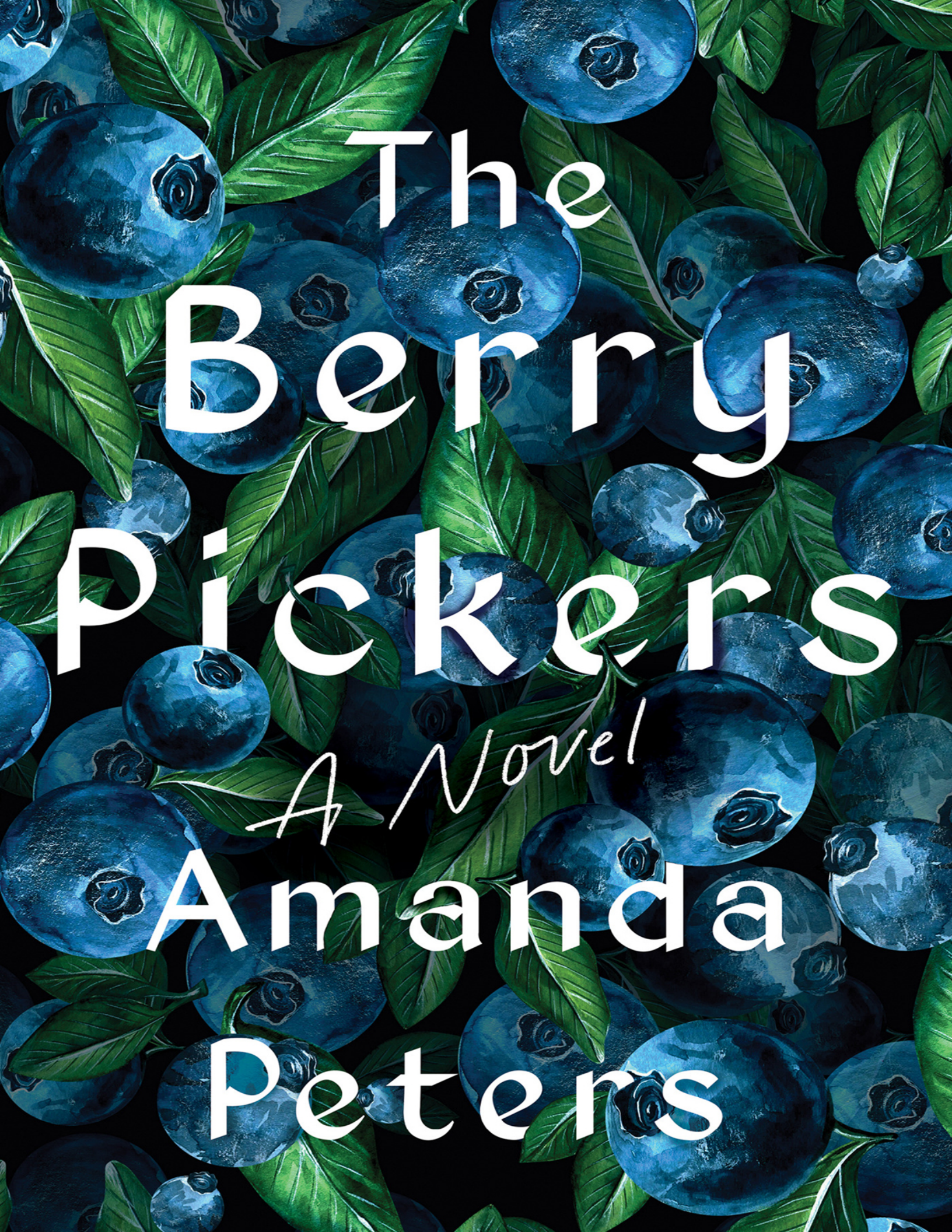
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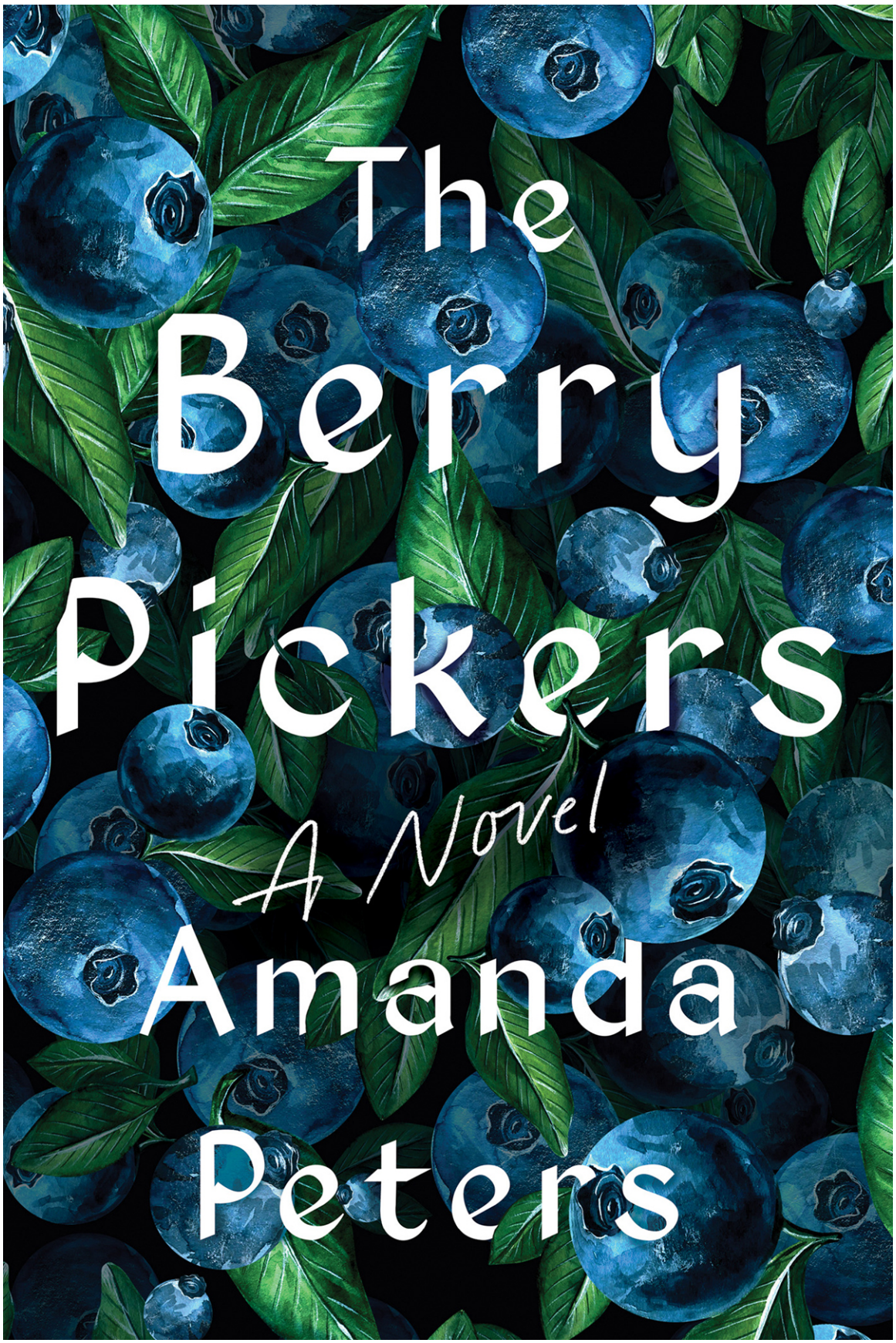

The
Berry
Pickers
A Novel
Amanda
Peters

THE BERRY PICKERS

THE BERRY PICKERS

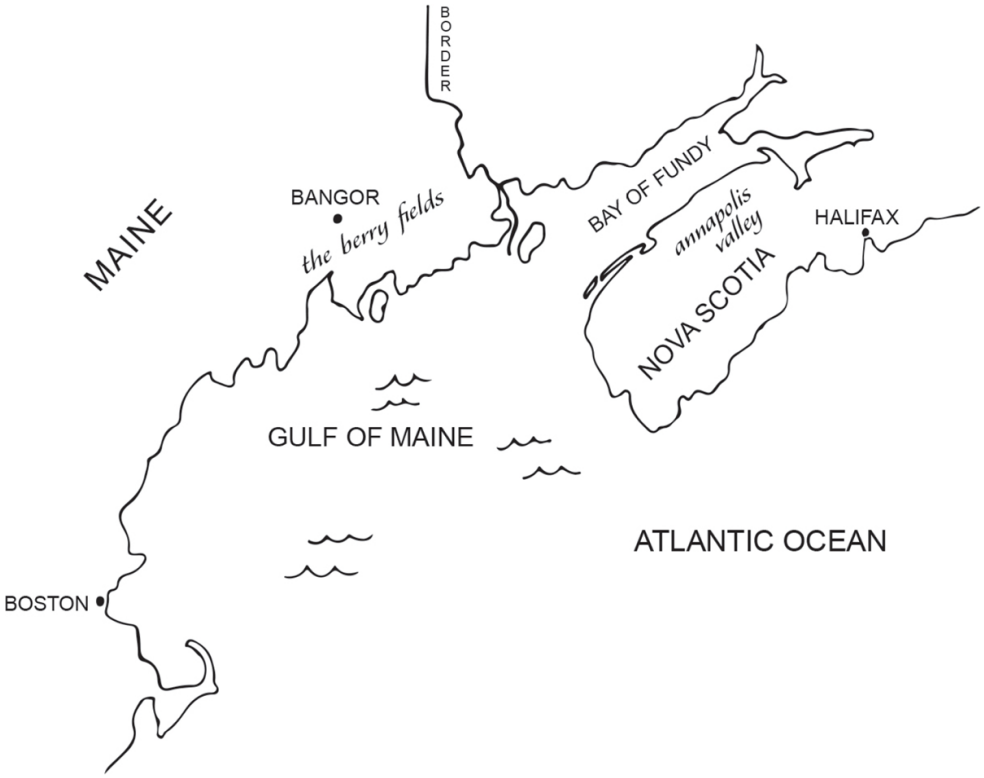
A novel

AMANDA PETERS

Catapult
New York

For my dad. Thank you for the stories.

Wela'lin a'tukowin.


BORDER
MAINE
BANGOR
the berry fields
BAY OF FUNDY
annapolis valley
HALIFAX
NOVA SCOTIA
GULF OF MAINE
ATLANTIC OCEAN
BOSTON

THE BERRY PICKERS

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

I SIT WITH MY BACK TO THE WALL, MY PILLOWS FLAT. Mae punched them and made them full, but that was hours ago. I'm holding a picture of Leah in my hands. In it, she is small, before I knew she existed. The sun is beginning to fade outside the window, and I am marvelling at how I've been shaped and moulded by women, even though I was absent from them most of my life.

The pain in my legs prevents me from sitting by the fire, the one beside the tree trunk that I have long considered a friend. I'm tired of this bed, of the medications, of the loneliness that comes with sickness, knowing that the people I love, no matter how much they try, will never understand my solitude. Dying is something I have to do alone. Leah, a grown woman now, visits a couple of times a week. My sister Mae and older brother Ben care for me even when I don't deserve it. My mother prays.

"Joe?" Mae opens the door a crack, her face framed by the door on one side and wall on the other.

"I'm awake."

The door opens fully, and Mae walks in. There is something joyful in her eyes. Something I haven't seen from anyone in quite some time.

"You look happy, Mae."

"It's because I am."

I try to sit up straighter. I want to be my full self for her, to show her that whatever is making her happy, makes me happy, too.

"Joe, there's someone here to see us. And I think we might have some catching up to do."

ONE

—

JOE

THE DAY RUTHIE WENT MISSING, THE BLACKFLIES seemed to be especially hungry. The white folks at the store where we got our supplies said that Indians made such good berry pickers because something sour in our blood kept the blackflies away. But even then, as a boy of six, I knew that wasn't true. Blackflies don't discriminate. But now, lying here almost fifty years to the day and getting eaten from the inside out by a disease I can't even see, I'm not sure what's true and what's not anymore. Maybe we are sour.

Regardless of the taste of our blood, we still got bit. But Mom knew how to make the itching stop at night, so we could get some sleep. She peeled the bark of an alder branch and chewed it to a pulp before putting it on the bites.

"Hold still, Joe. Stop squirming," Mom said as she applied the thick paste. The alders grew all along the thin line of trees that bordered the back of the fields. Those fields stretched on forever, or so it seemed then. Mr. Ellis, the landowner, had sectioned the land with big rocks, making it easier to keep track of where we'd been and where we needed to go. But eventually, and always, you'd reach the trees again. Either the trees or Route 9, a crumbling road littered with holes the size of watermelons and as deep as the lake, a dark line of asphalt slithering its way through the fields that brought us there year after year.

Even then, in 1962, there weren't many houses along Route 9, and those that were there were already old, the grey and white paint peeling away, the

porches tilted and rotting, the tall grass growing green and yellow between abandoned cars and refrigerators, their rust flaking off and flying away with a strong wind. When we arrived from Nova Scotia, midsummer, a caravan of dark-skinned workers, laughing and singing, travelling through their overgrown and rusting world, the local folks turned their backs, our presence a testament to their failure to prosper. The only time that place showed any joy at all was in the fall when the setting sun shone gold and the fields glowed under a glorious September sky.

Among all that rust and decay stood Mr. Ellis's house. It was on the corner where Route 9 met the dirt road that led to the other side of the lake, the side without Indians, where the white people swam and picnicked on Sundays, their skin blistering under the weak Maine sun. At home, years later and before I left again, I remembered that house like it was a picture from a book or a magazine that you looked at when waiting at the bus station or the doctor's office. The tall maples hung over the driveway, and someone had planted a long, straight line of pine trees between the house and the dirt road that led to the camps, so we couldn't peek at it, not that we didn't try.

"Ben, why do they bother having a house at all if it's just gonna be all windows?" I asked my brother.

"People need a roof over their heads. It gets cold here just like home."

"But all those windows." I gaped.

"Windows are expensive. That's how they show the world they're rich."

I nodded in agreement, even if I didn't understand exactly.

The whiteness of that house, painted every second summer, with the red trim and two columns framing the front door, was enough for me, who lived in a tiny three-bedroom with a leaky roof, to declare it "the mansion." Years later, when I returned, Mr. Ellis long dead of a heart attack, I had fresh eyes and realized it was nothing more than a two-storey with a bay window.

When we arrived in mid-July, that summer we lost Ruthie, the fields were thick with green leaves and tiny wild berries. We were still full of excitement, the memories of hard work and long days from years past all but forgotten. My father dropped us off with the supplies we needed for the next eight to twelve weeks, and then left again the same day. The dust followed him as he headed back to the border. He went to New Brunswick to grab the same pickers who always came. The ones he could trust. Old

Gerald and his wife, Julia, Hank and Bernard, twins who worked hard and stayed to themselves, Widow Agnus and her six children, all of them big and strong, and Frankie, the drunk. A funny man, scared of bears and the dark and not much of a worker.

Dad always said, “Your mother says that even people like Frankie need money and a purpose in life, even if only for eight weeks.”

“I pick more than him, Dad,” I said, nodding my head at Frankie as he absent-mindedly plopped a berry into his mouth, “and he eats just as much as he picks.”

“There are some people, Joe, that we make allowances for. You know he nearly drowned as a baby and didn’t quite grow up right after that. Nothing wrong with Frankie. God must have had a plan for him, so we take him just the way he is. He needs this each summer just like we do. He likes to come and sit ’round the fire and earn a bit of pocket change. Gives him something to look forward to.”

“Yeah, but Dad—” I started to say, annoyed that Frankie got paid in money and I picked more and all I got were new school clothes in September.

“No but. Just get back to work and be kind to Frankie. You never know when you might need kindness from people.”

While Dad was away, loading the additional pickers onto the back of the truck, we cleaned out the cabin and set up the camp under the watchful and exacting eye of our mother. “You boys pull out the grass growing through the porch floor. Tidy this place up a bit.” We cut our hands pulling that grass that dared to grow in our absence. Then, we collected dry wood for the fires, one for cooking, which was lit almost all the time, and one for cleaning dishes and, on weekends, our clothes. My sister Mae and some of the other girls helped clean the cabin, and a few went to the landlord’s house like they did every summer to help his wife clean the house from top to bottom. They got a small amount of money for it, money they spent at the county fair on bobby pins, bootleg whiskey and popcorn.

We couldn’t see the lake from our cabin, but we could from the outskirts of the camp, down where Old Gerald and Julia had their tent. We were lucky to have a cabin with a roof, a door, and a few old mattresses to sleep on. Only a handful of us got to stay in a cabin. The others, including my

two older brothers, Ben and Charlie, slept in a tent, their backs to the hard ground, their jackets used as pillows.

When all the other families arrived, families from all over Nova Scotia and a few from New Brunswick, the boys would get loud and boisterous. They hadn't seen each other since last year's berry season and had a lot of loud catching up to do. That summer, I wasn't old enough to hang out with the boys, so I spent my time with Ruthie, who got nervous around those older boys. During the day when they were serious and working, she remembered them and loved them the same as the rest of us. But at night, when they were singing around the fire, flirting with the girls and play fighting with each other, she retreated to the cabin and slept with her back against the far wall, her doll made out of old socks settled under her arm. Mom lay on the other side of her, a barrier to protect her from the loud boys she had forgotten.

When we'd left home that summer and headed south, seven of us had piled on that old truck. Mom, Dad, Ben, Mae, Charlie, Ruthie and me. Ben and Mae used to live at the Indian school, and every summer before that one, Mom would wait for them to come home, pretending she wasn't. And when they did, they'd hardly have a chance to get out of that car before Mom would be on them, grabbing one and then the other, taking their faces in her hands and just standing there looking at them, like they were made of gold or something. She'd kiss them on their foreheads, repeating their names over and over again like the Hail Mary. Dad would pat Ben on the back and hug Mae before he loaded us onto the truck and headed to the border. The Indian agent would only let us see them twice a year, at Christmas and berry-picking time. "Hard work will build their character, help them to become *proper* contributing citizens," Ben read from a letter once, pieced back together after Dad had ripped it up. Dad didn't like Mr. Hughes, the fat Indian agent with little purple holes on his nose, and after Dad read that letter, Ben and Mae didn't have to go back. They got to stay home with us and go to the same school as Charlie and me.

Now, Ben sleeps in a single bed across from me. He's awake most nights, scared I'll take my last breath on his shift. When he's not in the bed, Mae is there, grumbling and snoring. It's just us now, Mom, Mae, Ben and me. If the spirit world does exist, it'll be good to see those people I've lost. Be good to give them a hug and tell them I love them, tell them I'm sorry. I

have apologies to say on both sides of the great divide. If heaven doesn't exist, I guess I'll never know, so I'm not going to let it bother me. I'd tell Mom that I doubt heaven, but she believes that all the people she loves, who've passed on, are sitting at the right hand of the Lord.

On a clear night in mid-August that same summer, we all sat around the campfire. Dad had just put away his fiddle, and we were tired from dancing and singing along. Ruthie and I spread out a blanket and lay down. Our hands cradled our heads as we watched the fireflies fight the stars for attention. Those who were lucky, and old enough, headed down to Allen's Mountain for their own fire. Mae told us tall tales about boys and girls dancing and kissing, trying to convince us that she was always on her best behaviour and never did any of those sorts of things. Neither me nor Ruthie believed her. Mae never found a party she didn't like, where she couldn't cause some sort of trouble. But back at our fire, talk turned to other things.

"They say it's good, help the kids fit in, get jobs." The old woman had hands like thick knots, but she weaved the long strips of ash into the shape of a basket without even looking down to see what she was doing.

"I say it's horseshit. No one's got the right to snatch our kids like that, 'specially white folk. You see how they raise 'em, all snivelling and blatting all the time. They got no joy, and now they're tryin' to take ours."

"Don't get me wrong, I love having Ben and Mae back home, but there must be something said about how they give them the teachings from the Bible," my mother said, leaning toward the fire to see as she cast on stitches for another pair of socks. "I'm never sure if taking Ben and Mae out was the right thing, but Lewis is, as sure as the sunrise." My mother, through no fault of her own, had come to love the church, the elaborate ceremonies replacing the ones torn from her heart during a childhood she rarely mentioned. Ruthie got up and whispered in my ear that she had to go to the bathroom, leaving a warm indent in the blanket we were sharing. She never came back to the blanket. Mom went looking for her after a bit and found her curled up, asleep in the cabin.

The very next day, Ruthie went missing.

Dad was walking up and down the rows, checking our progress, pointing out missed bushes and sloppy work. At the end of each day, he'd meet the rakers and jot down how many crates they'd picked that day. Some of the lazier ones would try to stuff the bottom of the crates with green

leaves and stems, making it look like they'd picked more than they had. But Dad never fell for it, no matter how many times they tried. Pickers got paid by the crate. Mr. Ellis was strolling along one of the long ropes separating the rows when Ruthie reached Dad from the other direction, carrying a small bucket of water. Ruthie, her little arms shaking from the weight, lifted her small blue plastic bucket with a white handle, the kind we'd use to build sandcastles on Sunday afternoons.

"*Wela'lin ntus*." Dad thanked Ruthie, taking the water and sipping it.

"She's a quiet one, Lewis." Mr. Ellis placed his sweaty hand on the top of her head and rubbed it in a circular motion, making a *tsk-tsk* sound with his thick tongue, like Ruthie was simple or something. She stood there and let him, his belly hanging over his belt, his jeans filthy with grease and dirt. "She's lighter than your others, Lewis. Probably be good for her in the end, but I reckon that talking to her in that gibberish won't help her any." Dad took a sip and handed Ruthie the bucket before he placed his hand on her back and pointed her toward Ben and me and away from Mr. Ellis. The water sloshed as Ruthie made her way over to me. Ben was reaching for the bucket when I grabbed it and poured the rest of the water over my head. I coughed and sputtered when some got in my mouth and I swallowed it by mistake. Ruthie crouched down and rubbed my back like she'd seen Mom do a thousand times.

Sometime around noon, Dad and his blue truck crawled along the edge of the fields collecting the rakers, who were hungry for lunch. Back at the main field closest to the camp, Mom handed out bologna sandwiches. The bread was dry and stuck to the roof of my mouth. Sometimes we'd have ketchup or mustard, but most of the time just the bread and bologna. When Mom wasn't watching, I snuck the bologna out and threw the bread to the crows. She would have found a nice strong switch if she'd seen me doing something like that. Mom had no tolerance for waste, not with seven of her own mouths to feed, plus the camp.

That day, Ruthie and I sat at the edge of the field on our rock. We liked to sit there while the boys wandered off in their few minutes of freedom, sneaking down to the lake for a quick swim or a kiss from one of the girls. Mae was already working to prepare supper, usually potatoes and meat cooked outside under a setting sun. But we fed the whole camp, so it took time to peel all those potatoes. Mae always complained and sometimes

she'd run off. She'd hitch a ride into Bangor without a thought to Dad's worrying or Mom's rage. Then she'd come strolling in after dark and secretly pass candies to Ruthie and me. We never asked where she got them—we didn't care. The taste of sugar and that sour powder was exciting. The candies stuck in our teeth. Mom would yell a bit and Mae would sit and listen. She'd be good and helpful for another couple weeks before she'd take off again. Back then, there was no telling about Mae.

Not another soul could remember seeing Ruthie that day after I threw my bread to the crows and pushed my pointer finger into my lips. "Don't you tell Mom, Ruthie."

"I'd never tell on ya, Joe." Her voice was soft, and she had that look on her face. Silent and thinking. It's funny what you remember when something goes wrong. Something that would never stick in your memory on an ordinary day gets stuck there permanent. I remember that Ruthie was wearing a sundress that had been handed down through the older girls. By the time it got to Ruthie, it was thin and patched, too big for her small frame. The original blue was patterned with bits of red and green, and even a small piece of brown corduroy from my work trousers from last summer, just under her arm. And I remember her face, the face of my mother—uncanny the resemblance, so similar that everyone remarked on it—as Ruthie looked away and settled on watching a crow swoop in to steal the bread I'd discarded.

I ran down to skip stones on the lake, like I did most days in the time between finishing my sandwich and returning to my row. I never imagined that she'd wander off. After she finished eating, she'd always just sit and watch the birds and wait for Mom or Mae to come fetch her. When Dad passed by with the truck full of pickers returning to the field, he never even noticed that she was missing. Only when Mom went to the rock to find her after she hadn't returned to help Mae did anyone think that something might be wrong. Mom hollered for her, thinking she was just trying to get out of helping, even though that wouldn't be like Ruthie at all.

"Ruthie! Ruthie! Come on now, girl, come out where I can see you." Mom was walking along the edge of the trees when Dad drove up, the truck bed empty of people. He slowed down, following Mom, bumping along the dirt road.

"What's going on?"

“Ruthie’s wandered off. I’ll tan her hide when I find her for making me worry so much.” Dad smiled, reached over and rolled up the passenger-side window to keep the dust and blackflies out as he continued down the road, leaving Mom to holler for Ruthie.

Dad was cutting lines of twine to section off a new field when Mom showed up back at the camp without her youngest by her side.

Out in the fields, we were surprised when we saw Dad’s truck again, coming down the dirt path, dust and stones flying into the air. Dad stopped and yelled for everyone to get back on the truck. Ben, Charlie and I looked up to the sun to see that it wasn’t yet quitting time, before we dropped our equipment and climbed into the truck bed along with the others. When we got to the camp, Mom was sitting in one of the plastic chairs, her head in her hands, Mae huddled around her.

“Now listen up. Ruthie seems to have wandered off,” Dad said. Everyone turned their heads in unison, looking at the trees and the path that led to the lake, as if all of us looking at once would somehow reveal her. “I want you to split up in pairs and start looking in the trees.”

Mae went with Charlie and I followed Ben into the woods, the brush scratching at my legs and face. Until the day I die, and that isn’t too far away anymore, I will remember the sound of all those voices yelling Ruthie’s name. We looked all through the woods and down by the lake, searched the edges where the water met the land, just in case. We listened for the cheers of someone finally finding her, but they never came. As the sun sank and the yelling continued, I began to feel sick right from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet. The yelling echoed in my belly as the sky began to darken. Ben stopped when I had to sit down on the damp ground between the trees to catch my breath.

“Come on, Joe, get up. This ain’t no time for a rest. Ruthie’s gotta be scared by now.” Ben grabbed my arm to lift me, but my legs gave out and I fell hard. “Joe, don’t be a baby. Come on.”

I broke into tears before twisting my body away from him and throwing up all over a patch of moss.

“Jesus. Come on, I’m taking you back to the camp.” Ben lifted me and swung me around to carry me on his back, like I was as light as a feather. I wrapped my arms around his neck and laid my head on his shoulder. “Now,

don’t be throwing up on me, or I’ll drop you right here in the middle of nowhere.”

I nodded weakly, my chin bumping against the bones in his shoulder.

When we got back, Mom was still sitting in the plastic chair, staring into the fire. It was almost time for supper but there was no sign of food. Mae grabbed me off Ben’s back and laid me down on an old blanket on the ground, my head at my mother’s feet. She didn’t even call me a sissy when Ben told her about my stomach betraying me in the woods.

“Don’t you worry, Joe,” Mom said. “She probably just wandered too far. Someone’ll find her. You just don’t worry now.” She reached down and ran her strong hands through my hair.

It was that time of day when the sun starts making room for the night and everything looks ghostly. Dad walked up to the campfire, but I couldn’t be quite sure if he was real or not until he spoke.

“I’m going into town to get the police. Good to have more people helping, and they might have more lights than we do. And she’s just a girl.” As if her age made a difference. Dad turned, got in the truck and drove off.

“He still has faith that they care,” Mom said, as we watched his tail lights disappear into the gloomy dark of dusk. Half an hour later, he was back, one lone officer in one lone police car following the beat-up truck. The officer, shorter than Dad but just as skinny, sat in his car for what seemed to be forever. We all watched as he just sat there and jotted things in his notebook. Occasionally he’d look up to spy those of us gathered around the fire. He was too far away and it was too dark for me to see him clearly until he got out. Dad pointed to me, still lying at my mother’s feet. The officer came over and crouched down to talk to me.

“You see anything strange around here this afternoon, little fella?” I shook my head no. “You see your sister wander off into the woods? Down to the lake?” Again, I shook my head no. His breath was foul like onions and cabbage mixed together and left out in the warm sun too long. He stood up and straightened out his pants before he asked my mom and Mae the same questions. He looked at the people gathered around the fire, barely listening to anything anyone said, and Mae was getting testy.

“You just gonna ask the same stupid questions or you gonna help us find her?” she said.

Mom grabbed Mae's hand to calm her down. The policeman didn't even turn in her direction. I remember clearly how the firelight cast half of him in shadow like a villain in one of the comic books that I admired but could never buy.

He tapped his pad with his pencil. "Well, not much more I can do that hasn't been done. You let us know when you find her. I'll keep my notes, just in case."

"You're not going to help us?" Dad said.

"Sorry there"—he looked down at the pad of paper—"Lewis. I'm sure you'll find her. Besides, nothing much we can do. She's not been gone long enough, and you not being proper Maine citizens, and known transients. You understand." He paused, waiting for Dad to agree. Dad crossed his arms over his chest, waiting. "And there are only three of us police officers, and we had a break-in down at the farm supply store a couple weeks back, so . . ."

He walked back to his car and was starting to climb in when Dad grabbed him by the collar. The policeman's hat toppled off his head and bounced off the car door, landing at Dad's feet.

"She's a little girl," Dad said quietly.

The police officer regained his footing and stood between the car and the door, Dad's hands still gripping his collar. "I would suggest that you take your hands off me. There are more of you here looking than I could bring. Now, let go."

Dad let go and the police officer adjusted his clothes. He bent to pick up his hat and tapped it against the car door to get the dust off.

"If you were so concerned about the girl, you'd have taken better notice, I guess. Now, step back. I told you I would keep the notes in case we hear anything. You feel free to let me know when you find her." He crawled into the car, careful to not take his eyes off my dad. Dad was as tall and thin as a willow, but when he was mad, he could be scary. The car backed into a hollow place between the trees, turned, and headed down the dusty path back to Route 9. Dad picked up a large stone and threw it, busting a tail light. The car stopped for just a second before it moved on until the one remaining light disappeared altogether.

"You knew they were never going to help us, Lewis. You put too much faith in these people." Mom sat down again, leaned back and stared up at

the stars as she started to cry.

No one slept that night. I was sent to bed alone and lay beside a space where Ruthie should have been. The light from the fire snuck in through the thin cracks separating the pine planks that made up the outside walls. The hushed sounds of adults in conversation reached me, but I couldn't make out anything they said. I closed my eyes so tight that stars appeared. When they started to fade, I drew a picture of Ruthie's face on the back of my eyelids.

Two days after Ruthie went missing, Mr. Ellis stopped by. He hadn't been around, but we were too busy to notice. He knew about Ruthie. All the camps up and down Route 9 knew by now. But on the third day of empty berry crates, he stopped his truck, got out and waved Dad over to him, pretending he couldn't hear the searchers still calling her name.

"This ain't my problem, Lewis. This just ain't my problem. Do you know what my problem is? I need those berries picked." Mr. Ellis pointed to the fields, empty of rakers. "And if you don't get back to work, there are lots of other Indians around that would be more than happy to work these fields."

His spittle hit Dad in the face, and for a minute everyone froze and waited to see if Dad was going to lay him out flat, but he didn't. Dad didn't seem to have the fight in him anymore.

"That's right, get back to work," Mr. Ellis hollered as he crawled back into the cab of his truck. "Sorry about your missing girl," he said out the window to Mom as he drove off.

We searched for Ruthie for two more days, taking turns picking berries in the fields. Mr. Ellis would drive by every morning at ten thirty, so we'd have lots of people out picking then. He would nod and drive on. But from the time the sun came up until it slipped behind the trees, taking hope along with it, we searched, only taking time away to stuff the berry boxes with grass and twigs before the sun went down. We hollered Ruthie's name so much that the trees knew it by heart. We wandered up and down Route 9, through the fields and across the lake, but couldn't find a single trace of her. She wasn't in the thin forests that ran along the back of the berry fields, and she wasn't in any of the outbuildings or rusted-out refrigerators of the half-dozen neighbouring houses.

After four days with no sign of Ruthie, Mom's temperament was becoming more unpredictable. She only moved from her chair to use the bathroom or to go sit on Ruthie's rock. Mae found her sitting beside the rock, crying her eyes out because she could see Ruthie's tiny footprint in the dirt. Mae looked at the ground from every way that she could, but there was no footprint. Mae couldn't get Mom to move until the weather turned and the rain carried the invisible footprint toward the ditch at the end of the dirt road. All the way back to the cabin, Mae holding Mom under her arm, she wailed and cursed God in the ancient language known to her and Dad but not to us.

Dad paid one of the other pickers to drive Mom back to Nova Scotia with Mae. Mom cried and wailed for hours before they left. It was unsettling to see my mother cry like that. Mom never cried. We watched as the old beat-up 1952 Crosley station wagon crept along the dirt road, the rust falling to the ground whenever it went over a dried-out mud puddle. I waved as my father's chapped hand rested on my shoulder.

After Mom left, the other women at the camp huddled together, shaking their heads, speaking in hushed tones about the worst thing that could happen to a woman.

"A shame to lose a child. I lost three before birth and a little one to the fever some forty years back. Not something a woman ever gets over." The old woman shook her head and bent over her sewing, trying to catch as much light as possible from the fire.

"And especially one so quiet and sweet as Ruthie."

"Let's hope it doesn't get to her too bad. She still has four others that need a mother."

I sat and listened, thinking that Mom would be better if it'd been me and not Ruthie that disappeared. She had three boys and only two girls. I was the youngest boy and one that could be spared. At least that's what I told myself that night, the firelight throwing sad shadows on the ground. It was a simple matter of math.

We looked for Ruthie for six straight weeks, right up until it was time to go home, after the berry fields were empty and we'd pulled the potatoes from the ground. We packed up the camp, taking the owners of the station wagon with us on the back of our truck. No one spoke about her, but when

we passed the small stone where I saw her last, a sandwich in her hand, I just knew that we were leaving Ruthie behind.

TWO

NORMA

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, MAYBE FOUR OR FIVE YEARS OLD, I used to have these dreams. One was full of light and the other dark. It wasn't until I was in my fifties, and Mother was losing her mind, that I realized that they were one and the same. In the first, I was in the back seat of a car as the sunlight burst through the trees that lined the road. The light glinted off the car window and I squinted. I lifted my face to the sun, and it felt warm and good. My hair, normally in a tight braid down my back to keep the ticks out, was tickling my nose. I kept reaching up with my tiny hands, dirt crusted under the nails, to push the hair away. For some reason, one shoe was on my foot and the other lay on the floor in front of me. The car was moving fast and smelled of soap and new leather. There was no air conditioning, so my skinny brown legs stuck to the seat, and the sweat made little oval wet spots where my upper legs met the leather. I lifted my tattered dress and tried to tuck it under. Mother would be annoyed if I sweated on someone else's car seat. I was blinking away the stars that came from looking at the sun for too long, when she spoke to me from the front seat. I turned to see the face of a woman who wasn't my mother but had my mother's face. And then I woke up.

In my dark dream, the sky was black except for the blue halo around the moon. Light refracting, I learned later in life. The moon was bright, and the halo was so blue that my eyes couldn't fix on any one star. Everything around it was absorbed into the light. There were a few wispy clouds but it wouldn't rain. I didn't know how I knew this, but I did. "These are not rain

clouds," a familiar voice told me. I could see a fire burning not too far from where my feet were planted on the ground. The grass was cool and wet with nighttime. The moon brought chills and damp feet. People were gathered around a fire, and a woman turned toward me, nodded, and turned back to the flames, casting herself in shadow. I had to pee.

I could hear barred owls calling to one another and the faraway howl of a coyote, but they didn't scare me. They do now, when I'm out at the cottage that Mark and I rented when we were married. When I'm alone and the coyotes start howling, it takes every bit of courage I have not to get in the car and make my way back to Boston. The only thing that keeps me inside sometimes is the thought that a coyote might get me in the mad dash from the cabin to the car. Age brings all sorts of fears. But in that childhood dream, the night creatures didn't frighten me.

In the dream, I stood, blending into the night. I heard a laugh and I knew it was my brother's, which is strange since I am an only child. I shivered, and the lady by the fire turned again. She was looking for me, gesturing, waving me toward the circle of people. I wonder why she stayed hidden in the dark. I know how she smelled and the sound of her voice. I can feel her hands, worn from years of mothering, comfort me in a thunderstorm. Her face was a mystery, and it remained so until a few short weeks ago. She was always a silhouette with no colour in her eyes, no pink in her lips and no crow's feet to mark the passage of time. She only existed in the night. Each time I woke, I grieved for the woman cloaked in darkness and I tried to call out to her. I knew her, but when I tried to say her name, my tongue stuck to the bottom of my mouth and my mind forgot. I could feel the vibration in my throat, but no sound came out. I was so filled with sadness that the tears started before I could even open my eyes.

Sometimes the sadness manifested itself as fright. I don't remember all of the circumstances, but I remember understanding—not just thinking but truly understanding—that my house was not my house. Nothing was where it was supposed to be. No one was who they were supposed to be.

"We moved, sweetheart. You're just remembering the old house. That's all." She always had a way of making me feel silly for saying these things. Silly when I was young, but guilty the older I got.

And when I wanted to talk about the woman, when I would start to remember her face, her features, the texture of her hair, there was another

reasonable explanation.

"I went away to take care of your aunt June for a few weeks, remember? After her surgery." A surgery that was never actually explained to me and one that, I learned later in life, was a complete fabrication.

"You're confused. You're thinking of your father's cousin who came to stay with you."

I think I've always known that something was out of place. But when I was young, I understood it was me. Then I quickly forgot why. And the dreams persisted.

I tried to talk to Father about my dreams, and although he always had a perfectly reasonable explanation, I could never put the dream away. I couldn't fold it up and put it in the back of a drawer to be forgotten.

"Norma, sweetheart." He sighed. "It's probably one of the visitors who come to our church in the summer. Someone who was kind to you once." He picked at his fingers when we talked about this, tearing little bits of skin off the corner where the nail met the thumb. Sometimes he put his thumb in his mouth to stop the bleeding. When I talked about my dreams, he'd have bandages on his thumbs for a week afterward.

"Dreams often don't make sense, Norma. I was once a sea horse in a dream. It doesn't mean that I am one," Father told me when I started to describe the woman by the fire.

"But she's so real," I told him. In those first few minutes after waking, everything was so clear to me. I could smell the campfire and the potatoes cooking. I grieved with each breath as the smells faded. And then I cried, not just from the corners of my eyes but from the bottom of my torso, from deep in my belly.

When the loud crying started, Mother would rush into my bedroom, stopping to turn on the little Noah's ark ceramic lamp with elephants and ducks lined up in pairs. The click from the string that lit the little Biblical lamp was my first real memory, aside from the dream. And I could see the lamp cast light across a small bed covered with stuffed animals and a handmade quilt in shades of pink, with lace ruffles all along the bottom. To this day, the light from a lamp, when it's the only source of light, can take me back to that room, to the smell of sweat and urine soaking through my pink cotton-candy sheets. I still have that lamp somewhere in storage, or maybe it's at the cottage. The quilt is long gone.

“It’s just a dream, my sweet girl, nothing but a dream. Mother’s got you now. Hush there, Norma, it’s just a dream, only a dream. It’s just a dream. It’s nothing more than a silly dream. Only a dream.” Her voice was softer at night than it was in the daylight. She held on to me tightly as she rocked me back and forth, humming Sunday hymns. The clock in the hall clicked until the little wooden bird peeked out to tweet three times, and still Mother sat and rocked me. She held on until my tears dried and the shadows crept down the wall and disappeared into the grey of morning. Sometimes, when the crying wouldn’t stop right away, she would make a little bed on the floor using all the extra pillows from the closet at the end of the hall. A few times she steamed milk with a drop of vanilla and let me drink it out of a teacup painted with blue flowers—one I wasn’t allowed to touch in the daytime. The milk still thick in my mouth, I’d fall back asleep, my mother curled up beside me. I loved the feeling of her arm draped across me, her hand holding mine until it became limp with sleep. When I woke in the morning, she would be gone, back to the bed she shared with Father, but her smell lingered on the pillow beside me. My early childhood was defined by scent. Campfire and boiling potatoes at night, and Ivory soap and whiskey she didn’t think I knew about in the morning.

“Maybe we should take her to see someone? A minister maybe?” Mother spoke in hushed tones, her lips barely moving, as if she carried a secret on her tongue and feared that if she spoke too loudly, it would come flying out. This time the dark dream had been intensely vivid. The dark was blacker, the moon was brighter, but the voices were further away. This scared me. And I could see from the dark circles under her eyes and the way she scrubbed the clean pots that it scared my mother, too. She eyed me from behind the counter and watched to see if I was listening.

On the days after my dreams, I wasn’t permitted to be alone. So, I sat on the floor in the living room, bending my head and straining to hear them. I sat where I could best see them, and when Mother spied me, she lowered her voice. I had a stack of junior readers and my baby doll in front of me. I was nine. I was too old for the baby doll, but Mother felt better when I had it with me. When she watched me, I cradled it, dressed it and undressed it, and pretended to feed it. I combed its yellow nylon hair and bended and moulded it into braids. Then I whispered motherly things into its tiny plastic ears. But when Mother wasn’t looking, I set it aside and searched for books,

a puzzle or anything more interesting for a girl of nine. When I didn't have the doll, Mother would always find it, sit it beside me and watch until I picked it up and cradled it.

"She's a child, Lenore. She has bad dreams. She'll be fine. We don't need a minister. She'll grow out of it. She'll forget, I promise." Father sipped his coffee and returned to his newspaper. It was a Saturday morning, and he was dressed like he was going to court, his greying hair slicked back and his moustache neatly combed. He wore a white dress shirt and a tie, just in case we went out anywhere. He took the tie off in the summer when he mowed the lawn and in the winter when he shovelled the driveway. Mother said that people trusted judges to make the right decisions, as long as they were neat and tidy. Cleanliness was Mother's answer to most problems.

"It's more than a dream. And you know what I mean. And don't pretend you don't."

He glanced at me through the doorway that separated the living room and kitchen. I turned away quickly and pretended not to see them talking about me. He returned to his newspaper and Mother stormed off, as much as she could storm in the thick heels she wore, even in the house. She found another room and a random, unnecessary chore.

When I was much older, and the dreams were a dim memory, Mother devised a new theory, one she maintained until the disease started to eat away at her brain. She said that the dreams were nothing more than the result of too much sugar before bed. Which was odd since sugar was heavily rationed in our house out of concern for my teeth. I gave her the same cross look my father had, and she turned away to refold the tea towels sitting on the countertop or refill the already full salt shaker. But eventually I stopped talking about the dreams. I had to. I didn't stop having them; I just stopped talking about them, to Mother at least. The last time I brought up the car or the mother in my dream, she broke a heavy glass tumbler. She slammed it down on the counter so hard, it broke into three big pieces, cutting the soft part of her palm just below her thumb. Five stitches. That was the last time. I felt the weight of guilt sitting squarely on my shoulders, and each time the feeling began to fade, she sensed it, turned her hand toward me and showed me the scar.

If my mother did anything exceptionally well, it was guilt. Guilt and the cleaning that came with it. I dreamed and she cleaned, and when she

cleaned, I felt heavy. While Father was at work and I was at school, she busied herself with chores, the same chores she'd done the day before and the day before that. "Just in case someone stops by unannounced," she said. But I don't remember anyone except Mother's sister, my aunt June, coming to visit. Yet, the dust didn't even have time to settle before she captured it in dust cloths or the vacuum. And on the rare occasion when the Ladies' Auxiliary from the church came asking for donations, Mother met them at the door, as they craned their necks to see inside. She'd have her pocketbook in hand or a tray of cupcakes ready for the bake sale. The women never got beyond the front stoop. They tried, but not one of them succeeded. Years later, I learned of the stories people told about my house—piles of newspapers stacked taller than my father, and a dead relative mummified in the basement. Although that last one, I believe, I heard in grade school from a freckled boy named Randall, who smelled bad and was liked by no one. Only in the seventh grade did I learn that my mother was small-town famous as the judge's peculiar wife on Maple Street. And I, by association, the peculiar daughter.

"She's just vigilant, that's all," was Aunt June's answer. "She likes to know where everything and everyone is. It keeps her mind calm." Aunt June was the only person who could make sense of Mother, and she tried her best to help me make sense of her, too.

"She wasn't always this way, Poopkin. When she was a kid, you couldn't shut her up if you wanted to. I swear you could hear that girl in Timbuktu. And she was happy, happy as a pig in shit," Aunt June said before her face went all serious. "It wasn't until after those dead babies that she became all quiet and creepy. It's hard on a woman. Then she had one, fully formed, but the poor thing had no air in its little lungs. It was a girl, you know." She stopped to take a breath. "But then you came along, and it helped. She's just scared she's going to lose you. That's all. Nothing more, nothing less. That has to count for something, a love that big."

I nodded and licked the ice cream Aunt June had bought me before she caught the train back to Boston. Chocolate soft serve with vanilla on the top and strawberry in the middle, smooth and cold on my tongue. Father was waiting in the car and Mother had needed to use the facilities, so it was just Aunt June and me, waiting for the train.

“You remember that, now. Remember she does everything she does out of love. Misguided maybe, but full up to the top with love. You remember that, Poopkin.” She made me shake on it.

I don’t think anyone remembers when they started to make sense of the world. I can’t remember the first time I empathized with anyone, or the first time I noticed an adult and classified them as normal or odd, friendly or dangerous. I don’t remember the first time I cried at a movie because I felt broken-hearted for someone, or the first time I turned red with embarrassment at someone else’s blunder. But I do remember the day I first understood difference. And I don’t mean the difference between homemade chocolate chip cookies and store-bought. I’m talking about real difference.

I must have been nine, because I was nine when I started talking to Alice, and I remember the two events being close together. Anyway, when I was nine, we went to the beach. The beach was the only place on earth where Mother looked at peace. I swear that her skin loosened, her back muscles let go just a bit, and the corners of her mouth turned up more than they turned down. At the beach I could see a little bit of the person Aunt June knew so well. If there wasn’t a picture, I might think that my memory was tricking me, the sneaky way memory does sometimes. A picture, in black and white, of my mother in a swimsuit, jumping over a wave, her hands reaching for the sun, her hair a mess of light, framing her head like a halo. When Father died, I stole the photo from his bedside table.

That day, we walked along the beach collecting broken seashells. I was disappointed that I couldn’t find the kind that you could hold up to your ear and hear the sea.

Father scolded me when I pouted about it. “Norma, don’t be foolish. You don’t need a shell when the ocean is just feet away.”

I grumbled as I built a sandcastle with a little blue bucket with a white handle, which Mother had bought for me at the department store. I loved that blue bucket. When I left it in the driveway and Father backed over it, crushing it to pieces, I cried. But that day at the beach, it still had the shine of new plastic on it.

I looked up from my misshapen pile of beach sand and watched the white bodies burned red by the sun file past. Some stopped to admire my castle, although it bore no resemblance to a castle at all. Some people ignored me altogether. Mother sat out in the sun, her chin pointed to the sky,

and Father drank a beer and read a book under an umbrella that kept falling over. I looked down at my own hand, made dark by the summer, littered with tiny grains of sand and even darker freckles. The skin was smooth, and the nails formed tiny crescent moons, which Mother had filed to the perfect length and shape just the day before.

"Why am I so brown?" I stood at my mother's feet, her arm slung over her eyes. "You guys are so white and I'm so brown."

Mother sat up, casting a wary glance at Father, who placed his book on his knee, split down the middle, where he'd stopped reading. "Your great-grandfather was Italian," he said with such authority that it left no room for questioning. "You have his skin tone, and it comes out in the sun."

I had no reason not to believe him. I turned back to my lump of sand. "Can I see a picture when we go home?"

"No, they were all burned in the fire."

That fire, which happened when I was too young to remember it, took a lot with it, including every picture of me before the age of five, and now the picture of the only person in my family who might look like me. I cursed the fire and went back to my castle.

A few weeks later, after school started, I was playing in the backyard. The bugs weren't biting yet, so it must have been afternoon. The sun was hot on the back of my neck. I had on my outdoor clothes—older clothes that I had somehow ruined with stains or the act of growing. The arm cuffs nearly reached my elbows, and the jacket was tight across my chest and belly. I was digging in the yard, the dirt dark and cool, preparing to bury a dead June bug, a large one, the wings hard and shiny in the sun, even in death. I felt sorry that our porch light had caused it to knock its head against the window and die. I was pulling a worm out of the little hole I was digging with a large silver spoon from the kitchen, when the phone rang. Mother set down her book and looked inside, looked at me and back inside again as it rang for the third time. Finally, she got up and went indoors, leaving me alone with the spoon and the dead bug. She hadn't been gone long when I heard voices out front, children's voices yelling at one another. I was never permitted to go bike riding like the other kids in the evenings. I could ride my bike up and down the driveway under the careful supervision of my father, but I wasn't allowed to go play baseball at the overgrown field a couple streets away. "Absolutely not. Ruffians and insects. And parents

who don't seem to care what happens to their children," was the answer I got when I asked to go. I was confined to my yard, and with the exception of the bike riding, to the backyard. But something about the voices that day drew me out front. I got to the edge of the lawn as a few kids I recognized from school rode by on their bikes. A few waved and called out my name in greeting. I waved back, but just as they were disappearing around a small stand of trees on the corner, I was pulled back with such force I was sure my arm was going to come clean off my body. I stumbled but kept upright while Mother dragged me up the stoop and in through the front door. The curtains were closed, as they always were, and I had to blink to adjust to the dimness.

"Do not, I repeat, do not ever do that to me again." She was breathing heavily and sweat was forming on her upper lip. "Someone could have taken you. Do you understand? Do you?" I nodded. "What would we do if someone had just snatched you off the lawn and taken you away? After all we've been through, what would I do?" Her fingers were digging into the soft flesh of my upper arm, and I was trying not to squirm, but it hurt. The next day, I found five bruises, each in the shape of a cherry.

"I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't mean it, I promise," I whispered, remembering my handshake with Aunt June.

She paused her rebuke to pull the lace drapes open and look out onto the empty road. Satisfied that no one was there, ready to snatch me from the front lawn, she sat beside me, wrapped her arms around my head, and rocked me back and forth like she did when I had my dreams. I met her hug with stiff muscles and looked out the window as she pulled me even closer. She spoke to me in softer tones now, her anger filtered out into the world through clenched teeth.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry, Norma, sweetheart. Mother is sorry."

That night, as my parents sat at the small table in the kitchen, sharing a bottle of whiskey that they had given up trying to hide from me, their conversation was so strained and their voices so low that I gave up trying to hear from my perch in the hallway and went to bed. It was years before I went out to the front lawn again, and I never did get to bury the poor June bug. For all I know, it was carried away by the neighbours' mangy cat, Orangie.

A few weeks later, when I was supposed to be in my room memorizing multiplication tables, I heard them talking about me. Mother was sipping a mint julep, a cocktail she'd recently discovered and thought was the epitome of grace and class, but that my aunt June called racist and pretentious. Aunt June drank wine from California. She had faith, she told me, that the winemakers on the West Coast would eventually get it right. She and Mother argued a lot and hugged almost as much. Their relationship was always confusing yet somehow comforting.

Mother was refusing Aunt June's suggestion that I see a therapist. "Hippie medicine," she called it, and Father didn't disagree. Only Aunt June took up my cause.

Mother said, "But June—"

"No 'but June' this time." Aunt June took a sip of her wine, and Mother turned away from her.

"But June, what if they dig out her life before, dig it out of her memory?" Mother said, hushed and looking toward the doorway that led to the living room. She and Aunt June sat at the dining room table. I was supposed to be watching *Romper Room*, but I didn't care who the lady could see through the little mirror. Whenever I knew talk of me was happening somewhere else in the house, I'd sneak behind curtains or hide behind doors and listen.

"Alice says that kids don't even start to form actual memories until they are five or six. You can just keep telling her that she's dreaming." Aunt June took a long drink from her glass, the condensation glazing the crystal, hazy and muted.

"She's nine, June."

"She was four, maybe five, when it happened? We'll never be sure exactly. She told us she was four, but kids can get confused. Memories don't form yet. Follow along." Aunt June reached over as Mother filled her glass. I thought they were talking about the fire that took away all the concrete memories of the past. I remember the smell of pot roast that day. It was early September, and we never cooked a roast that early. Pot roast was for the cold days when the wind howled and the snow fell. I remember Mother nodding and children laughing on the television in the background.

"Let Alice talk to her. It might set your mind at ease."

Mother shook her head and pursed her lips against the mint she accidently let into her mouth. “I don’t think so. My God, June, sometimes I wonder if you have any sense at all. Someone like her? Really, June?”

“Someone like her?”

“You know what I mean.”

Aunt June looked weary but kept going. “Stop being you and think of Norma for once.”

“She’s all I think about.”

“Then let Alice talk to her.”

A few weeks later, I talked with Alice for the first time. I had met her before but never at her house, and I’d never talked to her the way I did that day and many days to come. She’d always just been Aunt June’s friend, who was sweet and nice to me. That day, though, I decided that I loved Alice. She was the first adult who spoke to me like I was a person and not a china doll about to shatter. And she always smelled of peppermint. To this day, when I smell one of those round pink peppermints, I see her face.

“Well, hello, Norma.” She knelt so her face was directly in front of mine. “I’ve heard from your aunt June that you’ve been having bad dreams.” She looked up at Aunt June and smiled. “Do you want to come in and talk with me about them?”

I nodded and she stood, took my hand and led me into a living room unlike any I’d ever seen before. She lived in a brownstone with windows that took up the whole wall, and best of all, the curtains opened to a view of the gardens across the road, all greens and sky-blue peeking through the trees. Mother and Aunt June went into the kitchen to have tea.

Alice offered me a chocolate, but it was bitter and not sweet. I shrivelled up my nose but swallowed it down anyway. Mother would be cross if she found out I wasn’t polite.

“Make yourself comfortable, Norma.” She gestured toward the couch. A baby doll was leaning against the arm. “Your mom tells me that you love baby dolls.”

I picked it up and set it aside. “Not really. I’m too old for that now.”

“I see. I guess I’ll just put that away, then.”

“And it’s *mother*.”

“Mother?”

“Yes. She says *mom* is pedestrian.”

“That’s a big word for . . .” She stopped and sat down opposite the couch in a chair I didn’t think looked very comfortable.

I sat down, too.

“So, you have dreams.”

“Yes.”

She waited and I waited.

“Would you like to tell me about them?”

“I tell Ruthie about them, but they’re just dreams. Everyone has them.”

“You’re right. Everyone does have them, but your mom—mother worries that yours are scarier than most. And who is Ruthie?” She leaned forward, her elbows resting on her knees. A small cat, orange, grey and white with a black nose, crawled out from under the chair and slinked toward me, veering off down the hall before I had the chance to pick it up and pet it.

“Ruthie’s my friend. Mother says she is imaginary. I barely remember the dreams anymore. They’re all faded now. I can’t talk about them anyway. They give Mother headaches.”

“Do you think that they are real, these dreams?”

I turned my head at the sound of a cough coming from the kitchen.

“Don’t worry, Norma, they can’t hear us.”

“How do you know my aunt June?”

“Your aunt June and I are very good friends, and we have been for a very long time. Longer than since you were born, I believe.” She leaned back in her chair and folded her legs at the ankles. “Now, back to those dreams.”

“I think my mom—mother is in the dreams, but she’s not. It’s someone else. And I have a brother. But I don’t have a brother. Because of all the dead babies.”

She looked surprised. “All the dead babies?”

“The ones from Mother’s belly. I was the only one not to die.”

Alice sat back in her chair, and I felt like I’d said something I shouldn’t have. I waited for Mother to come down the hall, take me under her arm and lift me off the couch, out the door and back to the train. I could feel the tender skin under my arms turning black under her tight fingers, but she didn’t come down the hall, and I stopped massaging my imaginary bruises.

“That’s a lot of responsibility on you, don’t you think, Norma?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m nine. Almost ten, though. I have to make my bed in the morning and take the garbage out on Tuesdays.”

She smiled at me.

“I mean, it’s not your fault those babies died. And it’s not your responsibility to make sure your mother forgets about the dead babies. Your only job right now is to be a little girl.” She scrunched up her nose in a conspiratorial smile. “Maybe one that doesn’t play with baby dolls anymore, but a little girl.”

“Maybe.”

“How about I give you something to do more suited to your age? No baby dolls.” She smiled. “Would you like that?”

“Okay.”

Alice walked over to a small desk in the corner and pulled out a notebook, one with tiny pink and blue flowers on the cover.

“I would like you to keep a journal. All those things that you would like to talk about with your mother but maybe feel nervous about. Or anything at all. When you feel like writing, just write. And if you want to talk about one of the things you write about, we can do that. But this is your journal, just for you.” Alice opened it and wrote her phone number on the inside cover. “If you ever want to talk about any of the things you write down, you can call me. How’s that sound?”

“Good.” I took the notebook from her hand and placed it inside the hand-me-down purse Mother let me use.

“One rule: no talking of babies, the lost ones or the toy ones.” Alice winked at me, and I smiled. A full smile.

I can’t be sure since I’m older now and my memory isn’t as strong as it used to be, but I think that was the first time in my young life that I didn’t feel guilt—in those moments between looking out through the tall windows in Alice’s apartment and when we sat down in our seats on the train back to Maine. Aunt June waved from the platform as we pulled away. Mother put her arm around me, her scarred hand turned toward my face, and whispered, “My precious little baby.” And the guilt washed over me again.

I don’t think I changed much after meeting with Alice, except that one day, while Mother read her book in the lounge chair on the back deck, under a rusted autumn sun, I buried the baby doll under her white and

purple rhododendrons. She found it years later, when she dug it up while planting her Japanese maple, and nearly had a stroke.

For a few painful months, we tried to navigate this new Norma. I didn't talk about the dreams anymore, and when I did have them, I didn't cry. I wrote about them instead. And I didn't tell Mother about them—about my dream mother, about my ghost brother. In the margins, I sketched stars and crescent moons and the crude figure of a doll. Father never asked about the dreams, and the skin at the corner of his thumbnail healed nicely. And eventually, the dreams faded too, stored away somewhere in the very back of my mind. By the time I woke one morning to blood on the bedsheets and terror in my heart, because Mother had never told me about this and I was convinced I was dying, I couldn't even tell Alice about the dreams anymore. The light and dark had faded into an unrecognizable grey. The dreams were a mystery to me until Mother's mind started to fail her, and those things stored in the deep dark of her conscience leapt out and started to flail about like fish on the lakeshore. And then those dreams came back to me and started to mean something.

THREE

JOE

THE HIGHWAY CUTS THROUGH THE TREES, SLICING the province in half, north and south, connecting but separating. This time of year, the asphalt is littered with potholes so big they might swallow the car whole if you hit one hard enough. And I feel every one of them. It's reached my marrow, the doctors tell me. And I believe them. When we hit one of those potholes, I can feel it in every single one of my disease-ridden bones. The only point of this trip is the allday breakfast we go to after the appointment. Bacon and eggs, home fries, and toast with sweet strawberry jam, and an extra side of ham. I wouldn't be going if Mom didn't make me. I'm fifty-six years old and I stay alive because my eighty-seven-year-old mother tells me she can't watch another child die. If it were up to me, I'd be home in my bed, waiting for the dark.

"Mom will survive my passing. She's survived Charlie's and Dad's," I say, wincing as we hit a hole.

"And Ruthie," Mae says from the driver's seat.

"Ruthie ain't dead, Mae."

"God love ya, Joe. You and Mom holdin' out hope after all these years."

I never count Ruthie among the dead. We returned to those fields along Route 9 every year, but we never found a trace of her. If she was dead, someone would have found something. And besides, when a person dies, there's a finality to it, a heaviness that comes with all endings. Ruthie's story has no ending. But there was living to be done and, slowly and quietly, we did begin to live again. It didn't come right away, and when Dad

asked the Johnsons to host the apple pickers that fall, all it did was keep us in the lingering part of grief a little bit longer.

Each year before Ruthie went missing, the apple pickers came to the field that sat between our house and the train tracks, their brown skin made browner by the summer sun and their minds made calmer by the cool autumn air. They arrived in cars, in trucks and by train, and walked from the station in town carrying everything they needed to live for another month of picking fruit. They pitched tents and built fires, fought a little and loved a lot. And just like in the berry fields, Dad piled them in the back of the truck and dropped them off at the orchards at sun-up and picked them up at the end of each day. The elderly women came together in cars with the windows rolled down, their white hair still big and messy from the wind. They came and sat around the fire, gossiping, mending socks and weaving baskets, which they'd give us to sell for them in town.

"Now, you make sure to rub a little dirt on your face before you get to town," one of them said.

"And a limp helps, too. They pay more if you got a limp," another said, laughing.

The folks in town liked to buy our baskets. It made them feel charitable, I guess. They never seemed to notice that the Indian child with dirt on his face and a lame leg that sold them baskets on Wednesday was the same clean and healthy Indian child that sat behind them at church on Sunday. But that October, there were no fires, no old ladies and no apple pickers in the field.

Ruthie wasn't there either, but we felt her in the walls, in the extra chair at the dinner table and in the things that belonged to her. Mom found Ruthie's winter boots in the storage closet where we kept our summer clothes in winter and winter clothes in summer. She held them for the longest time before she put them on the shelf at the top of the closet in the girls' room. She gently placed the sock doll with button eyes inside one of the boots.

"She'll need them when she comes home," Mom reasoned.

"Mom—" Mae started, but Mom put her hand up, stopping her.

"Don't, Mae. You don't know what it's like to lose a child. And I pray you don't ever find out. Her boots are staying there until I say they aren't."

Over the decades, the walls of this house have been torn down and built again in different places and painted in different colours, but a closet still holds a very old pair of girl's boots with the head of a doll sticking out of one of them on the top shelf, between old woven baskets and Christmas decorations.

When winter began to show itself in grey skies and dark afternoons, Mom went quiet—a real deep quiet. A quiet like the sky just before the snow starts. She spent all her time sitting in her chair beside the window, watching the crows and yelling at the squirrels that got into her bird feeder, rosary in her hand. I was tiptoeing through the living room on a dark afternoon, near the beginning of November, when I stopped to watch her.

"I'm sorry I lost her, Mom."

She jumped when I spoke and turned away from the window. I watched her face go from empty to sad.

"You didn't lose nobody, Joe. And don't you go carrying that on your shoulders." She looked at me, straight in the eyes. "This isn't your fault. Seems like my children are just ripe for leaving, one way or another. Ben and Mae came back from that school. Ruthie will come back, too, don't you worry." She didn't look away like she usually did. This time her eyes stayed on mine, those dark eyes that, I swear to this day, still know every thought in my head. I was grateful when Mae came into the living room.

"Mom, teach me how to knit."

Mom looked at Mae and a new shadow crossed her face, one not so dark and sad. This one looked like it held surprise and maybe just a little bit of humour.

"Mae, I love you to bits, you know that. But you got two left hands and the attention span of a new puppy snapping at the snow for the first time."

But Mae pleaded, and eventually Mom relented. And I remember that Mae tried—she really did. But after a few days, Mom got frustrated and quit on Mae, leaving a sock half finished. Something about Mae with her fingers all knotted up with yarn and her teeth biting her lip in concentration reminded Mom that we were still there, that we still needed to be taken care of. I still think Mae knew what she was doing, knew that this was how she was going to help Mom, help us all. When no one is looking, Mae can be a sweetheart.

Now it's Mae who takes care of us. She cooks and cleans, washes my bedding when I can't get up fast enough in the middle of the night, and helps Mom out of her chair in the living room, then sets her at the kitchen table, and helps her to bed each night. Mae's kids are grown now, so she sold her house and moved back in when I came home to die. In all my years here, and even in all my years away, I never would have imagined Mae as the caring type. Yet here she is, behind the wheel, driving me into the city to sit in a waiting room that reeks of disinfectant and disease, to stare at a wall with a blue glass sculpture, ugly as sin but somehow compelling.

"My land, Joe, I don't know why they put something so ugly on these walls for the sick and dying to look at. Why don't they put nice stuff like cheesecake or that white castle from India?" She flips through a magazine left on the table between the rows of chairs. "Or maybe even a nice picture of the pearly gates."

A young woman, her head wrapped in a scarf, smiles at me.

"I think it's art," I say.

"I think it's garbage that they glued to the wall." She doesn't look up from her magazine, and I shrug at the woman with the scarf. There is a code among the dying: let the living speak. They have longer to atone for it.

When they call my name, Mae waits while they poke at me and tell me I'm doing well, even though we all know I probably won't see the changing of another season.

If Mae's willingness to knit brought Mom around, something far crueller brought Dad around. But for years, the cruelty was lost on me. On a grey afternoon just after Mae's failed attempt at knitting, Dad dropped the stick he was using to flip deer meat on the outside grill. He called out to Mom, telling her to turn off the inside stove and gather us. It was the first snow and Ben and Charlie, who'd been throwing snowballs at each other, dropped the clumps of snow they'd fashioned into weapons and moved toward the front door. I raced toward the dropped snowballs, seeing a chance to steal their hard work and use it against them. I didn't notice anything strange until Dad came out of the house with his shotgun in his hands and called my name. I followed his gaze to the road where a long, shiny black car was pulling into the driveway.

"Joe, leave those snowballs." I could feel the cold as it soaked through my knitted mittens, and I remember the disappointment at being made to

abandon them, so perfectly formed. “I need you to follow your sister and brothers into the woods.” He never took his eyes off the approaching vehicle. “It’s a game, like hide and seek. You go hide and I’m going to come and find you. When you hear me holler your name, you can come out. If you hear anyone else call your name, you stay hidden. Do you understand?”

I nodded my head and bent down to pick up one of the snowballs I’d just dropped, its roundness hard and solid, before I turned and ran as fast as I could into the woods. Behind me I could hear Mae call out, “Don’t go too far but stay hidden.”

A big maple tree, just on the edge of the woods, stood at a spitting distance from the house. It was rotting from the inside out, with a hole about my size and low enough for me to climb into. The tree was damp inside, but I could peek out to see the car as it stopped just in front of Dad, his back straight and his shotgun held across his chest. My mother, in her apron with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, stepped down from the front stoop to stand beside him.

“Mr. Hughes? Can I help you?”

I had to strain to hear my dad’s voice. My mother wrung her hands as she turned her head toward the woods.

“Good afternoon, Lewis. Missus.” He nodded to my mother. “Word reached us that you lost one of your younger children this summer.” His breath hung white and weak on the air. Dad didn’t move or make a sound. “I’ve come to talk about the others. About what’s best for them, in light of what happened.” He looked down at the ground and paused. When he started again, his voice was higher, meaner than it was just seconds before and carried easier on the wind, so I could hear him better. “How do you lose a child, Lewis? You give me a good explanation for losing a child and I will consider leaving one, maybe two, in your care. Maybe I only take . . .” He looked down at his notepad. “Ben and Mae, the oldest. The ones you snatched away. Maybe I leave the younger ones, for now.”

Dad didn’t move. “You try to take any of my children, and I will use this gun on you.”

Mr. Hughes shifted from side to side, his bald head red from the cold, his hat in his hands. “Now, be reasonable.”

“Get off my land now.” Dad didn’t raise his voice.

“Well, you see, I have an order to take them all, Lewis. I’m trying to be compassionate here, trying to compromise.”

My dad stepped back, lifted the shotgun, cocked it and pointed it at Mr. Hughes. “Get off my land now. Or you won’t be going home to your own family tonight.”

Mr. Hughes slowly lifted his hands into the air and backed away until he was against the car. “I hope you don’t regret this,” he said as he opened his car door and slipped in, his hands still high in the air, my father’s shotgun still pointed at him.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” Dad said, as Mr. Hughes pressed on the gas, tossing snow and mud into the air. Dad lowered the shotgun and passed it to Mom, who, shaking from fright and the cold, went inside. Dad turned toward the woods and started hollering our names.

A few weeks later, when Dad was hunting deer with Ben in the woods, a letter came. Mom read it, kissed it and placed it inside the front cover of her Bible. We never saw Mr. Hughes again, and for years I chose to remember that day as a great game of hide-and-seek where I was the winner. The others had crouched down behind pines or run behind the outhouse. I’d gotten inside a dead maple—inside it! And I’d stayed there until Dad called my name. Even Mae admitted how clever I was. For years I considered that one of my greatest victories of childhood. Then the memory faded for a bit until I opened Mom’s Bible just after I moved back. The letter was brown and soiled by that time, but it told the events of that day in a way I didn’t remember. But none of that mattered. They agreed that they would leave us alone since we didn’t live on reserve and Dad owned his land outright. It seemed like the wrong kind of reason to me. In return, they would no longer be sending us the two dollars per child for school supplies. I slid the letter back in between two pages in Leviticus, careful to leave it just where Mom had placed it.

Since we skipped the apple picking, Dad had to take on extra work. In any other year, after the apples were picked and before the new year, he spent his time fixing things around the house that needed fixing before the snow came and before he started his winter work, cutting trees and peeling bark for the sawmill. But that fall, just after I’d won my game of hide-and-seek, Dad decided to cut down my maple tree.

“It’s dangerous, Joe,” he said when I whined. “You could hurt yourself.” And that was the end of it. The stump is still there, the circle of rings fractured by time and the weather. When the pain doesn’t let me sleep, Mae makes me a strong cup of tea and sets me in a lawn chair beside that stump and wraps me in blankets, so I can watch the sun rise. But back then, when I was still a child, I was mad. And I got even madder when a letter came for Dad.

These letters requesting Dad’s services weren’t new, but he’d started sending the requests to younger men, those who lived down near his sister, my aunt Lindy. The letter requested the services of a “real Indian guide” for a group of wealthy American hunters. They liked to come up in the late fall, outfitted with the newest hunting gear and money to spend. According to Dad, they wanted an “experience,” and this meant Dad taking them through the woods looking for a buck. Dad folded the letter and looked across the dinner table at Mom.

“I think I’ll go. Since we missed the apple picking this year.” The table went quiet. Forks stopped scraping the bottom of plates and chewing slowed into silence. No one moved, and Dad took a swallow and continued. “Be good to get a little extra money in before I go back to the mill.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Mom reached for the salt.

“Can I go with you?” I asked, the excitement vibrating through me so hard that I dropped my fork, and a piece of carrot flew across the table and landed in Mae’s glass of water. She fished it out and threw it back at me.

“Mae, stop that. And Joe, you’re too young . . . Your mother needs you here. I’ll take Charlie with me this year.”

“Yes!” Charlie pumped his fist in the air, and I scowled at him. Ben had always gone and now Charlie. I was getting worried that Dad would be too old before I got the chance to go. It’s funny how old you think your parents are when you’re a child. Ben was only fourteen and Mae twelve. Charlie was eleven that fall, and I had just turned seven. Ruthie would have been five in December. Yet I was convinced that my parents were old when, really, they were decades younger than I am now.

“Don’t you worry, Joe. Your time will come.” Mom smiled across the table. “Now stop trying to grow up so fast.”

Every year I was told that my time would come, I grew more resentful. I let that bitterness grow for eight straight years until the fall I turned fifteen.

We'd just gotten back from another summer living and working along Route 9. Mr. Ellis was still the landowner. He was fatter now and had no hair to speak of, but he was still as unpleasant as a dead skunk. Something called gout kept him more at home and less in the fields. Even when he did show up, he stayed seated in the cab of his truck. In our downtime we still asked questions and still looked into the face of every girl we saw at the supply store or the carnival that stopped by in the summer. We looked for those brown eyes and turned-down mouth, that tattered dress and that faraway stare. We looked for the face of our mother, her likeness still the stuff of stories around the campfire. But Ruthie was getting more gone each time we went down to Maine. The apple pickers returned to our fields each October, and the sadness that seemed to settle over Mom when we were in Maine lifted, just a little, once they arrived.

A few days after the apple pickers left, when all that remained was the black earth from their fires—a reminder of the good times and shared meals, of hard work and even a baby born—Dad and I were out back of the house. We were cutting pine boughs to place around the base of the house to keep the cold winter winds out, when he pulled a letter from his back pocket and handed it to me.

"You want to go this year?"

I opened it to see the request written in perfect cursive, and my heart nearly jumped right out of my chest. Charlie had a full-time job now painting houses, and Ben, who'd left the berry fields three years ago, hitched to Boston and stayed, always told me that his best times were spent with Dad in the woods.

"It's easy work and they pay well." He went quiet and reached up to bend a thin branch back and break it off. "Back when I was your age, it was harder to get work for people like us, so these trips were important. Kept food on the plate."

We left two days later, Mom standing at the foot of the stoop, waving with one hand, her other hand over her eyes to protect them from the sun.

Late October brings a chill. In the mornings, even in the house, before the fire started, you could see your breath on the air. But it wasn't the depressing grey chill of November. I think the trees, all afire with orange and red leaves, made the chill bearable. My favourites were the ones that looked like they glowed gold when the sun hit them just right. As we passed

them, I rolled down the window and tilted my head and squinted just to see if I could make them glow even more. We travelled the whole way down the old road. The highway was new but dull. Fields forever and barely a twist or a turn. The old road offered trees, orchards, roadside stands we could stop at for cider or a glass of water, old bridges that shook and rattled when we passed over them, the water slipping away underneath.

We got to Aunt Lindy's just before supper. Aunt Lindy was Dad's older sister by eleven months, and she was a fat woman—no other way to say it than that. She hugged with such strength that I thought I might be sucked into her roundness, but I survived, breathless but alive. She made the best deer stew, and her house, while small, was always warm and comfortable. She had a husband once, a "no-good white man" she'd call him when she was having "just a thimbleful of whiskey," but one day he just got up and left. He washed his face, put on his boots and left her with three children to raise on her own. I don't know if he became "no good" before or after he left. She never told any stories about before, only the ones where he left and didn't return. A year after he left, Aunt Lindy took all the photos she had of him and lined the floor of the outhouse with them.

Dad and I shared the big bed in the one extra bedroom. Two of her kids lived away, and the third had been killed in a logging accident a couple years before I was born. I got into bed and listened to them talking through the pine plank walls. The hum of adult conversation lulled me to sleep. The next morning, they both complained of headaches and drank their coffee black and so strong I swear that the smell of it watered my eyes. When we finally got on our way, our packs loaded with rubbery leftover bread, smoked meat, and apples, I saw Dad pass her a few dollars, and despite my slowly backing away from the door to avoid her, I could still feel Aunt Lindy's kiss on my forehead hours later.

Aunt Lindy's place wasn't far from the path that led to the camp, down an old dirt road just like any other. Dad turned down and stopped about five minutes in, pulled over to the side of the road, and parked. I looked around and saw nothing.

"Where are we?"

"At the start of the path." He grabbed his sack from the bed of the truck and strapped his fiddle to it. I grabbed my own pack and looked up at the trees, still and quiet in the calm morning. Dad stepped across a small ditch

and parted the grass. I followed, the wet of early morning frost cold on my hands.

“There’s a path?” I asked.

“If you know where to find it. We gotta stamp it down a bit before they arrive.”

We walked ahead for another twenty minutes, parting the grass and stomping it down before we came to a narrow dirt path just before a wall of trees.

“See, a path.” Dad winked at me, and we turned around and headed back to the road to wait for the Americans. “I’ve walked this path more times than I can count. The camp belonged to your grandfather. I can always find it.”

When I came home for the last time, after the new Mr. Ellis did what he did, Ben and I tried to find that path, to make our way to Dad’s cabin. It had been too long, and the narrow dirt path had faded away under new grass. We must have stopped beside the road a dozen times, convinced we were in the right place. But we never found the path and left disheartened. On our way home, we drove past Aunt Lindy’s house, long abandoned and given up to nature. The roof had caved in and the windows were broken. Shards of glass reached up out of rotting windowpanes. Grass and weeds had taken over her garden, but a beautiful vine wrapped itself around the ruin and I was glad for that.

When the Americans finally arrived, there were three of them, dropped off by an ugly man named Harris who claimed to be the trip coordinator. With an exchange of American dollar bills, he drove off in a cloud of dust, promising he’d be back the next day at nightfall to retrieve them. They shook hands with Dad and eyed me sideways. Dad spoke to them in Mi’kmaw, pretending that his English was poor, using only words, never a full sentence, to get his point across. Path, deer, mud, nighttime, food and whiskey. I was told to stay quiet, seeing as how the only Mi’kmaw words I knew I could count on two hands and had mostly learned from Mae. Saying them, even under my breath, usually meant a swat to the head if Mom heard. They weren’t Christian words, that’s for sure.

“They tip you better if you speak the language out here in the woods. It doesn’t need to make sense; you just need to throw some of the words together,” he whispered when they were out of earshot.

It’s something I had a hard time reconciling, my father making himself small for them.

“People will be someone other than themselves if they have people who rely on them,” Mae said on one of those mornings I sat by my stump to watch the sun rise. She stayed out with me this time, and we were talking about the days before we knew anything about the world. “You got fed, didn’t you? You went to school, didn’t you? Not that you did anything with your schooling, but you got to go. You had a warm house to come home to in winter.”

I sat quiet, the steam rolling off my tea and the old blanket wrapped around my thinning legs. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Don’t suppose I’m right. Know I’m right.” She took a sip from her mug and used her other arm to wrap tight around her chest to conserve warmth.

“And you’d be a good one to talk, Joe. You abandoned your family, if you remember. Dad only fooled a few morons so we could eat.”

Dad and I led those Americans down that path and through those woods for the better part of a day and saw nothing but rabbits, a few common snakes and one porcupine, but we stayed clear of him. The sun was starting to sneak toward the west when Dad stopped to point out a deer. The white men lifted their guns but never got off a shot. Deer are skittish, and the men talked a lot. Dad had to always remind them to be quiet, turning his head and placing his finger on his lips. And they were picky. We saw a nice big doe, but they wanted antlers.

We came to the cabin, one room with an old wood stove and bunks, just as the first stars started to shine. There were four beds closest to the fire and one against the other wall, with a sheet that we could pull across for privacy. My great-grandfather had built it and passed it down. He was long dead now and I never knew him, but he’d carved pictures into the walls during long winters when he’d stayed for weeks at a time, hunting and catching rabbits. That first night in the cabin, I lay on the narrow bed I shared with my father and traced the rough lines of a beaver, trees, the cabin itself and flames shooting up out of nothing. A crudely etched star made me think of the last time Ruthie and I lay on a blanket and watched the stars move slowly across the Maine sky.

I could hear the men well enough—the sheet didn't keep their voices from me—but I paid little attention. Dad sat in the corner, whittling a piece of wood, and kept the fire going. He also poured, and charged per pour, some of his homemade whiskey. He made them pay before the pour, and the more they drank, the more he poured. He sipped the same cup all night, adding a bit of water every few sips. Just when they were thinking of going to sleep, Dad brought out his fiddle and played them a tune. Good for another three or four pours.

"New boots for you kids," he said after they passed out and he counted the American bills.

The next morning, really only two or three hours after they'd gone to sleep, Dad woke them, made coffee and fried bacon on the old stove. Dad had me get water from the lake so that they could wash their faces. The morning was crisp, and dipping my hands in the tin-coloured water of the lake felt good, like being new again. I washed my face and under my arms the way Mom had taught me, before taking the two kettles back to the cabin. I passed them water and Aspirin for the headaches. The air in that cabin was filled with bacon grease and the smell of too many men confined in one place. When the Aspirin started to do its job and they had breakfast in their bellies, we headed out again.

By midafternoon, they bagged a buck. That was my first experience with waste. The men wanted to cut the head off and throw the rest away. Dad salvaged the body and took it back to Aunt Lindy, who cut it up for food. I learned how to hold a camera that day. We didn't have one, but one of Mom's sisters owned one. That is how we have pictures of ourselves. Mom has one of all of us together, Ruthie standing beside me, squinting in the sun. It's the only picture of all seven of us in one place and hangs in the middle of a wall on its own. The camera was heavier than I thought, and I was shaking out of fear of dropping it. The men posed, crouched down by the dead animal, each gripping the antlers. They wanted Dad in the picture, so he stood in the back, his lips straight and thin, his face serious, his arms folded over his chest, oldie-type Indian style. I pressed the button, and it made a clicking sound that scared me. I thought I'd broken it. I dropped it and it landed on the ground with a thump. One of the men started toward me.

“You little brown shit, you’d better not have broken it.” Dad was between us before he had the time to grab me, picking up the camera and handing it back to him.

“It’s good,” he said in his false broken English. “It’s good.” And it was. The camera was fine. They took a few more pictures but none with Dad in the background or me holding the offending piece of equipment.

“You did everything—why are they so happy? They didn’t do hardly anything,” I whispered as I pulled a tall piece of grass from its root and stuck it between my teeth, enjoying the sweet flavour.

“There are things more important in this world than taking credit, Joe.”

The trip home the next day was quiet. The leaves seemed dimmer somehow, the road longer and less interesting. When we pulled up the drive, I don’t think the truck was even at a full stop before I was out and running through the front door of the house, slamming it behind me. I wrapped my arms around my mother. Mae had to get me off her.

“Jesus, Joe. You’ve been gone three days. Don’t be such a baby.” Mae had hold of my arm and dragged me over to the sink for a good wash. You’d never think I was fifteen years of age, the way they babied me. I’d be lying if I said it bothered me. Mae was heating water when Dad came in with deer meat in packages for the freezer downstairs in the basement. We were the only Indian family that I knew of with a basement, and the only ones with a deep-freeze. Mr. Ellis had given us an old one, said it didn’t work, but Dad brought it home and fiddled with it until it did. He put it in the basement, on wood tracks since it flooded down there every time it rained.

“Hello, my love.” Dad kissed Mom on the cheek. “And before you ask, Joe did really good.” He stopped to put a one-dollar bill in my hand and then climbed down the ladder into the dark, mouldy basement.

“Well, look at you,” Mae said, teasing, and Mom gave me a kiss on top of my head. I still have that dollar in my wallet, sitting on my nightstand beside warm glasses of water and medication. On days when no one comes around to visit, I watch the small bubbles that form when water turns from cold to warm. I watch them free themselves from the bottom, betting on which one will make it to the top first, the glare of brown medication bottles in the background.

That winter, after my first trip to the woods with Dad, passed slow and quiet. Letters came from family members and Mom read them out loud before pressing the paper to her chest. Sometimes she cried, and sometimes she didn't. Some received the honour of being squeezed in between the pages of the Bible. If a particularly good letter came, we'd get baked apples with butter and cinnamon. When spring came, we spent our time planting, but only those fruits and vegetables that would be ready before we headed to Maine. Cabbage, string beans and strawberries mainly, which were boiled and preserved and set in the basement, ready for winter. Mom was disappointed when the school sent a letter telling her I wasn't ready for the next grade. I was never a good student, preferring to stare out the window instead of pay attention to what was being said at the front of the room. I drifted off so much into my own imagination that the principal strapped me once for "preoccupation," whatever that meant. I didn't tell Mom or Dad. I had to hide my blistered palms for a week and then tell a lie about pulling a rope too strongly. Turned out that would be my last full year in school. Halfway through the next year, I left it behind. I could read enough to get through a Louis L'Amour book, add and subtract numbers on paper and sign my name. I didn't see much sense in learning anything more than that, and I never regretted leaving.

But Mom worried about it the rest of that spring and made me pack extra lessons in math and reading to take with me to Maine. Before we left, I was looking for a good place to hide them when I came across Ruthie's old boots. The leather was still soft but coated in dust. The laces sat untied. I lifted them off the shelf and held them close. The button eyes of her doll looked at me mournfully in the dim light. We left two days later, the house secured, the early summer fruits and vegetables squirrelled away in the basement, boys on the back of the truck and Mae and Mom squeezed into the cab. Charlie came with us that year, and he said it was going to be his last. He had plans to maybe open his own business painting houses, and maybe I could work with him. I never imagined it would be our last summer in Maine.

FOUR

NORMA

EVEN AS I GOT OLDER AND STARTED TO MAKE MY OWN way in the world, my mother tried to keep me close, pulling on that invisible chain that brought me back into her space whenever I tried to occupy my own. I loved my father and I know he loved me, but his love was different. While there was distance, there was also a lightness about it. I never felt that his love was a burden.

"Your mother . . ." He rubbed his forehead with his thumb and pointer finger. "Your mother is nervous." Father sat in his chair in the living room, his book closed on his lap, a tissue for a bookmark. A glass of whiskey, neat, beside him. I sat on the ottoman facing him, my elbows on my knees. "A lot has happened to her, remember. Her parents dying when she was young, raised by her grandparents. They weren't cruel, but they weren't loving either, Norma. She didn't have the love that she gives to you." He leaned forward and placed a hand on my knee.

My grandparents died in a car accident when my mother was three and Aunt June was six. Mother didn't talk about them, and I'd never seen a photo. Aunt June told me that their grandmother would often remind them that they had already raised their own children and that Mother and Aunt June could sleep under their roof and eat at their table but not expect much more. They learned early on how to care for themselves and depend on one another.

"And then all those miscarriages. It's been a lot for her."

I lived my entire childhood in the shadow of infant ghosts. Their memory haunted my mother, and she carried them around with her, constantly tripping over their absence and blaming me for the fall.

"She wanted children so bad, Norma, wanted a whole houseful, and the sadness just got worse with each one. And then you came along and brought a little bit of the light back into her eyes. But sometimes I think that sadness drilled down deep and some of it might just be there for good." He leaned back in his chair, reaching out to catch the book as it started to slip from his lap.

"She worries too much. I just want to go to camp. An hour away. For two nights." I'd never been away from home and Janet was going. "It's a church camp, Dad. What does she think is going to happen?" She'd gone to lie down, citing my ungratefulness for her headache, so I whispered.

"I'll talk to her." He pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose and picked up his book. I sat there for a minute watching him until he glanced up and nodded toward the door. "Now, get lost and leave me to my book."

"I couldn't get lost if I tried. I never get to leave the house."

He smiled a sympathetic smile, and I went back to my room, passing a small photo of Mother and Aunt June just outside my bedroom door. It had sat midway up the wall my whole life, cast in the shadow of the hallway. The black-and-white photo showed two girls standing on the steps of a church, hats straight and hands at their sides, smiles wide and mischievous.

This was one of the rare photos that existed in our house, and I never considered it strange that we had so few, until I went to Janet's house for a birthday party. Mother came, of course, offering to help the hosting parents, but she ended up sitting on the sofa with a cup of tea in her hand, never taking her eyes off me. Only at school or in the shower did I not have Mother hovering over me, and I'm sure that if it were possible or proper, she would have had eyes on me there, too. The walls and shelves at Janet's house were covered in photos of children at all ages, grandparents and weddings, and Polaroids were stuck to the refrigerator. Our refrigerator held only the grocery list and a magnet with a clasp that Mom used to keep track of the bills. They came in the mail and she put them on the fridge until the next time she went to town, paid them and filed them in a cabinet in the basement. In our living room, above the sofa, hung a photo from their

wedding and two of me. In the first I was four or five and looked terrified in a taffeta dress, my pronounced frown "adorable" according to Aunt June. The second was replaced each September after a trip to the photographer downtown. I'd wear a forced smile and the new outfit bought for the occasion, a fake backdrop of fall leaves behind me. The one from the previous year would be taken out and filed away in the same cabinet in the basement. As I passed the photo of the smiling girls, I stopped and, for the first time, wondered how this particular photo hadn't burned in the fire.

"Didn't we used to have more pictures?" We were at the supper table, and I was absent-mindedly pushing around a piece of steamed broccoli.

"Pictures of what?" Father stopped cutting his pork chop and looked at me.

"Of us. Family pictures. Why don't we have more?"

"We have all the photos we need." Mother took a sip of her water and eyed Father.

"I don't know why, but I remember there being more." I stabbed at the broccoli, bringing it to my nose.

"Stop smelling your food and eat it." It was bad manners to smell your food. She set her glass on the table and continued. "You have quite the imagination. You know we lost almost everything in the fire. I saved only our wedding photo." She set her fork and knife on the table and wiped her mouth with the corner of a napkin. "You were just four. You wouldn't remember."

"What about that picture of you and Aunt June?" I asked.

"It's a copy your aunt made for me after the fire." She was quick to answer.

I shrugged and went back to my meal. "Okay." I stuffed the broccoli in my mouth and washed it down with a sip of water.

That conversation was all but forgotten when I was allowed to attend church camp a week later. Despite all the things my mother imagined, nothing terrible happened to me at camp. There were no sinister men hiding behind trees, lake currents ready to pull me under or cliffs to fall from. I had three full days away from home, sleeping in a bunk, steering canoes along the lakeshore, the autumn-stained leaves reflected in the water, singing hymns by the fire at night, religion enriched by roasted marshmallows. My

first taste of freedom was delicious. I was destined for more freedom, but not until years later did I understand how that freedom came to me.

Fate is a trickster. He likes to set up all the clues just to see if you can put them together and make sense out of things you never thought to make sense of in the first place. He presented me with a bold clue, one so obvious to me now that I know the truth, but one I ignored at the time in favour of freedom and a new bicycle. I was in middle school and working on a project on the circulatory system, and I needed red and blue coloured pencils and some blank paper for drawing. Mother kept her craft supplies in the basement, where there were shelves stacked with dried leaves and plants, coloured paper, yarn and felt. I was rummaging when I saw the cabinet where she filed the bills. It was cold and grey, beaten and battered by time, with a thin layer of dust on the top. I'd never been told to stay out of it—it was understood that I would have no need for anything inside. But something that Sunday afternoon made me open it and look. The first drawer was just as I had been told. It was filled with old bills for electricity and property taxes, and income tax forms filed in neat colour-coded folders by year and month. But the bottom drawer was different. While I'd been expecting more bills, documents of little consequence to my fourteen-year-old self, I was surprised to find it filled with photos, strewn about haphazardly, almost in defiance of my mother and her need to have everything tidy.

As I sifted through the photos of familiar but younger faces, I turned them over to read the dates and names on the back. Mother had labelled each photo in her perfect and recognizable cursive. I found pictures of my mother and Aunt June, pictures of my father looking younger with less creases on his forehead and more dark than white in his hair. There was a nice one of the three of them sitting at a picnic table, tall pine trees framing the ocean in the background. I turned it over and read the back: "June, Lenore and Frank, July 1960." I would have been two years old. But I was nowhere in the picture. There wasn't a toy or doll, no notice of a toddler. And there were more. Pictures of Mother and Father at a wedding, of younger Aunt June and Alice, their arms linked, hands on hips, laughing into the camera. Photos of parties, the beach, barbecues and church services. Some were taken before I was born, but in others, I was missing when I should have been there.

“Norma, come up here and help me a minute. What are you doing down there? It’s damp. You’ll catch a cold.”

I took the photo of my family by the ocean and tucked it in my back pocket before I closed the drawer and pulled the string to turn out the light, casting the basement back into darkness. At the top step, I shivered. The damp, cool basement air gave way to the comfort of a room warmed by the sun, the yellow streak of light from a small window laying out a path from the top of the basement stairs to the kitchen. At the end of the sunlit path, my mother stood, nature’s debris scattered around her.

“Give me a hand with these.” She held up a handful of common holly that grew like a weed in the ditches and fields. The greyish brown stems were cluttered with hard red berries and cut at the base at the perfect angle for preservation. She collected them to decorate the church for Christmas. The simple act of collecting holly was such a deviation from the mother I knew. With a scarf tied around her perfectly formed curls and gardening gloves that were too big for her hands, she’d slug through ditch water and tall grass in the boots my father wore to shovel the driveway in the winter. Seeing her standing at the counter, her cheeks stained pink by the October chill, I couldn’t help but feel a deep love for her.

She was tying the branches in bunches with twine when I pulled the picture from my back pocket and placed it on the counter. “Mother, why am I not in this photo?”

She stopped, set the scissors down and picked up the photo. She held it as if it were about to burst into flames, and I watched as little droplets of sweat began to form on her upper lip. She took a deep breath like she wanted to speak, but said nothing. I waited, quietly, picking up the scissors and cutting the piece of twine that she had been about to cut. I wrapped it around the branches and tied the ends in a knot while I waited.

“I feel one of my headaches coming. I think I need to lie down. I’ll finish this in a bit.” She took the flower-patterned handkerchief she’d been wearing over her head and placed it on the table before leaving me with the small forest. “Dinner is in the refrigerator. Please be a dear, Norma, and put it in the oven at 350 for an hour at four o’clock. We’ll eat at five,” she said, before she disappeared around the corner and down the hall, taking the picture with her.

I never saw that photo again. I thought about it occasionally and wondered what was so troubling about the photo that it caused one of her headaches. That evening the invisible chain that kept me shackled to the house slackened even more when my father allowed me to go to Janet's house for a sleepover.

When I got home the next morning, Father surprised me again by presenting me with a new bike. It was red with tassels erupting out of the handles. I wanted to tell him that I was too old for tassels, but I was afraid of hurting his feelings, and so they stayed, the long strings of rainbow-coloured plastic blowing in the wind. The seat was long and curved, and it smelled of grease and new rubber. The best part was that I was allowed to bike down to the baseball field.

"It's so weird." I'd snuck the phone into the kitchen while Mother was out shopping and Father was raking leaves into piles on the lawn.

"What's so weird?" Alice whispered back.

"Just being able to do things. I get on my bike and look back at the house and, for a minute, I feel like I should go back inside."

"Why would you want to go back in the house if you've been given permission?"

I heard her take a sip of tea on the other end of the line. I twisted the cord around my pinky and looked out the window to make sure Mother hadn't come up the drive. "She doesn't want to do it. She doesn't want to let me go. I can tell. And I feel bad."

"Norma, you're nearly fifteen. It's time to start thinking for yourself, start doing things for yourself."

"But her headaches."

"Her headaches are hers, not yours. You don't cause them; she does. Remember that."

Alice always had a way of making me understand things. Yet regardless of the wisdom she imparted, once the telephone went silent, I still felt the weight of my mother's headaches. There was love in that house, but none of us really knew what to do with it.

I'd only had my new bike for a few weeks before winter came, and the blowing snow forced it into storage and kept me confined again. With adventure stalled by snow squalls and freezing temperatures, I remembered the drawer in the basement with all the photos and went searching again.

The snow fell sideways that day. It hardened on the roads, roofs and anything that didn't move. School was cancelled, so I tried to go back to sleep, but sleep wasn't meant to be mine. Mother was already up and working away at whatever she worked away at. Her heels fell hard on the wooden floor, and I'm sure her sighs could be heard down the block. So, I got up and dressed, missing the stolen sleep and the warm comfort of my bed. A Nancy Drew I intended on spending the rest of the day reading lay unopened on the bedside table.

"Can you please go down and put some wood on the fire? I'm getting a chill."

The bacon grease was starting to harden on my plate as the wind rattled the windows. Mother was standing at the sink, her hands in the soapy water. I gave her my plate and headed down to the furnace room in the basement.

"A nice piece of ash, please. It burns longer and warmer."

At the bottom of the stairs, I turned toward the furnace but noticed the old cabinet, full of paid bills and the photos I once thought didn't exist. I looked up to the top of the stairs to make sure she wasn't watching before I turned away from the furnace room and knelt by the cabinet. My knees rested on the concrete of the basement floor as I leaned forward, taking the handle of the bottom drawer in my hand. It opened easily, but the sound of metal sliding made me stop and look again to the stairs. It wasn't loud, but the sound was amplified by my knowing I was doing something I shouldn't. I looked down into the drawer. Empty. There was nothing in it except for a few paper clips and dust. All those photos were gone. I sat staring into the empty drawer, then closed it quietly when I heard her heels on the floor above me. I was halfway up the stairs before I remembered what I had gone down for. I found a large piece of ash and tossed it into the furnace.

I spent the next few weeks looking for those pictures. Each time Mother would lie down for a nap or go to the grocery store, I would look, but I never found them. The only place I didn't look was in Mother's closet. After she got sick and I couldn't care for her by myself anymore and she went to live in the home, Aunt June helped me clean out the house and ready it for sale. I was washing out the lower cabinets in the kitchen when she tried to sneak by me, a large hat box in her arms. She'd borrowed a friend's car and was heading toward it.

“Aunt June?” She didn’t stop. “Aunt June?” I said more forcefully. She turned before she reached the car but didn’t say a word. We stood there, looking at one another, in a strange sort of standoff. She with a hat box in her hands and I with a dishtowel in mine. I wasn’t exactly sure what was happening, but I knew there was something strange in the way she walked, the way she held that box, the way she pretended not to hear me when I called her name.

“Just a few knick-knacks from our childhood. I’m going to take them with me back to Boston.” She set the box on the ground beside the car.

I stepped off the porch and started toward her. “Can I see?”

“No, no. No need. Nothing interesting.” She opened the door and bent to pick up the box.

“I can get that for you.”

“I’m fine, Norma. You go back to what you were doing.”

“Will you show me someday?”

I noticed her old back was crooked as she placed the box on the back seat beside a few of Mother’s dresses she was taking with her to give to the women’s group she worked with. “Someday maybe.” She smiled and closed the car door.

“Good, I’d like to see them . . . someday.”

She patted my arm and rested her wrinkled hand there for a few seconds before she headed back into the house. I waited a moment, then looked through the car window at the corner of the box before I turned and followed her inside.

BY THE TIME I started to experience freedom, my dreams had faded, like a watercolour left in the sunlight. The colours thinned, the night warmed, the birds and the night creatures quieted, the fear and confusion dulled. And even though I never forgot them completely, they began to take up less space in my life. Space that I first filled with church camp and bike rides but quickly extended to soccer and a boy named John, the older brother of Randall. He smelled nice, and the first time he kissed me, he tasted like black licorice, sweet with a little bit of spice, which I could taste long after the kiss.

I'm certain that, as I aged, my mother's headaches got worse. The more time I spent outside the house she kept so carefully all those years, the more she took to her bed with a bottle of Tylenol and a warm, damp cloth draped over her eyes. Father resigned himself to my freedom, imposing curfews and town limits but little else.

"And where did you adventure to today?" He placed his napkin on his lap as I took a sip of water.

"Janet and I went to the park for a while and hung out. Then we went to the library." I nodded toward the stack of books sitting on the counter.

"I've heard that some of the kids are hanging out down by the reservoir?" Mother tried to make it sound like a statement, but we all knew it was really a question.

"I don't hang out with them, Mother." She eyed me skeptically and I shrugged. "I swear I don't."

"We believe you, Norma. Finish your dinner," Father said.

It was true. I didn't hang out with those kids, but I don't think Mother ever believed me when I told her I was behaving. Aunt June was always telling her to relax, which only seemed to heighten her anxiety instead of relieve it.

Aunt June was visiting for the weekend on the first warm day in May the spring I was sixteen, when I came home five minutes late for supper. Mother was waiting by the door, and she looked at me doubtfully when I told her I'd been at the library and had lost track of time. Aunt June came up behind her and kissed her on her worried red cheek. "You're going to fret yourself into an early grave, Lenore," she said, giving me a wink.

Mother wrung her hands and rolled her eyes before stepping aside and letting me in the door. "It's hard being a mother, June. You can't understand how trying it can be. How much worry there is."

Aunt June let the conversation drop and smiled at me as we piled the mashed potatoes, ham, honey-glazed carrots and homemade bread onto the table for dinner.

Aunt June frustrated my mother. Her "liberal ways" turned Mother's face red and caused her to lose her words. Mother disapproved of her menthol cigarettes and her assessment that a woman did not need a man to be content. She was a "career woman," a phrase my mother uttered with distaste before throwing her arms into the air. But Aunt June danced with

me in the living room, slipped me advanced copies of good books her company was about to publish, and snuck me a sip of gin once when I was thirteen. I hated it, still do, but that was the kind of aunt she was, so very different from my mother. I was always perplexed by their relationship.

"Your aunt June can be such a trial sometimes, Norma," Mother would say while hanging up the phone after one of their hour-long conversations. Yet when Aunt June stayed away for too long, Mother groaned about how much she missed her. It made me jealous, this odd sisterhood between them. I wanted a sibling, and I went to great lengths expressing it, knowing the entire time that I was hurting my mother. I finally gave up asking after I caused a headache that kept her in bed for a week. But Aunt June, despite her perceived flaws, was all Mother had aside from my father and me. She didn't have any friends. There were the ladies from church, but they couldn't be called friends. They spoke in awkward, high-pitched voices to one another each Sunday as they stood in circles outside the church, their sensible heels sinking into the soft earth, their obvious judgment of one another floating on the air between them. They kept their conversations to topics such as the weather, misbehaving children and recipes.

The day after my late arrival home was unseasonably warm. I remember the spring frogs croaking out in the shallow pond in the woods behind our house, and knowing that summer was close. Father stood at the barbecue flipping hamburgers, and Mother and Aunt June were sitting in quiet conversation, their glasses of iced tea set aside in favour of wine and mint juleps.

I'm still not entirely certain what made me speak up, except that I believed, somewhere in the recesses of my mind, that Aunt June would always tell me the truth. It hurts now knowing that was not the case, but I am working on forgiveness. Maybe, as I sat out under the warmth of the sun, I could already see the skin on my arms start to darken.

"What was my great-grandfather's name? The Italian one?"

Aunt June had her face turned toward the sun and was swirling her drink in her hand. I was sitting at the top of the steps that led to the yard where I'd spent much of my childhood. The yard that contained the graves of hamsters and June bugs and a baby doll, long forgotten.

"What Italian great-grandfather?" Aunt June sat up, adjusting her sun hat to cover her eyes. "We're Irish back further than the famine. Although I

once heard a story that there might be Moors back there somewhere." She winked as Mother and Father exchanged worried looks.

I watched as a hamburger, half cooked, landed on the ground when my father tried to flip it. He cursed under his breath before kicking it aside. "On my side, June. My grandfather was Italian, I believe." He stumbled over his words and Aunt June looked at him sideways, taking a slow sip of her wine before turning back to me.

"Right, I always forget you have a mother *and* a father." She laughed a little too hard and a little too boisterously for the joke she'd told. "Why the interest, Poopkin?" Mother got up and went inside.

"I'm darker than you guys, and I get really dark in the summer. It's just weird." I set the magazine I was reading on the deck beside me.

"Genetic throwback," she said, without looking at me.

"Genetic throwback?"

"Yup, your dark skin is nothing but a physical testament to the family histories of most people in this country. You just never know how your kids are going to turn out. Genetics are tricky, I guess."

Aunt June stood up and went inside just as my father passed me on the steps with a plateful of burgers.

"Let's eat," he said, his voice cracking. He waited for me to get up and open the door for him.

Their quiet, which I now know was designed to kill the conversation entirely, had the opposite effect and stirred in me a fascination with genetics. I took out books from the library, which Mother retrieved from my bedroom and promptly returned before I had time to even crack the spine. But she couldn't monitor me at school, and whenever I had a moment to spare, I made my way to the library to soak up all the information I could. I must have read the same encyclopedia repeatedly until I was fluent in all things related to molecules and chromosomes, cells and genes. By the time I studied biology in the twelfth grade, I was well versed in the traits of handedness, eye colour, cleft chins and attached earlobes. I had brown eyes, the same brown eyes as my father, and all three of us were right-handed, but both my parents had earlobes firmly attached to the sides of their heads. Mine were not. The little peninsulas of skin hung loose, unattached and, despite my constant arguments in favour of earrings, still unpierced.

“Aunt June?” I was crouched down in the hallway closet where we kept the second telephone, not wanting my mother to hear. Even when she napped, I was convinced she could see everything I did and hear everything I said.

“Norma? Why are you whispering? What’s going on?”

I could hear Alice in the background, asking if everything was okay.

“Everything is fine. I just want to ask you a question, and I don’t want Mother to have one of her headaches.”

The line was silent.

“Norma, Alice is listening on the line with me.”

“Okay, that’s fine.” And it was. “It’s just that my earlobes aren’t attached.” The other end of the line was quiet except for the breathing of the two women I trusted most in the world.

“Okay, is this what you called to tell me?”

“No—well, yes. But listen to this: it’s not common for two people who have attached earlobes to have a baby with unattached earlobes.”

“Not common, but impossible?” she asked, lowering her voice, too.

“Not impossible, but not likely.”

Father coughed in the next room.

“So, I’m confused, Norma. My earlobes aren’t attached. Maybe you’re more like me in that regard.”

I could tell that she put her hand over the receiver and was talking with Alice. Alice spoke next.

“Why are you thinking about this now, Norma?” Her voice was still so soothing.

“I don’t know. It’s just interesting, I guess.”

“But why are you talking to us about it and not your parents? Why the need for whispers? They might find it interesting and may even have the answer you’re looking for.”

“I don’t want to make Mother sick again.”

“We’ve talked about this, Norma. You are not the reason for your mother’s headaches, remember? You need to give her a little more credit. You’re almost an adult now, and it’s time you started sharing with your mother. She might appreciate it, and it might make you better friends. If it helps, write it down in your journal before you have the conversation.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that for the last three Christmases, I’d regifted the journals to my friend Janet, and I no longer wrote about anything. The older ones, the ones with flowers printed on the cover, sat on a shelf in my room, covered in brown paper in a juvenile effort to hide the information from my mother. As far as I knew, they hadn’t been touched in years.

“Yeah, okay. Maybe I will. This was a silly thing to call about. Sorry, Aunt June.”

“Don’t be sorry about calling. I love to hear your voice, Poopkin. You have a good day at school tomorrow. I love you.” And with that she hung up, leaving me sitting in a dark closet, the receiver in my hand and the sound of the dial tone absorbed into the winter jackets hanging over my head like ghosts.

FIVE

JOE

"DON'T KNOW WHY YOU'RE ALL LOOKING IN THE woods. She ain't there." Mom sat by the fire, her shoes cast off to the side, the soles worn thin from age and use. She dug her toes into the loose dirt around the fire, a potato in one hand and a peeling knife in the other. "Doing nothing but wasting your time looking for her back there. She's out there somewhere." She lifted her arm, the knife still clutched in her hand, and waved wide, taking in the whole world.

In the years since Ruthie went missing, Mom had come to a soft understanding of the situation. She would try her damnedest to not be sad. She couldn't promise complete happiness or fully rid herself of the anger, no matter how many times a week she put on those shoes and walked to the big stone church in town, but she would harness the sadness. She would harness it and tame it and keep it still and quiet. And she did this by believing that Ruthie was out there somewhere, growing up, eating ice cream, reading books and remembering her mother. We let her. But we still looked. We scoured those woods, that lakeshore, the faces of any new girls who might be around Ruthie's age. We looked but we never found her.

"Joe, come on over here and sit with me." She waved the potato at me. Ben, Charlie and I had just returned from another brief sweep along the back of the berry fields, and I was scratching the new mosquito bites on the back of my neck. I wandered over and sat down beside her. She used her hands, covered in potato starch, to rub my neck. Her hands felt cool against the burn of the insect bites. I wouldn't say I replaced Ruthie, but when she

went missing, I became the youngest child. A responsibility comes with that, being the youngest, the last baby. I never did live up to the responsibility. Because, like my mother, I was convinced Ruthie was out there somewhere, just waiting for us to find her. Until we did, I was the closest to Ruthie Mom could find, so I sat with her. I walked her to church sometimes and tried my best to listen when she talked. And on the rare occasions when the sadness reared its head, I held her hand while she cried.

I am not a wise man. I think the actions of the last few decades prove that, but I have learned things along the way. The ones that stick with me from those years between losing Ruthie and leaving Maine for good are these: it's hard looking for someone who can't be found, and it's even harder replacing that someone in your own mother's heart. Not saying I didn't want to see Ruthie again—I did—but I tended to side with Mom. Ruthie wasn't in those woods, and even if I was wrong and her tiny little self was still lying out there somewhere with only the sun and moon as friends, I didn't want to find her that way, dead and nothing but bones. So, it was hard looking for her, but we did it anyway. Searching seemed to mean we still cared, still loved her. Up until the day we left that year, early in mid-August, on the cusp of grief once again, we ate our dinner and used the last of the summer sun to search through the brush and under fallen trees, but we didn't holler her name anymore. No one would hear it but us.

"We just keep shrinking." Mom was sipping tea after dinner was done. The quiet buzz of mosquitos and the snapping of the fire were the only other sounds. "Won't be able to work these fields if this keeps up."

Dad nodded and bent closer to the fire to see the writing on his notepad. "People are just finding better work back home, I suppose. It's a long trip if you don't want to make it." He pulled out a knife he had attached to his belt and sharpened the end of a pencil into a perfect point before checking the rest of his record for the day. The number of boxes, the weight per box and the name of the picker were all arranged in neat columns.

We were a small lot by that summer, the summer we quit Maine for good. Our camp housed the familiar faces. Ben came up from Boston and Charlie took the time off his job to make better money in the berry fields. The only other pickers were Old Gerald and Julia, the twins Hank and Bernard, and Widow Agnus and three of her children, the other three having gone off and become adults with jobs and families of their own. And, of

course, there was Frankie. Years later, to my amazement, I would find Frankie again, alive and still drunk, picking blueberries in those same fields, his face craggy and his mouth empty of almost all his teeth. His breath could knock you on your ass if you got close enough. But he was still Frankie, someone who, in his rare moments of sobriety, remembered Ruthie.

I was fifteen that summer, when the blistering hot days seemed to drag themselves into the damp, cool nights. I was itching to be grown, to go to the fires up at Allen's Mountain, to drink some of the beer Ben bought but hid from Mom. But just as the berry pickers were staying away now, the fun seemed to wither and die, too. I do remember waiting for the weekends. Even if there were no parties on the mountain anymore, there was still swimming at the lake and a girl named Susan who wore a yellow bathing suit and, when her parents weren't looking, snuck glances my way. And that summer, there was the carnival.

I was at the end of my row, waiting for Dad's truck to come and signal it was quitting time, and if I'm going to be honest—and when you're almost dead, honesty is so much easier—I wasn't picking many berries. Ben and I were still partners in the work, but he was at the other end of the row, looking like he was working. It was hot and we knew that a carnival was coming to the town just a couple of miles down Route 9. I was using a small twig to clean under my nails like Mom said to, when I felt the rumbling under my feet. The ground itself was vibrating. I dropped the twig and stood with my hand to my eyes as I watched all those trucks go past carrying rides and tents, freaks and magicians, fortune tellers, and animals I had only ever read about in books. I could almost smell the cotton candy. Ben was beside me by the time the last truck drove past.

"It's not like the carnivals at home, ya know," Ben said as we walked back along the row we'd been working.

"What do you mean?"

"They have good rides down here, not just those little trains and pony rides. They have Ferris wheels and rides that spin so fast you might lose your lunch."

"I can handle it." Truth is, I didn't know if I could handle it. I just wanted the chance to buy Susan some cotton candy and maybe get her to kiss me.

It was a clear Saturday night, a night that Ben, Mae and Charlie joked was perfect for earning the sins they would have to repent for the next morning. I was aching for some of those sins. It was like there was a rope pulled tight, the threads twisted somewhere inside of me, ready for the release. And we needed to get away. Away from the shadow of those trees, of the ghosts of our own voices calling for Ruthie. Away from the constant fear that I might find her back there somewhere. In bad dreams I sometimes did find her, her bones bleached by the sun, her little dress draped over what was left of her. Those dreams were hard, and I tried my best to forget them, working myself into exhaustion the day after. Sometimes I would wake up crying tears of both fear and relief. Because, while I never believed Ruthie was dead, wouldn't it be better to know for sure? Wouldn't Mom be able to throw those shoes away if she just knew that Ruthie was gone?

The night was warm and dry, with a breeze just soft enough to keep you cool but not enough to cause a shiver. We could hear the carnival and see the bruise the neon lights punched in the sky. The continuous sound of high-pitched bells shot through the dark to meet us. I remember that my legs, long and skinny, bones pushing against my summer skin, seemed to move faster and of their own free will, pulling me toward the smell of cotton candy, machine grease and public toilets.

Charlie ran up to walk beside me, punching me in the arm. "Slow down there, Joe. Gonna get yourself all tired out before we even get there." I punched him back and broke into a run. Ben and Mae followed, the sound of their shoes crunching the gravel fading into the dark.

I'd never been allowed to go to a carnival before. The others started going when they were thirteen, but Mom held me back because of Ruthie going missing. I didn't see any logic in it, but I also didn't question it. This year, after a sideways look from Dad, she finally let me go. Dad kept the money we earned hidden away under the seat of his truck. Each kid under the age of sixteen, which by then was only me, had their own envelope, Dad's hen-scratch cursive identifying the fruits of each child's labour. The money was tucked away and meant for boots and notebooks for school. Even though I'd quit school, Dad still didn't let me have it all. He said that if I was going to be an adult, I'd have to start paying my fair share of the bills. But on that night, he let me make a small withdrawal. Before we

headed out, before the sun was settling in, he snuck a couple dollars in my hand and gave me a pat on the back.

"Spend it wisely. It's all you're gonna get until we're home."

The bills felt damp in my hand, and I pushed them into the deepest part of my pocket. I kept rubbing my leg every couple minutes just to make sure they were still there. I'd just checked my pocket for the tenth or maybe the hundredth time when Charlie ducked under a rope strung between two tents. I followed close behind. We waited in the shadows until no one was near. Neither one of us wanted to waste our hard-earned money on admission. As I was about to step into the artificial brightness of neon lights, my foot caught on something, and the ground came up at me fast. I put my hands out in front and twisted, my hip taking the brunt of the fall. The grass was starting to cool, damp with the night air. I jumped up fast, wiping the grass and dirt from my pants. Charlie doubled over laughing.

Lying on the ground next to me, his body contorted into an L-shape, an empty bottle lying just outside the grasp of his dirty fingers, was Frankie.

"Jesus, Frankie. What the hell?"

"You woke me." He struggled to his feet, falling twice before he was upright.

"You tripped me."

"I did no such thing." His words slurred as he turned and walked around the back of the tent, dropped his pants to his ankles and pissed on the rope we'd just crawled under. I shook my head and turned back to Charlie, who was still laughing.

"Screw off," I said as I turned and made my way into the crowd.

You never know what your last words to someone are going to be, and it's hard to reconcile it when the deed is done and the person is gone. For years I tried to think of something else I might have said to Charlie, something that would've let him know how much I looked up to him, how much I loved him. Words I don't think he ever heard from me. But I've lived so many years with the memory that the last words my brother heard were not ones of love or encouragement, but words of anger, stained by my own embarrassment. The last thing I said to Ruthie didn't even have the dignity of being a word. A finger pushing into my lips, a shush to keep my secret. Words are powerful and funny things, said or unsaid.

The carnival was teeming with life, people of all ages and sizes. I watched a fat man squeeze himself into the Ferris wheel seat next to an equally fat woman and wondered at how they would be sustained in the air, if the steel was strong enough for the both of them. Children gripped the poles extending from the necks of wooden horses, the pastel paint chipping off with each new rider. I glanced at the local teens sneaking diluted whiskey. Animals in cages or behind fences were prowling or sleeping, mewing or growling. As I walked around, my eyes flitting from one thing to the next, taking it all in, I breathed in the smell of summer sweat and sugar. Cooking oil hissed and popped, and alarms signifying victory battled excited cries over stuffed animals and balloons, cheap watches and plastic pearls. I eavesdropped on conversations and ate my first corn dog. Ben and Mae had gone off to sit on the bleachers with a few friends from the berry fields, and Charlie caught up to me and gave me a soft punch in the arm. I wish I'd said I was sorry for telling him off, but I didn't. We turned at the Tilt-a-Whirl to head toward the fortune teller's tent, when we heard Archie Johnson's voice from behind the line of temporary toilets.

"You son of a bitch. Give me my money back."

Charlie turned toward the sound of the brewing fight. I felt my stomach lurch. Archie Johnson was a big guy, just a bit older than Ben and angry all the time. They say he came out of his mother punching and cursing. In the dim light of the rides, we could see Frankie on the ground, Archie's foot on his throat, foam forming at the corners of Frankie's mouth.

"Let him go, Archie. Don't be an ass." Charlie stepped toward them. I reached out to grab his arm, but he was too far from me now.

Archie's brothers, almost as big as he was, started laughing and talking to their brother in our language, the one our parents didn't teach us. I understood almost none of it, but I knew from the way they stood tall and leered that they weren't saying anything good. They came from a place a couple hours away from us back home. A rough place my parents abandoned long before any of us were even thought of. "Those Johnsons were no good when I was a girl, and they passed their badness on to their kids," my mom said each time one of them caused trouble during our summers in Maine, getting into small fights with the locals and shoplifting from the store where we got our supplies, whiskey and cigarettes mostly. They always seemed to be looking for a fight, but no one ever took them up

on it, leaving them to take out their violence on each other most of the time. It'd be nothing to see at least one of them on a Monday morning with a shiner or bruised knuckles. But on this night, they found victims in a hapless drunk and someone young and idealistic. One of Archie's brothers —I don't remember which one—stepped out of the shadows and pressed his hard, calloused hands against Charlie's chest and shoved. Charlie stumbled and fell to the ground, which only made him madder as Archie continued to press down on Frankie's throat.

"Let him go." Charlie got to his feet and started toward Archie, looking him in the eye.

"No."

"Let him go."

"What are you going to do, you fuckin' high and mighty Indian," Archie sneered.

Even in the dark I saw Charlie's face go hot as he stepped forward again, almost chest to chest with Archie. The only thing separating them was the drunk on the ground struggling to breathe.

"He's a harmless drunk. Let him go."

Archie threw his brothers a look, and quicker than I thought those big guys could move, two of them had Charlie, his arms pulled behind him. Archie lifted his foot off Frankie and punched Charlie so hard in the stomach I swear I heard the air leave my brother. I turned and ran for Ben. I ran like my legs weren't attached to me. The carnival lights streamed by in a bright streak of neon. The sound of blood pulsing in my ears replaced the sounds of bells and tinny music as I ran. I found Ben and Mae on the bleachers, smoking a cigarette and sharing a bottle with some white folk I didn't know. Mae had her hand on the leg of a skinny fella, his yellow hair slicked back and a perfect row of white teeth shining in his mouth. I didn't have the air left in me to explain, so I grabbed Ben by the arm and pulled until he and Mae were on their feet running behind me, demanding an explanation. When we rounded the toilets, the light retreated. The dark and the quiet were unsettling. Archie and his brothers were nowhere to be seen, and there on the ground Frankie sat covered in blood, Charlie's head in his lap. He was rocking back and forth, crying and mumbling the Lord's Prayer.

"*Nujjinene wa'so'q epin jiptek* . . . hallowed be thy name." He stopped and looked up at us. "I just wanted a drink and the money fell right out of

his pocket," Frankie sobbed. "They just kept kicking him. Kicking him in the belly and all around his head. They just kept kicking him, Mae." Frankie was slurring and crying, still rocking Charlie and wiping his nose with the sleeve of his shirt, covered in Charlie's blood. "He went all quiet and stopped movin' and they just kept kickin'."

"Shut it, Frankie." Mae bent low to the ground. The man who'd been with her on the bleachers came to stand behind her. "Charlie. Charlie, it's Mae. Wake up." But Charlie didn't wake up. Charlie didn't move. The man with the yellow hair lifted Mae off the ground, and Ben bent down, lifting Charlie into his arms. Frankie was still snivelling.

"Shut up, Frankie!" I yelled. All I wanted to do was punch Frankie in his rotten, drunken face, but I turned and followed my brothers instead.

Ben, Charlie's limp body in his arms, stepped over the rope between the tents like it wasn't even there. Mae and I ducked under. The night was quiet. The creatures hiding in the woods and in the soggy ditches along Route 9 seemed to know we were coming, seemed to understand the gravity of it all.

"What happened, Joe?" Mae tried to whisper. Something about the quiet, the dark, the violence softened our voices.

"It was Frankie." I stumbled over my words.

"Frankie did this?"

"No, Mae. Charlie, he was trying to defend Frankie. Frankie stole his money."

"Whose money? Charlie's?"

I was getting it all wrong. I was finding it hard to think. Ahead of us Ben walked quietly but slowly now. Ben was strong, the strongest of any of us kids, but the longer we walked, the more I could hear his breathing, laboured and rough.

"Archie Johnson. And his brothers. It was their money."

"I hate that family. No good, not one of them. If Charlie . . ." Mae's voice trailed off.

"He's gonna be okay, right, Mae?"

She didn't answer, and just when I was about to question her again, headlights cut into the dark, and the man with yellow hair pulled up in a car as big as a boat.

"Get in. I'll take ya the rest of the way."

I got in the back seat and Ben laid Charlie's head on my lap. Ben held his feet and Mae rode in the front. Charlie didn't stir. The only sound was the occasional gurgle from his throat when he took a breath. When we pulled up to the camp, headlights shining on the fire, Mom and Dad stood, their hands to their eyes, blinded and confused. The four of us managed to get Charlie's limp body out of the back of the car and into the cabin, Mom screaming for a reason the whole time.

"What . . . Charlie? Ben, what?" Dad stammered.

"He was defending Frankie, and the Johnson boys went at him."

Mae was already heading to the door, the bucket used for collecting drinking water in her hands. Mom sat on the cabin floor beside her son, running her hands along the side of his head. I stood in the corner, feeling the anger build in me. It burned the skin from underneath and tightened my muscles so hard that my fingers rounded themselves into tight fists. I turned to leave, determined to find Archie Johnson and beat him the same way he'd beat on Charlie. In my head I could see it, my fists powered by rage, Archie defenceless and cowering.

"A flight of fancy," Ben told me years later. "He would have done the same to you as he did to Charlie, and where would that have left us?"

I got as far as the fire, the flames shrinking from neglect, when Ben stopped me. He grabbed me around my midsection, pinning my arms to my sides, and held me that way, speaking not a single word. I think he thought he was doing a good thing, keeping me from dying at the hands of the Johnson boys. I think he thought that if he kept me there, locked in his arms, I'd be okay, I'd make it through this a normal teenage boy. I wish he'd been right. Instead, I bottled that rage, and it came out in ways I will be ashamed of until the disease drags the last breath from me. I could never reconcile my leaving Charlie there alone with a drunk who couldn't stand, let alone fight. I couldn't understand why I didn't stay with them in the dark shadows of those tents, why I didn't stand beside him, why I didn't take some of the beating. If the fists had been parcelled out, maybe we'd have both come out of it alive, bruised for sure and maybe a little embarrassed, but both alive.

Mom bathed Charlie's bloodied face with tears and prayed over him day and night until exhaustion forced her into a restless sleep. "Don't you go

and leave me, Charles Michael. Don't you go and leave me. You wake up. I'm your mother and I'm telling you to open those eyes and look at me."

But he didn't, and we left Maine under a heavy sadness. Dad bundled Charlie in blankets, and he and Ben placed him gently on a mattress. We'd taken the mattress from the cabin, and Mom used belts and twine to harness him to the bed of the truck. I sat on one side and Ben on the other, holding the mattress in place, staring down at Charlie, unrecognizable under the swollen flesh. Mae followed in the car. We left the fields in mid-August, turning over the foremanship to a Mexican fella named Juan.

We didn't look for the Johnson boys, but when we were packing up to leave, someone said they'd hightailed it for the border just after they'd kicked the life out of Charlie. Their fields lay abandoned, and Mr. Ellis was in a temper that only got worse when Dad told him that we were leaving early. I saw Archie a few years later, just after he got out of prison. I was on the road, leaving everything I knew and loved behind, and he was hitchhiking along the highway, on his way to New Brunswick. I recognized him from a distance by his bigness. When he stuck out his thumb, I swerved, aiming that beat-up truck right at him. When I hit the dirt on the side of the road, he jumped into a ditch. I missed. I don't know if I meant to miss, but I did. Maybe if I'd drove straight and hit him, I'd have kept going, never giving another thought to Archie Johnson. Regardless, I hope he broke a bone or something or at least shit himself. There's got to be some justice for what he did.

Charlie left this world somewhere in New Brunswick. I imagined each and every bump meant pain for him even though his face didn't show it. Twenty minutes across the border, he heaved a sigh that could have brought the clouds down if there'd been any. It was a sunny day, a beautiful, cruel day. I watched his chest, waiting for the rise, but it didn't come, and Ben knocked on the back window of the pickup. Dad pulled over and Mom wailed. She screamed into the trees as we stood at the side of the highway, our dead brother in the back and our grieving mother thrashing the tall grass that grew along the side of the road. She cut her hands to bits, thin lines of red criss-crossing her palms as my mother, a woman of faith, cursed God.

SIX

NORMA

MOTHER'S HEADACHES BECAME RARER THE OLDER I got. But that summer, before I packed my suitcase and my parents drove me down to Boston for college, her headaches returned.

"Norma, a cool cloth, please, for my head, and maybe put another in the freezer. When it's good and chilled, I can use it on my neck." She lay on her bed, flat on her back, her heels pointed inward, her feet pointed to the sides. For the first time in a very long time, I looked at my mother. You rarely notice change when you see someone every day. I hadn't noticed her skin start to wrinkle or the dim brown of an age spot as it spread across her jaw, the slight belly that came with menopause and stayed. She looked so vulnerable, and for a split second as I turned toward the door, I wondered if I should be leaving her.

"Of course, Mother." I went to the kitchen and wet two cloths, one for now and one to be placed in the freezer. I looked out the window and saw my father mowing the lawn. The comforting hum of summer.

I placed the cool cloth across Mother's eyes and was turning to leave when I heard her whisper, "I'm going to miss you." She swung her arm up over her head. I bent down and kissed her on the cheek before pulling the drapes closed. I slipped down the hall to my own room to finish packing.

For all the ways my mother tried to hide me away from the world, she seemed happy when I told her I wanted to attend university in Boston. Perhaps she felt relief at not having to watch over me every waking second, wondering if I was going to figure it all out. I think about those things now,

the moments of my life that passed without so much as a hint of the truth. Now they take up an inordinate amount of my time in their remembering.

AFTER THE SOLEMN burial of my baby doll in the backyard, and much to my mother's displeasure, I turned to books to keep me company. I think she would have preferred I stay a child forever, but instead, I thrived on fantasies of witches and white rabbits, of submarines and musketeers. I stayed awake until the sun started to break through the blinds, lost in those other worlds, so vivid and so removed from my own. I detected with Nancy Drew and read fairy tales from collections translated from Japanese and Spanish, gifted to me by Alice. My house, with its dark wood panelling, lack of colour and perpetual quiet, was a desert for the imagination. Yet, thanks to books, mine thrived. When you're an only child, semi-imprisoned, books become more than paper between hard cardboard, more than the alphabet organized into words and printed on a page.

As I got older and wandered through the world a little more freely, I came to depend less on books. I went on the occasional date or out with my oldest and only real friend, Janet. Some of the girls from our senior year were already planning weddings or getting ready to work for their fathers in nondescript offices with faux wood blinds that clacked noisily when opened. I could never imagine my life like that, leaving work at the end of each day smelling of stale coffee and cigarette smoke. Married at twenty, settled. It seemed to me to be a continuation of the life I was already leading. I wasn't sure what I wanted, but I knew it wasn't that. Not yet at least.

For three years after high school, I lived at home and worked at the local supermarket. I knew I needed to get out of my parents' home, but I wanted to be sure I was going somewhere first. Their love was less oppressive, but I still felt watched, guarded like a secret, even after I was old enough to drive a car, then to vote and finally to drink, casting off the last vestiges of childhood with a cold glass of beer. Janet chose to stay in town, too. She wasn't interested in college and took a job as a care assistant at the Shady Oaks retirement home. She started the day after graduation and worked in the dementia unit. I remember, before leaving for Boston, I helped her move out of her parents' house and into her own apartment, a

basement bachelor with low ceilings and narrow, horizontal windows. We stacked boxes, opened the windows to get the musty smell out, and ate stale doughnuts I'd brought from work.

"What are you going to do in a city?" Janet stuffed the last of her doughnut in her mouth and washed it down with a beer.

"Study. Meet people." I shrugged.

"Meet a guy, maybe." She winked at me. "Not one of these local losers."

I opened a box marked "Kitchen" and started putting plates into a cupboard. "I guess, maybe. Who knows? I'm just looking forward to getting out of my parents' house."

"The jail at 412 Maple," Janet teased me. "The prison of Lenore." She grabbed a box labelled "Bathroom" and headed down the hallway.

It's strange how quickly I lost Janet. We exchanged a few letters, and I saw her when I came home that first Christmas. Eventually, she was absorbed by the hometown, lost to me, the one who left. We were reunited the day I stopped my car at the front doors of Shady Oaks to leave my mother, with her two suitcases and a box that held a few photos and her Bible. Janet met us, her once thin, athletic frame taking up the entire door, the wrinkles around her eyes deep and dark, and the grey hair around her temples matching my own.

IT WAS A warm day when we left for Boston. I was leaving a few days early to spend some time with Aunt June. She wanted to show me around before I moved into my dormitory. She promised dinners, guided tours of the city she loved, and conversation suitable for a college woman. I rolled down the car window and breathed in the smells—exhaust, cut grass, flowers and urine—as we drove over the bridge and into the city, heading south. I'd been to Boston before, to spend a weekend with Aunt June or have one of my talks with Alice, but this felt different. For the next few years, I was going to call this place home. A place, like a person, takes on a certain quality when you're going to get to know it intimately. I wanted to memorize each nook, every crevice. I wanted my eyes to rest on each building and each bridge, each park and each person walking to somewhere from somewhere.

Aunt June lived alone in Jamaica Plain, with an immortal goldfish named Henri.

"Henri, with an *i*. He's a French fish, after all."

She'd been telling that joke as far back as I could remember. And each time I came to visit, he'd look somewhat different. When I was a child, she was able to convince me that Henri could speak French, but only to her, and that he also could change the colour of his skin on a whim. And I believed her. My love of books and the stories Aunt June told me watered my imagination, providing the nourishment that was lacking at home. Perhaps my love of a good story is the reason I chose the career path I did.

Some people, I have learned, are meant to read great works and others are meant to write them. Often, these are not the same people. When I was young, I decided that I could be the next great American writer. But over the years, no matter how hard I tried, I was denied access to that mythical space where stories dwell, waiting for the right person to find them and give them form. Somewhere between thought and ink, the stories held in my imagination dissolved into the ether. The journals that Alice suggested I keep were full of platitudes and preteen annoyances, and the occasional reference to dreams or imaginary slights from boys or girls I thought were friends. I believed then that nothing in those journals was worthy of the stories I thought I could tell. I wish I could go back to that girl, writing about her dreams in journals, and tell her to pay closer attention to what she was writing, to stare at the pictures she was drawing until she remembered. But I can't. So, I went to Boston to learn how to teach the words of others.

When we arrived that warm summer day, Aunt June was waiting, sitting on the front porch of a large yellow house tucked in behind a main road. You could tell that the house had been magnificent once. The dark wood trim and floors, the windows with tapered edges, all told stories of women in long dresses and men who tipped their hats when people walked by. Aunt June owned the building and lived on the first floor, with two apartments above her. A man named Leonard lived on the second floor, and they drank a lot of tea together on rainy days. I think I've known Leonard as long as I've known Aunt June. A family of three occupied the third floor. They owned a small bakery and brought extras home in the evening for Aunt June and Leonard. I think the boy, Boyd, no older than twelve, had a crush on

me. Whenever he saw me, his face blushed and his words froze solid on his tongue. It was cute, and I will admit I liked it a little.

"It's about time. I didn't think you were ever gonna get here." Aunt June's skirt made a swishing sound as she grabbed me into a hug. "This is going to be so much fun," she whispered into my ear, before hugging her sister and nodding to my dad. "Now, you two can scram."

I reached into the trunk to get my suitcase.

"My God, June, don't be in such a hurry to steal my daughter." Mother tried to make it a joke, but it got caught in the back of her throat.

"Come in then and have a cup of tea before you head back." Aunt June winked as she wrapped her arm around my waist, leaving my parents to gather my belongings and haul them indoors. Three hours later, after a few tears and a headache for Mother, they departed, leaving me truly without them for the first time.

The next day started dark with the threat of rain, but by late morning the sun had scattered the clouds, and Aunt June thought it would be the perfect time to show me around her neighbourhood. We walked to a nearby park and made our way along the edge of a large pond, surrounded by green. The park itself had been made into a makeshift campsite with nylon tents pitched all along the edge of the water and into the trees. People sat on the ground and on blankets sharing food and smoking cigarettes. Signs demanding that the government give back stolen land were driven into the ground or hung off the sides of tents. Dark-skinned women with black hair braided down their backs sat with dark-skinned men, their lips engaged in what looked like serious conversation.

"What is all this?"

"They're protesting."

"Protesting what?"

"Why don't you go ask?"

I couldn't imagine approaching a stranger, but I was genuinely curious. Protests didn't happen in my hometown, where we were all just various versions of one another and everyone thought the same. If they did think differently, they did it quietly behind closed doors.

"Are they Indians?" I whispered. Aunt June laughed. I only knew Indians from middle school textbooks and appearances on television. In my

narrow understanding, the entire history and existence of Indians comprised war-hungry savages, medicine men and Pocahontas.

"Yes, and people too, Poopkin. You don't have to whisper. They know who they are and I'm sure they'd be happy to tell you why they're here."

We had turned away from the water and were walking slowly back toward the main road. Just off the path a woman sat outside the door of a green and red tent, the zipper half closed. A man sat with his back to me. They passed a cigarette between them as she spoke passionately, the movement of her hands matching the intensity on her face, but I was too far away to hear. The man sat on the ground with his legs pulled up to his chest, his head resting on his knees, listening. She stopped speaking when she saw me watching them. I lost any courage I had been trying to muster to speak to them when she made eye contact with me. Her gaze held no meanness, but I lost my nerve and turned back toward Aunt June, who was now talking with an older woman. I stepped back onto the sidewalk as other protesters started to file past, obscuring my view of the woman by the tent. When the crowd broke, I saw her still looking and waving. She pointed my way and the man turned to follow her gaze. I lifted my hand to give a weak wave and, for an instant, we just stared at one another, our view filtered through passing protesters, handmade signs and the echoing sound of a drum. The woman waved her hand again and I realized that she wasn't waving at me. She was signalling the older lady to join them. But the woman and Aunt June were deep in conversation. I stood there with my hands crossed in front of me in embarrassment and trained my eyes on a dandelion trying to push through a crack in the concrete. After I'd inspected every detail of the flower, I looked up to see the man staring at me, his head off to the side, his gaze intent. I stepped closer to Aunt June as she and her friend said their goodbyes.

Then he yelled. "Ruthie?" He jumped to his feet. "Ruthie!"

He was walking toward me now. For an instant I thought he was yelling at Aunt June's friend, but with his sharp gaze focused clearly on me, I understood that he was coming toward me. As he got closer I felt a heaviness pressing against my chest and darkness floated in the corner of my vision. I was unsettled and all sound seemed to be under water. And then Aunt June's hand was on mine. She held on tight, so tight that the tips of my fingers began to turn purple. Something had shifted in Aunt June. I

could feel it, a panicked electricity that moved from her hand to mine as she pulled me along.

"Norma." She pulled me away from the gathering crowd, away from the approaching man.

"Aunt June, what's wrong?"

"I don't feel well. We need to go." Aunt June's face was flushed, her eyebrows arched in concern.

"Okay, let's go."

"Ruthie! Wait!"

Aunt June stepped in behind me, blocking the man from seeing me. We were moving quickly now. Behind me I heard the young woman yell, "Ben, where are you going?"

Aunt June quickened her step and glanced over her shoulder as the man got closer. I looked back one last time to see his brown eyes focused on me. We crossed the road just before he reached us. All my senses started to return once the crowd, marching down the middle of the road, came between us. We were almost running now, and Aunt June's grip on my hand was solid as I turned to see him disappear into the long line of protesters. But over the sound of the drum and the hum of people, I could hear him yelling, "Ruthie! Please, Ruthie!" The desperation in his voice almost made me stop to reassure him that he had the wrong person, but Aunt June pulled me down a small alley lined with trash cans from row houses.

"That was weird now, wasn't it?" There was worry on her face even though she tried to hide it with a crooked smile. "Let's walk toward home and stop and grab something to drink. It's a warm day. I'm buying."

From where we stood, halfway down the alley, we watched the protesters file by as Aunt June stopped to catch her breath, but there was no sight of the man named Ben.

We stopped at an Irish bar a few blocks from Aunt June's. My mouth was dry, and my eyes stung from moving from the daylight into the dark. The shock of the air conditioning sent chills through me. Aunt June pulled herself up onto a bar stool and I took a seat beside her. The place smelled of fried potatoes and grilled hamburgers. Aunt June ordered us a plate of fries to share, two glasses of Pinot Grigio and two glasses of water. She sipped her wine, and I guzzled both glasses of water. She was fidgety like Mother used to get when I had weird dreams or was five minutes late getting home

from school. She kept turning in her chair when anyone came in, relaxing each time the door closed behind them.

"You okay there, Poopkin?"

I nodded as I swallowed a third glass of water. The bartender sat the fries down in front of us, and Aunt June asked for some vinegar.

"I'm fine. It was just weird. That guy acted like he knew me."

"You probably just look like someone he knows." She grinned but her typically confident voice sounded shaky.

"Yeah, I guess." I took a sip from the glass of wine. The acid hit the back of my throat and I winced. "Good stuff."

"Beggars can't be choosers. I'm paying." Aunt June laughed and the stress of the day began to slip away. Something about Aunt June helped my muscles soften and my jaw unclench.

"What were they protesting anyway? I never got to ask."

"The unfair treatment. We have not been kind to the Indians."

The bartender leaned over, eavesdropping on the conversation. "I think we've been more than kind. Helping them when they don't help themselves. What more do they want?"

"Oh sweetie, I think you should just be bringing us drinks." Aunt June set her empty glass on the bar and pushed it across. He shrugged and poured her another. We spent the entire afternoon eating peanuts and a second order of fries with a cheeseburger this time, cut in half for sharing. I admit I don't remember a lot after the fourth glass of wine, but I do remember telling Aunt June about my childhood friend, a friend I forgot about once I was allowed to go to camp with Janet.

"I had an imaginary friend when I was little," I slurred, reaching for a glass of water.

"Most kids do. Your mother had an imaginary mouse that she accused us of trying to kill when we sat down in 'his chair.'" She laughed at the memory, and I found it hard to believe that my mother even had an imagination.

"Her name was Ruthie." I took a sip of the water. I watched the condensation drip from my glass while Aunt June shifted on her stool. "Don't you think that's weird? My imaginary friend was Ruthie and that man called me Ruthie."

"Just a coincidence." She wiped her hands with a napkin.

“Yeah, I guess so.” The door opened and light spilled into the dark room. “Just a little crazy, I guess.”

“Poopkin, I’m gonna ask you a favour and you need to promise me you’ll do it.” She ordered another drink. “And don’t ask me why. Pinky swear?”

“Pinky swear.” I extended my pinky finger and hooked it around hers.

“Never tell your mother about today.”

“Okay,” I said hesitantly. “But why?”

“I said not to ask me why. And you pinky swore.”

I shrugged and tipped back the last of the water. Aunt June paid the bartender, finished her drink in one swallow and hopped down from the stool. I don’t remember the walk home, but I remember waking up sometime in the middle of the night and throwing up into the toilet in the small bathroom. The cool porcelain tiles felt good against my skin, and Aunt June found me there sometime before the sun came up and helped me back to bed. I’d had drinks before but that was the first time I ever got drunk. And the memory of that day, of the man with the dark eyes and the name Ruthie on his tongue, was stored away, stowed in the back of my mind for decades, like all the other things I should have remembered but didn’t.

TWO YEARS PASSED quickly, as time seems to do as you age. As my classes got smaller and more specialized, I ended up with a few of the same people in every class: Angela, the poet who was madly in love with another poet named Andrew, who I’m sure was gay and in love with Professor Walters; Trinity, whose name confused me and who was obsessed with Gabriel García Márquez and had decided on a double major in English lit and Spanish so that one day she could read him in the language he intended; and Georgia from Georgia, which irritated her, so she made us call her by her middle name, Desiree. She loved Southern Gothic and tried and failed to make me like Faulkner. Desiree and I became friends. We bonded over our shared love of quiet and solitude. We spent time together without a lot of chit-chat and noise. I never asked what led her to appreciate the quiet and she never asked me; it just worked for us. We were quiet without being alone. But just like with Janet, my loose ties of friendship with Desiree

eventually came undone. After graduation we lost touch completely. It seemed that aside from my family, I couldn't hold on to anyone.

I was on the train heading back to the city after Christmas, when Mark sat down beside me. I gazed out the window admiring the glow that the winter sun bestowed on the snow-covered fields, lost in thought.

"Excuse me?"

I turned toward his voice, but the reflection of snow blinded me, casting him in silhouette, light around the edges, but dark and indistinct on the inside.

"Can I sit here?"

I shielded my eyes with my hand to try to get a look at him. "Sure." I turned back toward the window.

"I'm Mark."

I turned back to him. "Norma."

"Nice to meet you, Norma."

I didn't know whether I was meant to turn back to the window or just sit there looking at him. Then he started to laugh, a soft, throaty laugh.

"Well, that was uncomfortable. Should we move on?"

I looked away from the window again and his features became more defined. He had dark hair and blue eyes—something I found distracting but intriguing at the same time. He was clean-shaven, and his hair was cropped short, not military but tidy. He was wearing blue jeans and a button-up shirt, blue and white stripes. I could tell that he was doing the same thing to me, taking me in, trying to figure out if I was going to turn back to the window. I didn't.

We chatted the entire train ride and I was surprised when they announced that we were approaching Boston.

"Would you like to get dinner sometime, maybe?"

"Sure. I'd like that."

Mark took my bag down from the luggage rack and set it on the seat he'd just vacated. I grabbed it and followed him off the train and onto the platform.

"How about now?"

"Now?"

"Why not? I don't want you to go away and forget how interesting I am." He winked.

“Okay.”

We ate at a small pub just around the block from the train station. It was midafternoon, so the pub was nearly empty. We sat in a booth at the back and shared chicken wings and cheese fried in batter.

Mark was a few years older than me and worked in the accounting department of a law firm in Boston. He played soccer on the weekends, and he was a reader. I was comfortable enough in those first few hours to tease him about his affinity for fantasy and science fiction. We laughed. Laughter had always been so sparse in my life it felt odd and then liberating to laugh so loudly.

When the taxi stopped at the dorm to drop me off, he got out to hand me my bag.

“I hope we can do this again,” he said.

“Me too.” I gave him my phone number and he leaned in to kiss me. I detest clichés, but I was sure that I was light-headed not because of the beer, but because of his nearness to me.

In Mark’s presence I became a Norma who laughed in public, who talked to strangers in the grocery line, who danced at the bar after a few drinks. I still yearned for the quiet of the library or the stillness of a Tuesday afternoon in the dorm when everyone was either in class or studying. I still called Desiree, and we went to coffee shops and studied together. At times, I still feared being around other people, but Mark understood and gently forced me out of my shell. I loved the way he would take my hand and lead me into a group of people at a party. My face would flush, but his hand resting on my lower back calmed me enough to be social and not that peculiar version of myself, so like my mother.

I took Mark to Aunt June’s for Friday dinner eight months after we met.

“Well, well. We meet at last.” Aunt June sashayed over to Mark the moment we walked in the door.

“Aunt June, you sound like a fairy tale villain.”

She ignored me and took Mark by the arm and led him into the dining room, where Alice and Desiree were setting the table. A bottle of red wine was already open and half empty.

“Started without us, I see.” I gave Alice a peck on the cheek.

“Appetizer, my dear.”

“Now *you’re* sounding like a fairy tale villain.” I laughed.

The night passed quickly. As I look back on it, I think it might have been one of the happiest of my life. People I loved, eating together, letting the wine make us silly. We told stories and laughed. Mark smiled so much I thought his mouth was going to split at the edges. I realized the next day that not once had I missed the presence of my parents, not once had I wished they were there. When I woke, my mouth dry and my head ringing with the bells of Chianti, the familiar guilt started to inch into my thoughts, and I became annoyed. I was letting the guilt of enjoying life without my parents ruin my happiness. I was foul-tempered the entire day, and it only got worse that evening when I dragged Mark to Andrew's poetry reading.

I didn't like Andrew's work, but I went to support him anyway, as a classmate. I took Mark, thinking he could share in my misery. We sat in rickety wooden chairs in the back row, and Angela sat on the other side of Mark. I introduced them. They started chatting right away, like they'd been friends for years. I envied and loathed the comfort between them. They conversed so naturally for people who'd only just met. They tried to include me, but I felt like an intruder, an eavesdropper on an intimate conversation, although it was anything but. They talked about his job, and I found out he didn't care for his boss, a woman also called Angela. During the next hour, they whispered admiration for the poet. I sat, eyes facing the front of the room, Mark's hand on my knee. I don't anger easily, but as they whispered back and forth, I could feel my annoyance grow, a hard little lump sitting in the middle of my stomach and spreading like a vine up my torso and into my face. And I knew that it had nothing to do with Mark, with Angela.

"I can't read your mind, Norma. You took me to a poetry reading with your friends. Did you just want me to sit there and be unfriendly?"

"No, of course not."

"Are you jealous?" His voice rang with amusement as we walked away from the café and Angela. "Are you?"

"I'm not jealous. I was annoyed that you kept talking through the whole thing." I walked fast.

"You're jealous." He was practically dancing now, walking backwards to face me. "You do love me after all."

"You're annoying me. Just walk like a regular person."

"You're jealous. I need you to admit it."

I gave him a look that my mother would have said could kill a man. It didn't.

"Admit it."

His voice had a singsong quality, and I felt my wall crumbling.

"Fine. I was a little jealous. Now can you just turn and walk with me?"

"I think you love me, Norma."

"I've told you I love you."

"Yeah, but now I have emotional proof."

"Jealousy is not love."

"Well, I think it is and I'm taking this as confirmation."

"Confirmation of what?"

"That I'm making the right decision."

As we walked, hand in hand, I allowed myself to smile, to just be with Mark, to enjoy this perfect moment. The guilt I'd been carrying all day dissolved into the warm August air.

Three weeks later, I was at his place, setting the table for supper. I still had my room on campus, but I spent most of my time with him. I'd made spaghetti carbonara, and we were chatting about nothing important when he slid a ring across the table, leaving it to sit there beside my plate. My fork was mid-spin, egg-and-cheese-coated noodles hanging into my bowl. I looked from the ring to Mark and back to the ring. Mark smiled.

"So, how about it?"

"How about what?" I swallowed and smiled back.

"How about you marry me?"

I placed my fork and spoon on the table and reached for the ring, a slim gold band with a single round diamond in the centre. When I picked it up, the diamond caught the light.

"Do I put this on myself?"

"If you say yes, I can put it on for you."

"I suppose." I smiled.

"I'll take that as a yes!"

A few weeks after Mark proposed, I graduated a semester early with my degree in literature and a focus on teaching. I was still trying to write the next great novel but never got further than a few paragraphs before I gave up in frustration. The words were never right; the language always seemed forced. In the classroom, I knew I wouldn't need my own words; I had

hundreds of years of beautiful words written mostly by the dead. And the dead don't mind when we remember them and pass on their stories. Mark tried to support my writing by buying notebooks and fancy pens, and I still have a collection of notebooks with hundreds of empty white pages.

My parents came to Boston for the graduation. They stayed the weekend with Aunt June and got to know Mark. It was the first time they'd met him. They knew him only by what I had told them over the phone. He made a good impression, and by the end of the weekend, they approved of our engagement. I have a treasured photo that sits alongside the one of my mother at the beach. In it, we are standing under a tree, me, Mark, Aunt June, Alice, my mother and my father. As much as they hid me away, as much as my mother made guilt take up a disproportionate amount of my emotional self, I thought then that they had given me a good life, a solid foundation.

The day after graduation, I packed up my room and moved in with Mark. My mother's silent disapproval was written all over her pursed lips. She came from that generation of women for whom *feminism* was a bad word and living in sin was still a concept that bothered her. But I was happy, looking forward to the future, to building a home full of light, where neighbours would smile when they walked past and heard laughter through open windows. I was determined to live where sunlight streamed through open curtains and children played in the yard, where pictures took up too much space on the walls and hushed conversations were a thing of the past. And I'd chosen Mark to go along for the ride.

SEVEN

JOE

BEN MARKS THE DAYS OFF ON A SMALL CALENDAR tacked to the wall by my bed, a gift from the church with all the Catholic holidays clearly marked. The x's, scrawled in thick black ink, cross off the last of my days. As the x's take up more space than the white of the page, I become more confined to this room, to this bed. Even the smallest movement is painful. The pills help, but they also rid me of my ability to walk on my own. Ben and Mae help, but I hate being a burden, so I stay here and watch the daylight come and go through medicated eyes. By noon, the light from the sun, pouring in the window, is blistering. I stare at it until my eyes are forced closed. I wait until the light imprints on the back of my eyelids, fades into a milky yellow. Then I open my eyes and do it again. Sometimes I fall asleep. When I wake, the sun has wandered out of the frame and leaves only the fading daylight. I'm trying to get comfortable when I hear Leah coming down the hall. She comes every Tuesday at 3:30 p.m. She's faithful, far more than I ever was to her. In my defence, if I even have one to make, I did what I thought was best. I left. But, as Mom always says, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

"Come in," I say before she knocks.

"Hey, Joe." She leaves the door open and takes a seat on the single bed Mae and Ben alternate in and out of. She's never called me Dad, which breaks my heart, but I've never told her that. Mae says it's not a title I deserve and she's probably right. Leah has my eyes, but the rest is all her mother. Her skin is light, too, not as brown as the rest of us. That'll serve

her well, I guess. She's built like an athlete, something she hates. In high school, she was always asked to play sports, but she preferred books and playing the fiddle. Her grandfather left his to her when he died, when I was still out there somewhere and not here, where I should have been. Before I even knew that a part of me was walking around in this world. She tells me she's not very good at the fiddle, doesn't have the ear for it, but I can't tell the difference. She sounds good to me.

"How's your mother?"

"Good. She won four hundred bucks at bingo on Sunday, so she's taking Jeffrey and me out to supper later."

I've never met this Jeffrey. Mae tells me that he's good to Leah, and Mae wouldn't tell lies when it comes to her. He doesn't like me, though, even if we've never met. Claims that I don't deserve the love of a daughter I never took care of. And, just like Mae, he's probably right, but I do love when she comes to visit. Each time I open my mouth, I am careful not to say anything that might make her stay away. That might kill me before this disease does.

I shiver, something I do a lot of even when the sun is shining warm. Leah gets up and goes to the closet to grab an extra blanket. Now, I don't believe in the divine, at least not in the way my mother does, even after all her loss, but just as Leah places the blanket over my rail-thin legs and reaches behind my head to prop up my pillows, light from the last of the afternoon sun falls on a tiny pair of boots sitting on the top shelf of the closet.

"Look at that."

Leah turns to see what I'm looking at.

"Can you grab me those little boots, the ones with the doll stuffed in them?"

Leah reaches up and takes them down. A trail of dust follows her as she hands them to me. The doll's head flops over and the button eye hangs loose.

"These were my sister Ruthie's. They ever tell you about Ruthie?"

She nods. "The littlest sister. The one that disappeared." She says it so matter-of-fact-like, as if she were reading something from a history book, so far removed from the thing that it does nothing to her heart. I suppose you can't love someone who never was, and for Leah, Ruthie's just a little

girl in a grainy photo taken long before Leah was even a thought in anyone's mind.

"Yup, the one that disappeared." I stroke the leather, soft with dust. "They tell you that it was me that saw her last?" I take a deep breath and feel it catch. I cough hard, or as hard as I'm able to now.

"No. Auntie Mae said that she disappeared when you were little, down in Maine. Kiju says she's still out there." Leah pulls a tissue from the box beside my bed and wipes the spittle from the corner of my mouth.

"Mom never gave up hope," I whisper.

"Did you? Do you think she's still out there?"

"I used to. I don't know anymore. And don't think me strange for saying it, but I miss her even now, all these years later."

"I don't think that's strange."

I hand her the boots and she sets them back on the shelf.

"Your Uncle Ben ever tell you that he thinks he saw her once, in Boston?"

"No. Do you think he did?"

"He swears it's true, to this day. You ask him, he'll tell you."

"Why don't you tell me?"

AFTER CHARLIE DIED, we stayed away from Maine, away from the berry fields. Not one of us went down the next summer, and the lands that Dad managed were transferred to Juan. Mr. Ellis wrote Dad and asked us to come back, but Mom wasn't having any of it. That place had taken two of her babies and she wasn't risking any more. To be honest, I think we were relieved to leave those fields behind us. At sixteen, I took Charlie's job painting houses in town, and Mae worked at the taxi stand selling french-fried potatoes and hamburgers to men who called her "squaw" and laughed. She ignored them mostly, but sometimes she spit in their coffee.

We grew into the smallness of our family. Mae and I were left to watch our parents age, to watch Mom's shoulders slouch a little more and Dad's hands struggle with the axe. Besides the painting, I worked at the mill in the winters, sun-up to sundown. In the spring before it was warm enough to paint houses, I'd quit the mill and hitch a ride to Maine to look for Ruthie. I passed only a few—but still too many—years like this, living on my own

and then coming home when I got kicked out for forgetting to pay my rent, or breaking a window when I locked myself out. Those small things fed my rage since Charlie died. Mae, when she wasn't working, was flirting with every man she came across. At least she lived on her own, in an apartment in town with a mouldy bathroom and mice, but it was hers. Neither of us was able to find anyone to love, or at least anyone who stuck around. Seemed like we were cursed.

Ben had come home with us on the back of the truck, holding Charlie's hand. He stayed to work with Dad at the mill for a bit, but it wasn't for him, so he quit and took his last pay and a few dollars from Dad and hitched back down to Boston with some friends. He liked it so much he decided to stay. I think it was the Nipmuc girl he met down there at one of those protests. Something about losing Ruthie and Charlie and no one giving a damn except us made Ben go political for a while. For one whole summer in 1979, he lived with that girl in a tent by a pond down there in Boston. He and a whole bunch of other Indians from both sides of the border, demanding the white man live up to his side of the bargain.

I love my brother, but I still think what he did was a little bit cruel. On a quiet evening near the end of September, when I was living back home again, and just as the air was cooling and the sun was going to rest, a truck pulled up at the end of the driveway and Ben hopped out. Mom, out hauling the last of the carrots from the garden, was the first to see him. I was out back cutting kindling when she hollered for me to come. Mom still treated the coming home of her children as a sacred thing, a holy event. When I came around the corner of the house, she was holding his head in her hands. She mumbled a prayer, brought his head down to her lips and let them rest there a while before cussing him out for not writing enough.

Once Mom let go of him, I gave him a hug, brief but solid.

"Good to see ya, Ben."

"You too, Joe. You seem taller somehow."

"Not taller, just older."

He reached over and ruffled my hair, and the three of us headed into the house.

"How long you home for?" Mom asked.

"I'm not sure. I met a girl, Mom, a nice girl. Nina. She's expecting me back."

“You should send for her, bring her up here. Bring her when the apples are ready to be picked. Always a good time to meet folks.”

Supper that night was peaceful. Dad looked around at what was left of his family with a look of contentment. The only sounds were the scraping of forks and knives, the slurping of water, and the wind as it blew the curtains of the window above the sink. It was nice and it was fleeting. Twice, Ben tried to say something in between mouthfuls of food. Twice he tried but let the words die on his lips. But each time I looked over to see him stop, I felt queasy, like I’d drunk a bottle of spoiled milk. We were all chatting about the arrival of the apple pickers and Mom was about to stand to clear the dishes when the words finally escaped his mouth.

“I saw Ruthie.”

It got so quiet so quick that I could hear myself swallow. We all turned to look at Ben.

“It’s true. I saw her walking with a white lady down in Boston. I tried to catch up to her, but I lost her in a crowd. I ran after them but there were too many people. I’ve been looking, Mom; I haven’t stopped looking. But we were looking in Maine and she was in Boston. I was hoping I could find her and bring her back. I wanted to bring her back to you. I wanted to tell you myself, Mom. You were right this whole time. She is alive and I saw her. She still looks just like you, Mom. I swear it.” Ben was starting to ramble.

Dad cleared his throat and gently placed his silverware on the table beside his plate. “Ben—”

“Was she healthy? What did she look like?” Mom interrupted. Mae reached over to take Mom’s hand but she pulled it away, her eyes on Ben. “Well, Ben, speak up.”

“She looked healthy enough. A bit skinny but healthy.”

Dad cleared his throat again. “Ben, you can’t be certain it was Ruthie.”

“I know it was her.”

I looked over to see my mother, her eyes wet, full of hope, staring at her oldest child, praying for her youngest. Hope is such a wonderful thing until it isn’t. That sadness that Mom had managed to harness since Ruthie went missing, and since Charlie’s death, threatened to unravel right there and then at the kitchen table. I knew it, Mae knew it, Dad knew it, but Ben, he couldn’t see it. He couldn’t see the peace he was breaking. He thought he was doing a good thing, still thinks it to this day. But me, I felt a rage

toward Ben. It came on so quick, building in the bottom of my belly, warm and churning. The same rage that had started to take over my senses shortly after Charlie died, coming out wicked and red hot.

"I think she recognized me, too. I saw her at a protest down in Jamaica Plain. She was dressed really nice. I don't think she was there for the protest; I think she just walked into it by accident. I was sitting on the ground in front of the tent, talking with Nina about maybe taking a train or hitching to Washington, to join the folks that walked across the country, when I saw her. I stared at her so hard I know she could feel it. When she looked at me, I knew it was Ruthie."

Ben stopped to take a breath. He was talking so fast and was so excited he ran out of air. Mae reached for Mom's hand and again Mom pulled it back, letting her fingers rest on the edge of the table.

"When she started to turn away, I yelled out her name and she looked at me. I swear it's true. As true as me sitting here right now. It was Ruthie."

"Did you talk to her?" I heard my voice crack.

"No. The lady she was with took her by the arm and they took off into a crowd. I lost her, but I saw Ruthie, Mom, and I'm going back down to try and find her."

"I don't believe you." I tried to sound calm, but the more Ben talked, the more he tried to persuade us, and the more convinced my mother became, the angrier I got. I wanted Ruthie to be alive just as much as the rest of them. Probably more so. I wanted to believe Ben, I truly did, but why would he do this without bringing her back? Why would he tell us he'd seen her but not bring her back so we could see her, too?

"Joe, hold your tongue." Mom scowled.

"You don't believe him, do you?" My voice was getting louder with each word. "If she's alive, if you saw her, you would have tried harder to catch her, to bring her back. You're just full of shit, Ben." My leg was bouncing under the table and my fists sat clenched on either side of my empty plate.

"Joseph, get away from this table right now before I lose my temper on you." Mom was standing now, bent over her plate, her hands spread out on either side, my anger reflected back at me. "Get. Away. From. This. Table." Her lips were curled inside, replaced by a thin line of pink.

When I stood, too fast and without pushing my chair back, my glass tipped and spilled water everywhere. My chair fell back with a loud *thunk* against the wall, but I didn't care. I needed to get out of that house before I punched my brother.

"Joe, I swear . . ."

But I didn't hear anything else as I stormed out the front door, slamming it hard. I beat my feet against the dirt, dust trailing behind me as the ground reverberated up my legs and straight up my spine. I didn't know where I was going, but I wanted to get away from my brother. The sun was setting and it was going to be dark soon, but I was going to walk this off, whatever it was. Anger liked to sneak up on me. The biggest things that can send a man into a rage never seem to bother me, but something small, something that doesn't deserve my wrath, draws it anyway. And it comes up on me quick, so quick I don't even have time to curb it. I picked up a rock and threw it as hard as I could against a tree at the end of the driveway before I turned toward the train tracks and headed into town. I passed the field where the apple pickers camped, the old tree I was told used to oversee the birth of Mi'kmaw babies, past the shallow pond, the still water reflecting the twilight sky, the water skippers glancing across the top, defying everything I knew about the world. By the time I could see the lights of town at the intersection of the main road and the tracks, it was dark. I could feel the anger melting away and I started to plan my apology to Mom, listing all the things I would say and in what order I would say them. I stepped off the tracks and onto the road. The truck driver didn't see me. I heard the screech of the tires, saw a flash of light, and then darkness.

"MOM TOLD ME about your accident." Leah sat cross-legged on the other bed. The evening was sneaking in the window behind her, and I knew that she'd leave soon.

"Did she?"

"Yup. Said you almost died."

"I guess so. I wasn't really awake for any of that." I tried to laugh but it came out as a weak sniff. "I'm feeling good today, though. You want to help me out to the stump?"

"Sure."

Once we were settled in our chairs outside, both of us wrapped in blankets against the cool evening air, with two cups of peppermint tea between us, I tried to remember the accident. I tried to piece the time together, but it was nothing but confusion. My first memory after the accident was waking in a dark room to the smell of disinfectant and the humming of machines. I remember being awake, but my eyes wouldn't open, like there was glue on the lids, holding them down. I felt the exhaustion that comes from a deep sleep, one of those sleeps that settles into the marrow of your bones, where your body stops battling for control and just gives in to that element that exists on the other side.

"Were you in pain?"

Her voice startled me. I was concentrating so hard on remembering something more than thirty years ago, I almost forgot she was there.

"I suppose I was. Hard to remember all the details all these years later. Some things are so clear, and others, even those things other people remember so well, those memories don't exist for me. And it was more than a few years ago and so much has happened since then to fill up my memory."

She nodded and handed me my tea, wrapping my fingers around the cup for warmth and to make sure I could hold on to it. Some days, I'm too weak to hold on to anything. On those days, I feel worse than useless.

"I do remember them asking me what day it was. And all I could think of was that it was the day Ben came home. They asked me that same question each day I woke up in the hospital. First at home here, in the same hospital you were born in, but then they shipped me off to Halifax so I could learn to use all my limbs again. Now look at me." I turned and smiled. I meant it as a joke, but people sometimes find it hard to see humour in death, especially when they're sitting two feet away from it.

"You're looking just fine."

We turned when the familiar blue Mazda pulled up the driveway, Jeffrey at the wheel. He stopped but didn't get out. I nodded to him but he just sat there, waiting for Leah.

"Want me to help you in before I leave?"

"No, I think I'll sit here a while. Mae will get me when she gets home from work, or Ben, if he remembers that I'm out here." Another joke and this time, I managed to steal a smile from her. "I'll see you next week?"

"Sure will." She bent down and kissed me on the cheek before gathering her purse. "Enjoy your dinner."

She waved from the front seat as they backed out, and then she was gone. I was alone again, the same as the night I woke up in the hospital, confused and unable to move.

WHEN I WOKE the second time, it was daylight and my father was sitting in the chair beside my bed, flipping through a *Reader's Digest*, the edges brown with age and use. This time, my eyes opened but I couldn't talk; there was a tube coming out of my mouth. When I tried, I coughed and the pain of it made me close my eyes tight against the daylight. Then voices, some familiar, others not, joined the hum of machines.

"Joe, do you know where you are?"

A different voice: "Joe, do you know what happened to you?"

A familiar voice: "Joe, wake up, my boy. Your mother needs you to be okay."

I opened my eyes to unfamiliar faces switching this tube for that tube, pressing buttons and taking my temperature. I don't ever remember having that many hands on me all at the same time, and I didn't like it. I tried to move away, but my body wouldn't oblige. I tried to find my father, but one of my eyes seemed to have shrunk. I found out the next day that I'd broken the eye socket and the eye was nearly swollen shut. I also learned that I had a skull fracture from where my head bounced off the asphalt, a broken pelvis from the impact, a broken wrist, ten broken ribs out of twelve on my left side, a punctured lung and possibly a spinal injury, which the doctors could only examine once the swelling went down.

"You're a lucky young man."

I tried to cough just as my father's face came into my field of vision. It's an uncomfortable thing to see someone so strong look so terrified. At first, I thought he was angry with me, but later he told me that it was fear, plain and simple. As much as we tried to keep the pain away from Mom, no one ever really considered how losing his kids weighed on Dad, until the accident. Until I looked at him through my purple and red eye and saw the pain, the worry.

“I’m not leaving you, Joe. I’m just gonna go home and get your mother. I took her home to take a nap, but you know as well as I do that if I don’t get her now, she’ll never forgive me.”

I could feel the warmth of his hand as he held my cold one before he turned to leave. I must’ve fallen asleep again because when I opened my eyes, my mother was sitting in the chair beside my bed, her knitting needles clicking to the rhythm of the heart monitor.

I spent six weeks in the local hospital, having X-rays taken, bones cast and stitches removed. My breathing slowly returned to a state of ease, and my mother was by my side from sun-up until sundown. She read to me from whatever book she could find in the waiting room, left by other families keeping vigil. When I started to show strength and my skin began to turn back to brown from the reds, purples and yellows, she liked to remind me that the anger that had blossomed in my heart since Charlie’s death did this to me. She spoke of my anger as if it were its own entity, something to be quit, to be cast out, like a bad tenant. When the doctors decided that I would survive, Dad and Ben went back into the woods to guide wealthy men on their hunts. They sent back blackberry jam and moose stew from Aunt Lindy’s kitchen.

“Your aunt wanted me to tell you that you’d better behave and get up for a visit soon,” Dad said, handing the stew to Mom.

“It’d be a sin if you survived this only to get smothered in her hugs,” Ben joked.

I tried to laugh but my body wasn’t ready, and I winced. Mom reached back and gave Ben a smack on the leg.

Ben and Mae followed the ambulance when they transferred me to the rehabilitation centre in the city to learn to walk again. Once the swelling went down, they could see the damage to my spine, and while it wasn’t as bad as they’d feared, it wasn’t good either.

“We just need to get your body and your brain to work together again, and that takes practice,” the new doctor said.

Mae took the dull brown blanket off the rehab bed and replaced it with the colourful afghan from my bedroom at home, before Ben lifted me out of the wheelchair and into the bed. The rehab was painful, frustrating and lonely, but six months later, I walked out with a prescription for a year’s

worth of pain pills and a slight hitch in my step—but I walked out of there. That's the important part.

Ben never did get back to Nina or Boston. He stayed because of me. I owe debts to so many people, debts I know I'll never be able to pay, and it weighs on me. People have given me their time, their love, their bodies, their secrets. And I've given so little. Nina sent a few postcards, but the letters dwindled until they didn't come at all. The summer after my accident, I wasn't allowed to work. It was a decision made entirely by my mother the day I got home. I was to be kept calm and still until she determined I was ready for the world again, and nothing a doctor said would sway her. Ben and I spent a lot of time around the firepit that summer. He'd stop by on his way home from a new farm where he'd worked all day, six days a week, and we'd grab a beer and head out to sit and watch the flames. Sometimes Mae would join us, but she'd started dating a white man named James who was co-owner of the hardware store in town and bootlegged homemade booze of every kind on the weekends. James never sat with us around the fire, even after they were married. Mae said he could only handle so many Indians at once. A bunch of us together made him nervous. She laughed it off, but it never sat right with me.

"Don't be getting all mad at James. He's an idiot, and our sister loves idiots." Ben took a swig of beer. "Keep your rage in check. We don't want you running away and getting hit by a truck." Ben lifted his can of beer in a mock toast, laughing at his own joke. "Last time, you nearly gave Mr. Richardson a heart attack, and you ruined his truck to boot."

Mr. Richardson owned three gas stations and was the unfortunate soul who, while on his way home for a late supper, hit me with his truck when I stepped out of the dark and onto the road. He came by the hospital when I was first hurt and offered me a job when I got better.

I've grown used to the quiet, but back then, it still bothered me. Sometimes I'd say anything just to break the silence.

"Tell me the truth, Ben. Do you actually think it was Ruthie?"

Ben sat quiet—I imagine he was trying to determine whether or not I was going to go into a new rage. "Maybe it wasn't, Joe. Maybe it wasn't, but if you're asking me if I believe it was, then yes, I will go to my grave believing I saw Ruthie that day. The way she turned when I called her

name, the way those eyes that she got from Mom stared back at me for just a second. Yes, Joe, I believe it was Ruthie."

We sat in the dark, the fire crackling in front of us, the stars above. An animal moved somewhere back in the woods.

"Then I will try to believe you."

Ben reached across and patted my shoulder. "So, what are we gonna do about it?"

"You know Mom won't cross that border, so I guess it's up to us."

We decided then and there that we wouldn't give up on Ruthie. She was out there and we were going to find her. Ben would head down to Boston whenever he could to look for her, and when I was better, I'd go, too. We'd hang out near the park where Ben saw her, shop at the store near there, drink at the bars. And one last thing we agreed on was that there was no need to tell Mom about the plan. We didn't want to get her hopes up any further, and after my accident and almost losing a third child, she'd been quiet about Ben's revelation. If she held out hope for finding Ruthie, she didn't let on. She put all her energies into keeping me alive.

THE LAST OF my peppermint tea has gone cold and the autumn chill has settled over me, but I don't want to go in. I want to sit and look at the stars. I want to watch them move across the sky and disappear behind the trees. My head is resting on the back of the lawn chair, my eyes pointing toward the sky, when Ben gets home. He gave up the mill and the traipsing through the woods long ago. We're old now, with aches and pains that don't allow us to make money the way we used to. Instead, he works as a custodian at the church, cleaning and locking up. Tuesdays, he gets home around eight, after the men's Bible study. Mom and Mae had already eaten and left two plates on the counter, with waxed paper and a tea towel to keep the bugs out. Through the open window I can just barely hear the news on the television. Ben comes out and lights a fire, without asking me why I'm still out here. The flames are just beginning to warm when he comes out with our plates and two cans of beer. I haven't tasted a beer in years.

"Can't hurt now, can it?" Ben says as he pops the can open and places it on the stump beside me. Apparently, Mae told him. My last checkup was

grim. Weeks, maybe a month. Any faith they had in the good Lord making me better has all but disappeared.

"I suppose not. Not many nights like this left to enjoy. May as well make the best of it." I reach over slowly to pick the can up. It's heavy and I shake with the weight of it. I spill a little on the blanket before it reaches my lips. It's cold but bitter, and it leaves a dry cotton feel on the back of my mouth. Ben places the cold stew on my lap and hands me a spoon. I spill only a little and he's quick to wipe it off.

"How was your visit with Leah?"

"Good. Good. She's a great girl. Seems unfair that she has to claim me as her father."

"She wouldn't do it if she didn't want to."

"I think I should be mad at you for not telling me about her all those years."

"We didn't know where you were half the time. Not my place anyway. And Cora asked us not to. You did a bad thing and left us with the aftermath. It was the least we could do for her. And Mae told you first thing she could. She's never been good at keeping secrets. You could've come home then."

"I almost did," I whisper, as Ben goes back into the house.

He returns with a third beer. My tongue loosened by alcohol and painkillers, I say, "If she's still out there, I'd just like to see her before I die."

"Me too, Joe. Me too."

EIGHT

NORMA

MARRIAGE IS A FUNNY THING. THERE ARE SO MANY people in the world, and you decide to commit the rest of your life, the rest of your emotional energy, to just one. You assume that the mysterious connection that ties you to one another will hold. A connection that can't be trusted, one that probably manifests in that same mystical space where stories come from. A place that allows you to suspend your disbelief. Marriage assumes that you will bend and twist and adjust to one another. It assumes that your desires will forever be interconnected by the placement of a piece of gold around a finger. For many people this is true. I envy those people who can dig deep and find that thing that originally allowed them to believe they could spend their entire lives sleeping in the same bed, sit across the table from one another day in and day out, make a family, make memories, good and bad. My aunt June has called me a cynic. But I didn't always feel this way. I was more than willing to suspend my disbelief for the sake of Mark. Then something happened. Those ghosts from so long ago came back to haunt me, and Mark wasn't ready for the measures I would take to rid myself of them. And I don't blame him.

We held a small wedding in Aunt June's backyard. My mother and father attended and gave us their blessing—my father more so than my mother. An accountant wasn't a doctor or a lawyer, but it was respectable enough. Aunt June convinced me to leave it alone and just be grateful they liked him. So, in August of 1983, I became a wife. I was still looking for a job, and my parents wanted us to move closer to them. Aunt June, Alice and

Desiree wanted me to stay in Boston. Mark didn't mind where we lived—he could get a good job anywhere—so I applied for every position from Boston to the Maine-Canada border, with no luck until mid-September when the English teacher at a small school just outside Augusta had a heart attack while watching the news and died in his armchair. I got the call and packed a bag. I stayed with a friend of Aunt June's until I found an apartment. By Christmas, Mark had found a job and we were living back in Maine. My parents were happy.

Life settled into a routine. Work, home and the occasional dinner party or backyard barbecue. Dinners out on Fridays. Mark and I cultivated a small group of friends in Augusta, a few people from Mark's work and a few from mine. Mother pleaded with me to attend church, to meet "good" people, yet she refused or was unable to define *good* when asked. We went to church when I was young, or at least Mother had. Once I turned fourteen, I begged to be allowed to sleep in on Sundays. Father and I tagged along only on holidays. After I left home, church became a second child to my mother, one she would take great comfort in until she couldn't anymore. She attended Tuesday evening Bible study, went to Wednesday afternoon quilting club in the church basement, taught Sunday school and, when she turned fifty-five, started going to Golden Age, a group of seniors who made sandwiches and date squares, drank weak tea, complained about ungrateful children and occasionally read from the Bible. She even joined the choir. A woman who barely spoke in public and hid away in her home for the better part of our lives was singing for people. A little off key, but I was proud of her.

"You're a teacher, Norma."

"I'm aware, Mother."

"Well, think about how good you would be teaching the Sunday school, or the youth group." Mother passed me a bowl of steaming green beans, and I placed them in the middle of the table.

"I don't think so." We had the same conversation every Sunday afternoon as we prepared for dinner at my childhood home. My annual school picture was replaced by a wedding photo of Mark and me flanked by my parents.

"Well, just think about it a bit more."

"Actually, Mother, I'm going to be a bit busy for the next little while."

She had her back to me, hands in the dishwater. "Never too busy for God, Norma."

"Mom, can you stop for a minute? I have something to tell you."

She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and leaned against the sink. I took a deep breath.

"Mark and I are having a baby."

She stood in front of me, her hands wound up in the dishtowel, silent.

"Mother?" I walked across the small kitchen when she started to cry. I took her in my arms, her hands still wound in the towel.

"Mother? Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm just so happy. A little surprised but very happy."

"Okay, good. I couldn't tell there for a minute." I smiled and let her go.

She placed the towel on the counter and placed her hands on my arms, holding me there and looking at me. "I am so happy."

I knew she was, somewhere deep down, but there was something in her eyes that looked a little like fear.

"It's okay, Mother. The baby is okay."

She let herself smile. "Well, I guess I'm going to be a grandmother. Please tell me that I found out before your aunt June." She smiled big and hugged me.

"Yes. You are the first to know."

She wiped a few tiny tears from the corner of her eyes and turned back to the dishes.

"DO YOU THINK it's a boy or a girl?" Mark sat on the couch beside me, rubbing my swollen belly. We were home from another Sunday dinner, months after I told Mother about the baby and left her to tell Father.

"I already told you. It's a girl."

"How can you be sure?"

"A woman just knows." I reached into the bowl that sat on his lap and took a few of the grapes, rolling one around in my mouth. When I finally bit into it, the juice burst out of the skin, sweet and cold. I turned my head and spit a seed into Mark's hair.

"Nice, Norma. I hope you teach these manners to our daughter. Or son." He reached up and flicked the seed into the bowl.

“Daughter.” I smiled and spat another seed at him, but it missed and flew over his shoulder. “Are you coming to the doctor’s appointment tomorrow?”

“I think you can handle it. Mom.” He winked at me. “I have a meeting. I’ll take you out to dinner after.”

The doctor’s office was only minutes from the school, and I showed up promptly at 3:45 p.m. for my appointment. I remember the woman calling my name and giving me a smile reserved for pregnant women. Semi-sweet, bordering on sympathy.

“Norma, how are you feeling?”

“Good. A little tired, a lot of heartburn and a bit heavy.” I laughed the uncomfortable way I do when there’s someone in a white coat in the same room, a stranger who has seen me naked.

“To be expected. How is the little one’s movement?”

I think, but I will never be sure, that this is when the chill ran up my spine, when my tongue dried, when the edges of my vision went dark and my world became very small. “Actually, there hasn’t been much movement the last couple days.”

He looked up from the notes he was scribbling. “Okay, let’s measure you and get a listen to the heartbeat.”

The last thing I remember clearly is the quiet, the doctor breathing through his teeth, the din of conversation as people walked down the hallway, the hands on the stethoscope, then on my bare belly, cold and searching. Every hair on my body came alive. My skin tightened and the room closed in on me. The crinkle of the paper blanket under me sounded like lightning in my ears.

“Where’s your husband, Norma?” He wrapped the stethoscope around his neck, took my hand and helped me down into the chair. I pulled my shirt back down over my still belly.

“He’s at work.”

“Maybe we should call him.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“I’m going to send you next door, to the hospital, for an ultrasound. In the meantime, could you give me his work phone number? And can you remind me how far along you are?”

I recited Mark's number at the office, then said, "Thirty-three, thirty-four weeks?"

His assistant, the same one who had smiled at me earlier, walked with me over to the hospital, holding my elbow the entire time. She talked to me the whole short trip, but I heard nothing. We walked through the door, passed the emergency department and went into a cold room. A grey machine, dark and solid, stood beside the bed. Before I could take in all of my surroundings, someone was squeezing cold jelly on my bump, and a woman with a severe face ran a contraption that looked like a deodorant ball across my belly. Again, there was so much quiet. I remember thinking that if I took a deep breath, the world would shatter into a million different pieces.

The exact sequence of events over the next few days are a blur and always have been. Everything is scattered and dark with little bits of faded light. Tiny fragments of sound and colour. I'm glad I don't remember it all. I think my brain lets me have this one, lets me black it out for my own sanity. I was put into a room, by myself, the lights dimmed for my comfort. I don't know how long I lay there alone, but it seemed like hours. I rubbed my belly and sang lullabies.

"Mark!"

He walked in and stopped five feet from the bed, his face long and older than it had been earlier that day.

"Norma, sweetie. The doctor needs to talk to us."

I hadn't noticed the doctor behind him. I'd been so focused on someone I knew, someone who might be as scared as I was.

The doctor whispered, even though we were the only people in the room. "Norma, Mark, I'm afraid the pregnancy is no longer viable."

Mark moved to take my hand as I stared at the doctor, waiting for him to finish. Waiting for him to tell me how they were going to make it viable. Waiting for him to explain what *viable* meant when he was talking about my daughter. She was viable, she was in my dreams, she was in the notes I wrote to her, her blood was my blood, I sang to her, and I loved her.

"We want to induce labour to evacuate the fetus."

Evacuate the fetus. Deliver my daughter. My dead daughter.

The next thing I remember is being in a different room, watching a needle break the delicate inside skin where the elbow bends. I didn't feel

the pinch, didn't feel the flow of liquid into my veins, or the nurse putting my feet in the stirrups. I don't recall pain, although I'm sure there must have been. I've heard that there's a chemical that women produce when they give birth, which helps them forget the pain so that they can bond with the baby. I wonder what happens when the baby is dead. Where do those chemicals go? What purpose do they serve? All these years later, I can close my eyes and see Mark, a little blue hospital hat on his head, looking down on me, and I can feel the tear he let free. It landed on my lip, and I remember the salt. I wonder what he remembers.

When she came into the world, she came in the quiet, all five pounds, two ounces. I had carried her in my body, sang to her, decorated a room for her, bought clothes for her, tiny and delicate. I had set up the Noah's ark lamp on the dresser that held those tiny clothes. I'd softened. I had written her messages in a little yellow journal. Messages that I hoped we would read together when she was older, after the years when I was an embarrassment and before the years when she left me to become her own person. And I swore, to myself and to Mark, that the love I was going to give her would be full of light. There would be no heaviness in the love I intended to give. She was the thing that I was missing, that piece of me that always seemed hollow. I had looked forward to filling it with her laughter and her cries.

But in the end, I couldn't even hold her. They asked but I closed my eyes. Tight. So tight that stars danced in the darkness. I couldn't handle the idea of my ghost having a face, especially one that might look like mine. So, they took her away. They gave me something to help me sleep, and I prayed that it would last forever. But it didn't.

When I woke, I returned to my own nightmare. "I've done everything right. I ate properly. I went for regular walks." My eyes burned, and Mark was holding a tissue to my nose. I could barely catch my breath. My stomach had started to deflate, the eviction so real and true. In between sobs, I tried to explain, tried to defend myself for something that never needed defending, something that Mark never blamed me for. "I rested when they told me to. I took my vitamins."

"Shhh, Norma, this is not your fault. This just happens sometimes." He had his arm around my shoulders and pulled me in close. I rested my head against his chest. He smelled of the cologne he always wore, clean and

familiar. To this day, when I smell that cologne on a stranger, I'm thrown back to the day I lost my girl. A scent can bypass logic, can circumvent time.

They placed her in a casket that should never have been a casket. A month after we buried her, Mark told me they had dressed her in the little yellow dress I'd bought with the knitted coat my mother had made, wrapped in the quilt from Mother's church quilting group. I trust him in this because I refused to look. Baby Sarah was buried at the edge of the graveyard a mile from our house. Years later, I placed her grandparents beside her.

I TEACH WORDS. How to put them together to create fear or beauty or suspense. How a long line of words strung together can take you to a dinghy out on the ocean searching for a whale, can sit you beside the witch as she tells her story of the white man, bringing him into existence. I teach words that can take you to places that exist only in the imagination, introduce you to people so peculiar, so interesting that they can't possibly be real, yet they are, on the page. That's why I found it strange that no word exists for a parent who loses a child. If children lose their parents, they are orphans. If a husband loses his wife, he's a widower. But there's no word for a parent who loses a child. I've come to believe that the event is just too big, too monstrous, too overwhelming for words. No word could ever describe the feeling, so we leave it unsaid.

The quiet of her birth and her death followed us. It came home with us in the car. It stuck to my clothes, my hair. It burrowed under my nails, took up residence in Mark's sighs. It slept between us. And it made me quiet again. The principal at the school allowed me to take the rest of the year to rest. I could go back to my job in August. So, I stayed home and craved the quiet. I sat in the chair by the window for hours, just staring. No radio, no television, just the quiet. I stayed out of the room I had made for her. I closed the door and tiptoed past it on my way to the bathroom. Dinners were ones of scraping forks and silence. Mark carried my heaviness through those first few weeks. And I guess I assumed that I would just wake up one day and everything would be normal again, with laughter and chit-chat at the table, dinner out on Friday evenings. Summer was coming, so there'd be

trips to the beach and barbecues. But as the days grew longer and the air warmer, the quiet settled in, deep. I wanted to be me before there was her, but I didn't know how.

I went to stay with my parents for a week, but that didn't help. The heaviness that had always existed in that house seemed impossible now. Mother would get a headache anytime I tried to talk about it. I thought she, of all people, might be able to help me understand, if not ease, my burden. We, for the first time in our lives, had something in common, something that might bring us closer in the telling, in the grieving. But Mother didn't want to talk. *I've done my grieving. I can't do it anymore*.

I slept a lot instead, curled up in my childhood bedroom, missing the comfort of Mark beside me. I read the Nancy Drew books, the same ones I'd loved as a girl. I was reaching for one midway through the line of yellow spines when I noticed my brown paper–covered journals. I reached for one, pulling it off the shelf, disturbing years of dust. I ran my hand over the first one Alice had given me, using the tip of my finger to outline the coloured-pencil rainbows and pink hearts I'd been so careful in drawing. I opened it the way book lovers do, holding it to my nose and breathing in the scent of years of neglect. When I pulled it away, I smiled at my childlike printing, the letters large and in complete disregard of the lines. I'd drawn a moon with a blue halo. A pickup truck, something my parents had never owned, was crudely sketched alongside a house with crooked windows, drawn the way children always depict houses. Squiggly black lines indicated birds. There was nothing unusual, everything was so common, but it felt odd reading my words, trying to find meaning. And for the first time in a long time, I thought about those dreams, that confusion before memories solidified in my mind. The house that wasn't my house, the mother who wasn't my mother. I heard Mother coming down the hall, and for reasons I don't understand, I closed the journal quickly and placed it back on the shelf. Mother opened the door without knocking, the way she always had.

"Your lunch is ready." She looked around the room, and I had that feeling in my stomach I used to get when I was little and suspected that I was about to be in trouble for something I'd done.

"I'm coming." I followed her down the hall to egg-salad sandwiches and plain potato chips.

I was relieved when Mark pulled in the driveway the next Saturday to retrieve me.

"Let's get away from here for a while, Norma." It was the end of June, and we were sitting on the back deck of the house, watching the sun set.

"That sounds nice, actually." I surprised even myself.

Mark had been prepared for a debate and was relieved when I agreed. He got out of his chair and came over to kiss me. His lips lingered as he pulled the blanket I had draped over my shoulders for warmth. We made love that night, the first time since we'd lost her. He was gentle, more so than ever before, afraid I might break. But I didn't, and the next morning, I felt an essence of normalness return. Some wounds cannot be healed. Some wounds never close, never scar. But the further away from the injury, the easier it became to smile.

"Where should we go?" He poured the coffee as I removed some toast from the toaster.

"I don't know. You pick. I just want to get away." I buttered the toast and sat it on the table between us.

"A guy at the office has a cottage in Nova Scotia. The pictures look nice. Sunsets over the water, farms, some nice museums. We could take the ferry from Bar Harbor."

"Sounds nice."

"Okay, I'll get some time off work and we'll go."

There was a joy in his voice that made me smile. That morning after breakfast, we drove to Bar Harbor to get out of the house and picked up a stack of pamphlets on Nova Scotia. For the next two weeks, I filled my time with planning the trip, calling little inns and reserving our rooms, planning our days while Mark was at work. And for the first time since junior high, I started to write in a journal, after a call with Aunt June and Alice.

"We're both on the line, Poopkin. What's up?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to tell you that Mark and I are headed up to Nova Scotia on a little vacation. Need to clear our heads."

"Well, that will be nice—" Alice started to say.

"It will be. Mark's friend has a cabin, and we're going to stay there for a few days. See the sights. The pictures in the pamphlets look beautiful."

"Make sure you write things down. The good and the bad, but especially the good," Alice said in her calming voice.

We left in mid-July. I packed the car while Mark checked the doors and windows and gave the neighbour the keys to water the plants and put the mail on the table. This trip was going to be the farthest I'd ever been. Mark had been to Arizona and California as a kid, but I hadn't ventured much beyond the I-95 from Maine to Massachusetts. The drive to Bar Harbor was uneventful. We had a few stops for highway construction, but made it in plenty of time for the ferry. I'd been on boats before—canoes and tour boats in Boston Harbor—but never one as big as the ferry and never where I couldn't turn and see land. When I got out of the car in the belly of the ship, the smell of engine oil and salt water invaded my nose. When the hull door closed, the faint yellow lights and the tinny echoes of the car storage area were eerie. I took a deep breath when we broke through the top of the stairs and into the light.

It was a nice day with blue skies and calm waters. The trip took a little over six hours. We had dinner and a few drinks at the restaurant and walked around outside. I was amazed at the vastness of the ocean, even though we weren't too far from land. There were so many blues. The only thing that wasn't blue was the horizon, a thin grey line separating the water from the sky. When you're on the beach, your feet in the water, land is always right behind you; there is a reference point. Out there, all reference was lost. We put our trust in the staff to ensure that we didn't get lost in all of the blue.

Mark went on a tour of the ship and I settled into one of the chairs by the fake fireplace in the lounge area. I would like to say that I read my book, but instead I watched people and wondered about their lives. Where did they come from? What did they have for breakfast? What ghosts haunted their dreams? I watched an older couple eating soft food and drinking black tea. How long had they been together? How many children did they have? Were they going home or leaving home? A young man on his own was reading a book and looking intense. I tried to snoop and see what he was reading, but he had the cover bent back. Just as I was about to put my nose down and crack the spine of the book I'd bought for the vacation, I saw a young couple pushing a stroller. A baby a month or two old was asleep under a pink blanket. I could feel the heat of tears before they even started. I could feel them gathering in the back of my throat and pushing their way out of the corners of my eyes. When Mark came back, a smile across his face and excited to tell me all about the inner workings of a

ferry ship, I was a mess. I'd left the tissues in the car and didn't have the energy to get up to find a napkin. I was wiping my tears with the sleeve of my cardigan.

"God, Norma. What happened?"

"Nothing," I sobbed. And I wasn't lying; it was nothing.

"There's got to be something." Mark walked over to the bar and grabbed a handful of napkins. He handed them to me.

"It's stupid."

"Try me." He sat on the floor beside me, his hand on my knee.

"There was a couple with a baby. I don't know. I just started crying. They looked so happy."

He didn't say anything. He just sat with me until the tears dried out. Sometimes I forgot that he was hurting, too. I tried to wipe away the sadness, tried to replace my tears with a smile, tried to push the lump in my throat back down, but Mark wasn't buying it. He kept pulling me in close until I finally let him hold me still.

The rest of the ride was smooth, and when we landed in Yarmouth, the sky was still blue although the air was a little cooler. As we were driving off the ferry and into a new country, Mark said, "You're not going to cry every time we see a baby, are you?"

I turned to look at him and he was smiling.

"Are you really making fun of me right now?" There was heat in my voice.

"No, no, no . . . ," Mark stammered.

"I can't help it, Mark. I lost a child, for fuck's sake. Forgive me if I can't be the happy little woman you want me to be."

"No, Norma, that's not it. I'm sorry. I was trying to make a joke."

"Fucking funny, Mark. Fucking funny."

I've heard it said that swearing can make you feel better. It did. For a minute. When we pulled over at the gas station just past the ferry terminal, Mark got out of the car without saying anything, and I felt guilt replace the anger. I got out of the car and followed him into the gas station. He was at the counter paying, so I grabbed a couple of chocolate bars and threw them on the counter, taking the time to whisper, "I'm sorry," in his ear. Mark smiled, though not fully.

The man behind the counter looked at me. "You got your Indian card?"

I looked behind me to see who he was talking to.

"You, lady. You gonna use your Indian card?"

"I'm sorry, I don't even know what that is."

"Oh, sorry. I thought you were Indian."

I looked down at my July skin. "Italian stock, I've been told."

"If you say so."

He took the money from Mark, and we headed back to the car.

"That was weird," I said, unwrapping one of the chocolate bars.

"You are dark and more so in the summer."

I held the chocolate bar so he could take a bite as we pulled out of the gas station. "Honest mistake probably."

Nova Scotia was beautiful. We spent two weeks driving and sightseeing. We stopped in Digby for its world-famous scallops, then drove through the Annapolis Valley with its charming farms and rich history. We visited old, restored forts, once of strategic importance to both the French and English and battled over for years until the English finally took it all. We passed through small towns with Victorian charm, inherited from their colonial past, and apple orchards and cornfields that went on forever. We took our time, staying at Mark's friend's cabin in a little place called Kingsport, watching the tides go in and out for miles. Nova Scotians are very proud of their high tides, and they are something to behold—that much water moving in and out twice a day. I think that was my favourite stop, with its salt air and fresh local food. We ate greens and strawberry pie. The neighbour in Kingsport invited us to the community's strawberry social, where we paid five dollars each for hodgepodge stew—fresh vegetables cooked in milk and butter—strawberry shortcake for dessert, and all the coffee and tea you could drink. The people were conservative but friendly. I felt a strange familiarity with the place, not with the people so much but with the landscape. There was an intimacy with the trees that lined the roads, the small towns with their big brick town halls. It was something I couldn't place, and Mark, in a moment of humour, told me I must have been a local in a past life. We laughed, but if I had believed in such a thing, I may have thought he was right. One evening, near the end of our stay, I walked along a sandy beach at low tide and breathed in the salt air. I watched the sky turn from blue to pink and purple, the clouds erupt with pastels, and I was mesmerized by the murmuration of small seabirds.

A wooden staircase led from the beach to the cliffs above. The tide had gone out, so I sat on the stairs and watched the moon rise over the mud flats. The waves, reaching for the shore, whispered to me as they inched closer. I could hear children somewhere down the beach playing, but the moon wasn't high enough to cast enough light to see them. Their presence, as I admired the steady ascent of the moon, turned the air around me cold. The soft breeze bit my arms where the skin was exposed as the children laughed. I looked down to see the silhouettes of uneven cliffs and weathered trees but no children. The full glow of the moon quieted the ghostly voices. Perhaps they stopped to admire it as well, or maybe they'd been called inside to bed. Perhaps they were the ghosts that the locals spoke so fondly of in this place, where ghost stories were told over generations and wholly believed. I never knew what became of those children, but I understood the message they imparted. As the moon crested the water and floated on the tide, I wrapped my arms around my waist and cried. My mother lived with the ghosts of her dead children, most barely formed before she lost them. I lived in that house where the ghosts reigned. There, on a dark beach so far from home yet so familiar, I understood my mother and the ghosts that haunted her, and I understood I could not bring a child into the world knowing that I would do the same. That I would see their dead sister in their tiny features. That I would suffocate them with the love I was unable to give my Sarah. I breathed in the salty air and turned away from the moon. As the land above got closer with each step, a lightness settled over me, a relief almost. I knew what I had to do, and despite knowing that I was going to break Mark's heart, I smiled—a real smile, the first in a long time.

WE FOUND HALIFAX charming, with its bars and sea shanties that everyone seemed to know the words to. We drank a little too much and danced until the sun was coming up. We checked out of the hotel just hours after we'd gone to bed.

"You seem to be having a good time." Mark handed me a pain pill for the headache I could have challenged my mother with.

"I'm happy." I swallowed the pill down with a sip of coffee.

"I'm glad. Anything you want to tell me?"

“What do you mean?”

“What’s changed?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.” I turned and got into the rental car, putting my sunglasses on to cover my eyes in case they gave me away.

The South Shore was majestic. Tiny fishing villages and lighthouses right out of a postcard dotted the coast. I think there is something to be said for salt air. I know we have it in Maine, but I believe that getting away from what you know, getting lost in the cold, northern salt air, is good for the soul. Mark felt it, too. We held hands, watched the sun set and made love like we did when we first met. It was a good ending, as endings go.

As we pulled onto the Yarmouth ferry, ready to set sail for Bar Harbor, I told him. We were still in the car waiting for permission to exit and head up top. The eerie light added an element to the conversation that I hadn’t intended.

“Mark . . .”

He turned toward me, waiting for me to say something.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“And I’m sorry that I’ve been so . . . far away since the baby.”

He reached over and took my hand. “It’s okay. It was rough, but we can try again.” He leaned across the car to kiss my cheek, and I pulled away.

“That’s just it.”

“Just what?”

“I don’t want to try again.”

“You’re still sad. Wait a while and we’ll see.”

“No, Mark. I am serious. I lived with the ghosts of babies my entire life, and I saw the toll they take. They suck the love out of every room; they make the world quiet and creepy. I won’t do that to myself. I won’t do that to you.”

Mark dropped my hand and it landed back on my lap. He gripped the steering wheel as if he wanted to speed right off the ferry, but there was nowhere to go.

“You don’t get to just decide these things on your own. We had a plan.”

“Plans change.”

A man in a greasy uniform and a reflective vest indicated that we could leave our cars. Mark got out, slammed the door and disappeared up the stairs before I could catch him.

I felt bad for Mark—I did. I have never felt worse. I need that to be known. I wanted to talk to him, to explain, but he was gone, lost to the bowels of the boat. I wanted to cry. I wanted to stand on the deck with Mark and scream into the ocean wind. I wanted to let it carry the sadness and the anger out into the blue. It would get lost out there, and we would be free. But Mark had walked away into the dark.

As the ferry lurched away from the dock, I made my way up the stairs and into the bar. The people on the ferry were mostly families, and I was the only one to take a stool at the bar.

"Wine, please. White."

"Six or nine ounces?" the bartender asked. She had blond hair that was dark at the roots and the look of someone who had once been thin.

"Nine, please."

The wine was acidic and stung behind my ears. I winced and swallowed. The bartender was surprised when I asked for a second and then a third.

"You okay, ma'am?" she asked when I tapped the bar and slid my glass across to her, ready for a fourth.

"Peachy, I'm just peachy. My daughter is dead, and I think I just fucked up my marriage." I could hear the words coming out slurred and angry. They were barely past my teeth when I wanted to pull them back in. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm being pathetic."

"How about a glass of water?"

"No, I want another glass of wine. I'll sit quiet and not upset anyone, I promise." I slid a little off the stool, and as I was reaching out to catch myself, I felt a hand on my waist, hoisting me back onto the stool. "I want a glass of wine."

"Give her one more. I'll take care of her. And I'll have a beer." Mark sat beside me.

"If you say so. She pukes, you're cleaning it up." She winked at him, and I wanted to punch her.

I didn't talk to him. I just let him sit there all quiet and sad. When it was time to go, Mark helped me off the stool. He held me as we made our way

down the steps and into the car. As we drove off the ferry, after some of the happiest days in my life, I knew nothing would ever be the same and it was my own fault. I don't have time for regret, or the emotional strength it requires. I see the world unfolding as it is meant to. Sometimes I have trouble finding meaning in the things that happen to me, but I assume that the universe knows what it's doing. Perhaps it's my duty to carry this grief, this grief that another woman might not be strong enough to carry. I lost a child and let my marriage fall to pieces so that someone else gets to find happiness in those things. Mother always said that God would never give us more than we could handle. And while I don't believe in the God that brought her so much comfort, I understand the sentiment. Back then, at that point in my life, I needed to make peace with the decisions I'd made and carve out a new life for myself.

NINE

JOE

GETTING BETTER WASN'T EASY. MY ENTIRE RIGHT SIDE pained me from the moment I woke in the morning until I laid my head down at night. And even then, it haunted my sleep, sneaking into my dreams, transforming them into nightmares full of screeching tires and the sound of hospital machines. It was a deep-down pain, one that no amount of exercise and medication could cast out. No matter how many pills I fed it or how many of Aunt Lindy's "thimbles" full of whiskey I drank, I was convinced that pain would haunt me for the rest of my life. I was so sure of this that I did everything I could to prove myself right. A man determined is one thing, and more often than not, a good thing. But a man soured on life at twenty-four and determined to stew in that sourness is never a good thing. The pain only made my anger quicker to ignite. Mom tried to love the anger out of me, Dad and Ben tried to work it out of me by taking me into the woods, and Mae tried to curse it out, but all that came to nothing. I was determined to let that pain and anger ruin me.

In the months after the accident, alone in my tiny room at the rehab centre in Halifax with nothing but books that smelled of mildew for company, I desperately needed someone to blame. And I decided that someone was going to be Mr. Richardson, the poor soul who'd been driving home to dinner when I stepped out of the dark and into the front of his truck.

"You've got no reason to be mad at him," Mom said. She was sitting beside my hospital bed, taking bread out of an old margarine container.

“How was he supposed to see you?”

“He should’ve been looking.”

“On a Sunday night? For a boy stepping out of the dark? He was supposed to know that you were gonna walk out in front of him?” She placed the bread on the narrow hospital table and moved it in front of me before she poured molasses over top. “Luski, eat.”

The bread was still warm, and the molasses dripped down the side and pooled around the bottom. I used my finger to slop some of it into my mouth, dripping it on my chin. Mom reached up to wipe it and I slapped her hand away.

“That’s the last time you’ll do that.” She reached up again to wipe the thick brown syrup off my chin and I let her. “You’re not so banged up that I’ll let you get away with slapping your mother.”

On a good day, when the exercises alleviated the pain, and the winter weather lifted and I could go outside and sit in the sun, I could find a little bit of forgiveness for Mr. Richardson. He didn’t require it and I had no right to give it, but I still found it—on the good days. On the bad days, when the weather turned on me and the snow fell and the cold sank into my bones—even though the weather was banished to the outside and I was imprisoned on the inside—on the days when the exercises hurt more than they helped and the pills weren’t enough, my anger festered and grew. The longer I had to lie in that bed in Halifax looking at feet that wouldn’t do what I wanted, the longer I had to stew in my own circumstance, the angrier I got. Maybe that man from the supply store in Maine all those years ago was right. Maybe we Indians were sour. Or maybe it was just me.

I spent six months in rehab, six long months waiting for my body to relearn all those things I needed it to do. I missed the deer hunt with Dad and I missed Christmas. When winter descended, it kept my family at home, which was three hours away on a good day. The sun was returning to the world when I was well enough to leave, walking with the help of a cane, stiff and sore all the hours of the day. I took to sneaking sips of Dad’s whiskey to keep the pain at bay.

“You’ve been sitting there moping for hours. You’re gonna get all stiff if you don’t move soon.” Mae stood over me, hand on hip.

“Leave me be, Mae. I’m tired.” I settled further into the chair and tried to look past her out the big living room window, but she wasn’t moving.

“The doctor says you need to be exercising. Get off your ass and walk to the end of the driveway and back. And don’t think I haven’t noticed you sneaking drinks, ’cause I have.”

“Leave me alone, Mae. I don’t need a lecture from you right now.”

“Stop feeling so sorry for yourself.”

I tried to look around her and she moved with me, blocking my view. She held out her hand to help me out of the chair and I slapped it away. Turns out, I was just as sour at home as I’d been at the rehab centre. The familiar sounds and smells of home did nothing to improve my temperament. And I just kept on being a pain for those who loved me.

“You like to find fault with everyone but your own self.” The fire was warm in the cool April evening as Mae sat down, the old stump between us.

“Shut it, Mae. You don’t know nothing.”

“I won’t shut it and I know more than you do. That accident knocked your head around good, I guess. You blame that poor man when you were the one who stepped out in front of him. You probably scared the daylights right out of him and he’s an old man, Joe. It’s the worst kind of self-pity. Blaming someone else because of something you did.”

“Screw off, Mae.”

“Oh, big man now, eh?” She snickered.

Cursing at Mae was like throwing gas on a fire.

“You spend all your time feelin’ bad for yourself instead of trying to get better. And you want the rest of us to go along with it. You’re hurting Mom. She won’t tell you, but you’re hurting her.”

“I’m not hurting Mom.”

“She’s scared, Joe. Scared she’s gonna lose another kid. And you are doing everything you can to feed that fear. Sitting around here, stewing. Not doing your exercises, face as glum as a dead mummy.”

“All mummies are dead, idiot.”

Mae sniffed. “You think you’re so smart, and yet all you’re doing is sitting here being a dumb-ass. Not doing anything to get yourself better and won’t even talk about your own guilt in it all.”

I could feel my face getting warm as my heart moved from my chest into my throat and threatened to pulse its way right out of my mouth.

“I have guilt, Mae.” I wasn’t yelling but I was close.

“And you should.”

“I was the last one to see Ruthie. I was the one who lost her. I got guilt, Mae. Don’t tell me I don’t have guilt. Maybe not where you think it should be, but I got guilt.”

Mae was quiet for a minute. She watched her own hands as she rolled a cigarette. The fire cracked and spit as she licked the edge of the paper and folded it over, securing the tobacco in place. She took a deep breath before she brought down the truth.

“You hold on to that like some sort of badge. Like you’re special for it or something.” She pointed the unlit cigarette at me. “You’re not special because you were the last to see her. Just like you ain’t special because you were there when Charlie died.” She stopped like she was trying to think of something else to say. “You’re not special for those things, Joe. They were just things that happened when you were there.”

“Mae—”

She put her hand up to stop me and I stopped. She hurled the cigarette she’d rolled into the fire, unsmoked.

“Being the last one to see Ruthie is a guilt you have no right holding on to all by yourself. We all got a part in it. And you thinking you’re so special only makes it worse for the rest of us. You ain’t special, Joe, and I’m sick of tiptoeing around you like you’re going to break. Grow the fuck up.”

Wisdom is earned, I’ve heard said, and for the most part, I believe that to be true. But Mae had it from the get-go. Her wisdom wasn’t bound up in fancy words or written down in books. There was nothing elegant about it, and it was thrown out into the world all rough around the edges. But it made a difference. Maybe not that particular night. That night, I went to bed so mad at Mae I couldn’t sleep. I lay awake fuming in the very same bed I sleep in now, decades later. And Mae, she quit speaking to me, but I wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction of being the one to crack. A few weeks later, we found ourselves alone outside, around the same campfire after Mom and Dad had gone off to bed. I’d run out of my pills, and my back had cramped up and I couldn’t stand. I tried but I fell back down into my chair, twice. We sat in silence, the hum of the highway a half-mile off mixing with the sounds of tree frogs and fire slowly reducing itself to ash. As the embers began to blacken, Mae stood up, came over to my side, put her arm around my waist and lifted me up out of my chair. I used her for balance as she led me to bed.

“I’m sorry, Mae,” I said, as she helped me onto the bed.

She bent down to take off my shoes. “Don’t be sorry; be useful.”

That night, as I tried to get comfortable, I decided that maybe Mae was right, although I’d never tell her. If I couldn’t be the same as I was before the accident, I was at least going to heed her advice and be useful. So, I went into the woods with Dad and Ben, and three months later, when Mr. Richardson came by and repeated his offer of a job, I took it.

There is something about the smell of gasoline that still takes me back to that garage. To a time when I knew the kind of happiness that used to exist before Ruthie disappeared. Back when the family was whole, and the anger lay dormant. I can hear the ticking as the numbers turned over on the fuel gauge, feel the grime that built up thick and dark on the keys of the cash register. Men changing oil, punching numbers. The regulars who stayed too long, to shoot the shit, taking up residence in the cracked vinyl chairs, the smoke from their forgotten cigarettes wafting up out of the ashtray, too busy talking to inhale. I started in late fall as the chill was setting in. It stayed cold all winter. The two bay doors, constantly opening to let one car out and another one in, gave winter a home. You’d find me on a tall stool Monday to Friday, from two in the afternoon until nine in the evening.

I was still prone to bursts of rage. Tiny happenings, ones that no one else would care about, seemed to get my blood all hot and thick. An old-timer, prone to storytelling and deafness, always left his car sitting at the pumps while other customers were trying to gas up. One day in November, a line of cars were backed up to the road, and he stood there telling the same story he’d told a million times. I marched past him, got in his car and gunned it, burning the tires on his Oldsmobile until the whole place stank of burnt rubber. I parked the car on the grass, slammed the door, kicked it and climbed up onto my stool. Everyone was quiet and stared a minute until the old man turned and left. He gassed up in the mornings from that point on.

Then Cora started working the seven-to-two shift. Just as I was coming in, she was leaving. It didn’t take me long to start coming in a little earlier than was required, just so I could talk to her, watch her as she climbed down from the stool and counted her cash. She was petite and had hair that shone red. Cora was almost ten years older than I was, and she looked just like a character out of a children’s book with her freckles scattered over her nose

and across her cheekbones, her full lips painted pink every day. Of course, I knew Cora. The town wasn't so big that you could get away with being complete strangers. But I'd never really talked to her. We celebrated her thirty-fourth birthday on a cool December afternoon just before Christmas. She was gathering the last piece of cake and the card with money we'd all stuck in it for her when I tried my best to be charming.

"You like your cake?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's nice."

"It was tasty."

"It was."

She waited for a minute, maybe to see if I was going to say anything else, but the air in my lungs and every word I ever knew just left me. I've never been much of a talker, but I really outdid myself with my awkward silence that day, and every day after that for the next few months.

By the time summer came around, Aunt Lindy's thimbles of whiskey had become pints of the cheapest I could find. It tasted awful and hurt going down, but after a few swigs, I could bend my legs without wincing. I could crouch down to pick something up and be able to get right back up again. It's not fair to be young and weak. There's no fairness to it at all. The pain pills had run out long ago, and sometimes I couldn't stand it. The pain seemed to radiate out of my bones and poison the muscles. But even under a constant fog, caused either by pain or booze, I always stopped when Cora came through the door. Inspired by a whiskey high one afternoon, I found a bit of courage.

"You want to come to the house with me? We're having food cooked over the fire Saturday night. My brother, Ben, is home for a bit."

"Are you asking me out?" The corner of her mouth crept upward into a smile as her head bowed downward. Her red hair hung loose over her eyes. "What are you, twenty-one, twenty-two?"

"I'm twenty-five," I stammered. "Nearly twenty-six."

"Well, you're aging well, Joe. What would we be doing on our date? Assuming I said yes."

I couldn't tell if she was teasing me or being genuine.

"I'm not exactly sure," I said. "It's just my family sitting around the fire, having food and a few beers."

“Now what would the town folk say if they knew I was spending my time with one of you Injuns?”

No one calls us that anymore, at least not in public. Back then, no one thought anything of it. Prejudice runs deep and offers no apologies in small towns.

“They’d say you were a lucky girl.”

“I’ll come by, then.” She smiled full this time, her freckles stretched across her tiny nose.

“How about I come and get you? Saturday around four?”

“I guess that would be okay. But you gotta drive me home, so none of that golden courage I see you sneak.”

“Fair enough. No whiskey. Won’t need it anyway, since I’ll be with you.”

She laughed, grabbed her purse and left out one of the bay doors. Roger, the mechanic, slapped me on the back.

“Good for you, Joe. An older woman. She’ll know how to break you in.”

WE WERE MARRIED on New Year’s Eve at the Baptist church. My poor mother was so happy I was alive that she conceded to Cora’s Baptist ways. I’d never been devout and I believed in God more out of habit than anything else, so it didn’t matter to me where we got married. But it mattered to Cora. The church was decorated with pine boughs that Dad and Ben had cut, and with wild holly that Cora and her sisters had collected from the ditches. Cora had bought her dress at a second-hand shop, and her mother helped her make it just right.

The church basement was cool and smelled strongly of dust, coffee and church squares, those little homemade sweets coated in sugared coconut and sickly-sweet caramel. No one in Cora’s family drank on account of their religion, so Dad, Ben and I snuck out a few times to toast with some proper whiskey that Dad had bought for the occasion.

“Well, Joe, I’m pleased for you.” Dad held up a small glass under the outside light of the church, the gravestones standing stoic behind him.

“Yeah, good for you, buddy. Finding someone as cute as her to put up with you.” Ben slapped me on the back.

“Thanks. Cora’s a good person. I still can’t quite believe she married me.” I shifted my weight to the left to give my right side some relief. The cold still bothered all the places where bones had broken.

“None of us can.” Mae closed the door behind her and wrapped her shawl tight, but not before she reached down and grabbed the bottle. She took a long swig of the dark liquor. “Warm,” she said, and tried to hide a cough.

“Mae, don’t you ever change.” Dad reached over and pulled her in for a hug. Inside, someone started playing the piano.

“I guess it’s time to go and dance with my wife.” I took the bottle and tipped it up for one last drink before I handed it back to Dad.

The basement was warm and filled with the hum of conversation and quiet laughter. And there was dancing. Looking back now, I think that might have been the happiest moment of my life, that December evening in a church basement.

“Come and dance with me.” Cora took me by the hand and pulled me to the middle of the room. I held her close as her mother, in a very un-Baptist moment, played a love song from a cassette tape.

On New Year’s Day, we moved into a second-storey one-bedroom apartment in town. Cora took a job waitressing at the new Chinese restaurant and quit the gas station. Cora brought Chinese food home for dinner, I tinkered with my car, and I made love to a woman I loved more than my own self. We had no shower, just an old clawfoot bathtub, and I learned to enjoy baths, especially when Cora joined me. We went to my parents’ for dinner and cards on Saturday nights and to her parents’ on Sunday afternoons, after church, for dinner and conversation.

“You’re playing with the devil when you play cards on Sunday,” she explained to me when I suggested it one Sunday afternoon, bored by conversation about family long dead and church gossip. After that, I spent most of those afternoons out in the barn with her father and brother, building or repairing things in the quiet that comes from men who are newly related but don’t have the wherewithal to get to know one another. Occasionally, on Fridays, I’d go out with a few of the boys from school I was still friendly with. A few times, I staggered home and struggled up the stairs to the apartment. Our first real fight happened when I failed to come

home at all and she found me passed out at the bottom of the stairs on Saturday morning, on her way to work.

"You can't stay mad at me. It was one time and I was here the whole time." I sat at the kitchen table, a mug of black coffee and a bottle of Aspirin in front of me.

"I was worried. Don't you get that? I didn't sleep at all last night."

"Not my fault you can't sleep."

"I didn't sleep because I was worried about you, asshole." She rarely swore and it caught me off guard. "You're so selfish."

"Cora, it's nothing but a bit of fun. It won't happen all the time. I promise."

She grabbed her purse off the counter and slammed the door behind her. I swallowed the Aspirin and crawled into bed, fully clothed, stinking of booze.

I drank more Fridays than I should have. A smarter man would have seen that I was ruining the best thing in my life. But I can state, with full confidence, that I am not that clever. Or maybe I'm just one of those people who are only happy when they aren't. Maybe I find contentment in my own misery. All this knowledge would have helped me so much more when I was young and a fool. It's a tragedy that we only come to these understandings when we're too old for them to be useful.

"You're gonna lose that girl, Joe. I'm telling you, you'd better smarten up." Dad had stopped in to the garage. He stood by the bubble-gum machine, waiting for a lady driving a Buick to pay and leave. When we were finally alone, he didn't take time to sugar-coat anything. "Everyone knows you been drinking."

"Everyone should mind their business. I'm fine, Dad. A little here and there to keep the pain down." I pretended to be counting the cash in the register, my head down, my hands busy.

"A little? I know Jack at the liquor store, you might remember. He tells me about your 'little here and there.'"

I'd never been angry with my father. Disappointed sometimes, but never angry. And I never wanted to be, so I was grateful when someone pulled in for gas. I walked past him to the pumps without ever looking him in the eye. He left, his piece said. And by God, if I was any sort of man, I would have listened.

My last day with Cora was a Friday. We'd been married a year and a half already, and while everyone else could see what I was doing to my marriage, I was blind to it. By that Saturday, I was fully aware. There was no way I couldn't be. I'd left the evidence on Cora's body.

It was dark and I couldn't find the light to the stairwell. I stumbled up the first few steps only to lose my balance and fall backwards. As I lay there wondering if I'd broken more bones, the light flicked on. I raised my head to see Cora standing at the top of the stairs, her robe wrapped around her, her face blank.

"Come on and help me up," I slurred.

"Get up yourself." She turned and went back into the apartment. I could feel the fingers on my left hand begin to swell, but I wasn't feeling much of anything else.

"For fuck's sake, Cora, come fucking help me." I knew I was waking up the downstairs neighbour, but I didn't care. Through my haze, I saw Cora come back onto the landing. She threw a blanket at me and turned off the light. That small act, an act I should have recognized as one that showed she maybe still cared, lit the fuse that ignites my anger. There was a soberness that came with the anger, and it propelled me up the stairs and through the door. I stumbled into the kitchen. Cora was at the sink, getting a drink of water. Her calmness, something my poor Mother hoped would rub off on me, angered me even more.

"What the hell, Cora? You'd leave me in the dark?"

"It's summer. You'd survive."

She didn't look at me. She walked past me, her glass in her hand, her eyes trained on the bedroom door. Then, my memory gets fuzzy. Not because I don't remember, but because I don't want to. Nothing in my life I have ever done, including losing Ruthie and leaving Charlie to the Johnson boys, amounts to the regret and distaste for my own self that I feel about what happened next.

I reached out and hit her hand, sending the glass of water into the air. It came crashing down on the linoleum floor and shattered. Cora screamed, and the fear on her face made me even more angry. I reached out again and grabbed her by the wrist before she had time to move away. With my other hand, balled into a fist, I hit her square in the face. The blood on my hand was warm as I hit her again and then a third time. I heard the bones in her

nose break, felt the skin on my knuckles open on her front teeth. I let go of her hand and she fell. She held one hand to her face and the other on the floor to steady herself as shards of glass cut into her knees and hand. I stopped to steady myself against the counter. If she had yelled, if she had fought back, maybe I could have dealt with it, but she didn't. She sat, crouched on the floor, blood rushing from her nose and mouth, surrounded by broken glass, and she cried. She cried quietly. She didn't look at me. But I looked at her. I watched her as if I was watching a movie. This wasn't us. This wasn't something I could have done. This wasn't real.

"Cora?" The downstairs neighbour stood at the open door. In his face I saw myself for what I was.

Cora turned and looked at him as I pushed past him and ran down the stairs, stumbling and missing the last two. I ran out into the warm August night and headed for the train tracks. I didn't get to my parents' house. I stopped by the pond and I puked. I threw up until there was nothing but acid burning the back of my throat, and then I drank the cool and dirty pond water and threw that up. I lay on the ground and pounded my anger into the dirt. I cried until I passed out. When I woke, the sky was beginning to lighten enough that I could see my swollen wrist and blood still on my hands. I washed it off in the pond, but I couldn't do anything about the stains on my clothes. I took off my shirt and threw it into the water.

Mom and Dad were still asleep when I snuck into the house and grabbed one of Dad's dirty T-shirts from the laundry basket. Dad's wallet lay on the counter, and I took the twenty-six dollars and the keys to the old truck. I didn't leave a note. I had nothing to say. They never reported the truck missing and they never came looking for me. And I can't say that I blame them. I wouldn't have either. Those cracks that I had been hammering into my life and into my marriage had become an earthquake of my own making, one too destructive for me to repair. There was nothing left to do but leave.

TEN

NORMA

 As I walked through the house I'd shared with Mark, my footsteps echoed. The only evidence of the life we'd lived were the nails that had once held paintings and the shelves that now sat empty, allowing the dust to settle. Dishes, taken from their home in the cabinet, covered the countertop, ready to be wrapped and packed away. Shadows roamed freely across the bare floors with little to impede or bend them. A peace comes after the chaos of change. There's a strange acceptance and quiet acknowledgement that the change has happened and now it's time to navigate that odd time in between, before the final goodbye. Mark and I had love, just not a future. And as hard as it was, we both knew this. We both understood. We were in no hurry to make anything official—we would get around to the signing of papers later. We wanted to step quietly into the new lives we were creating for ourselves.

Mark moved back to Boston a few weeks after we got home, still uncertain, still questioning my decision. It was difficult to watch his confusion turn to resentment.

"You just can't make these decisions on your own." He was standing in the hallway, on his way to the spare bedroom.

"I don't know how to explain this to you, Mark. I just can't do it."

"We can do it, Norma. *We*. Why do you always assume you're on your own?"

It was the same refrain until it wasn't. One day, he just stopped asking, stopped talking altogether. All I could do was walk away, mumble my

apologies and cry myself to sleep. I didn't know how to put into words, how to make him understand, that the decision had been made for me. Somewhere in the echo of time, the universe had decided that happiness of a certain kind was not to be mine. I would have to find joy elsewhere.

Finally, Mark took the things he wanted, his clothes, the antique wedding ring that belonged to his grandmother and a few paintings we'd collected in our six years of marriage, and left. I looked inside the decorative box where we stored our wedding memorabilia and everything was still there, untouched, left for me to mourn over, for me to do away with. The guest book, opened on the day and not since. The leftover invitations wrapped in red ribbon. But I had no right to a broken heart, so I closed the box and set it with the rest, piled and ready to be carried to the next phase of my life. I still have it, packed away in the back of the closet in the spare room.

I was almost done packing when Aunt June and Alice pulled into my driveway, unannounced. They were going to a cottage they'd rented by the ocean, and my house was on the way. I hadn't told anyone about the separation and impending divorce. I couldn't imagine that they would accept my reasoning, and I'd never been a very good liar. It seemed easier to not tell anyone, to wait until it was necessary. They were surprised, of course. Mark and I had always been happy. No one was there to witness the burden of sadness after Sarah died. That sadness that stayed long after the sympathetic looks, after the casserole dishes were cleaned and returned to their owners.

Aunt June offered to go get food and then we could all sit down and devise a story my mother would accept. As she pulled away, Alice took my hand and led me into the house. The bare walls made the rooms feel smaller, the light brighter.

I told her everything.

"Oh, honey, no," Alice half-whispered.

"I thought you would be the one to understand, to take my side."

"There are no sides here, Norma. I want what you want." She came over to the couch to sit next to me, setting a box of albums on the floor. "You can't let your mother's past determine your future. You are two very different people."

"Are we?"

“Yes, you are. You have a quiet strength that she doesn’t. You can take anything life throws at you and bounce back.”

“Maybe, but I don’t want to have to bounce back. Why hurt when you can just avoid it all in the first place?”

“You don’t miss Mark? That didn’t hurt?”

“Yes, of course it did. But not like losing a child. I can’t go through that again. Maybe Mother has more strength than you give her credit for. Maybe I’m the weak one.”

Alice was quiet as I stared out the window watching a bee tumble from one dead lilac bloom to the next, searching for nectar that was long since gone. In spring, I loved that lilac, bursting with purple, invading the house with its sweet smell, and I envied the new owners, who would be able to open the window and breathe it in, just as I had done for the last three years.

“Did you know that lilacs were used at funerals to mask the smell of the dead?” I looked back from the window to Alice.

“Deflecting.”

“Tired of talking. I never get to talk about happy things anymore.”

“And the stench of dying qualifies as happy?”

We both started to laugh, and I began to feel lighter.

Aunt June returned with enough Chinese food to feed ten people. We sat on the floor as the sun started to sink behind the lilac bush. We spilled rice, we slurped noodles, and Aunt June devised a lie.

“We’ll tell them that Mark cheated,” she said between bites. “Or that he was impotent.” She started to laugh, and I thought for sure that water was going to come out of Alice’s nose, but they kept it together, barely. I waited for them to dry their tears and catch their breath.

“Aunt June, the first one is cruel to Mark, and I think that the second might give Mother one of her headaches. One from which she might never recover.”

“I suppose you’re right, but I think it’s cute how you think she won’t get one of her headaches when you tell her the truth.” Aunt June ate the last of the fried rice before we cleaned up. Then they helped me pack the rest of my stuff and ready it for the movers in the morning.

Before the loss, Mark and I used to rent a cabin on a lake in rural Maine for two weeks each summer. When our house sold, I took my modest half of the profit and put a down payment on the cabin. There, I could get away

from everything. When sitting on the deck, watching the sun set over the water, everything seemed to be right with the world. At night, the darkness was almost complete apart from the stars, little pinpricks of light breaking through the black. And it was quiet, so very quiet. The only sounds came from nature itself: the wind as it rustled the leaves, the occasional sound of an animal passing through the woods, the warble of a loon. I thought that the peacefulness of the place might dampen the disappointment I knew my parents would feel when I told them about Mark, so I invited them, along with Aunt June and Alice, to spend the weekend. We would eat together and sit by the fire at night. Mother would complain about the chill of October, and Father would quietly sip his whiskey. Aunt June would annoy Mother, and Alice would calm everyone down.

The drive to the lake was peaceful. I like to drive with the radio off and the window down. There's something meditative about it that eases my tension. I picked up groceries and cleaning supplies on the way. I left early so I could get the cabin clean enough that Mother wouldn't feel the need to tidy and scrub the weekend away. I got off the interstate in Bangor and followed Route 9. If you followed it far enough, you'd end up in Canada, but I turned at the junction for Machias and headed for the lake road. I like the wildness in this part of Maine, the trees decaying into bogs, the colour of the berry fields as you drive past. There's also a sadness, abandoned houses, scorched fields in fall. A solitary and untamed landscape with rare flashes of colour.

The lake shimmered in full sun when I parked the car. I didn't unload right away. I needed to put my feet in the water. I walked in up to my knees as I held the hem of my dress. Stones dug into the bottom of my feet, and tiny waves bounced off my shins or moved past me to the shore. Beyond the tiny peninsula that jutted out into the lake and provided the privacy I loved, I heard children hollering. Occasionally, a canoe would float past, but generally, it was uninterrupted solitude. In the summer, if I was up early, I liked to walk into the lake naked and lie on top of the water. I liked to watch the mist evaporate above me, my ears immersed so I could listen to the quiet hum of nature under water. But on this day, I just stood there, my face in full sun, momentarily forgetting that I would soon have to explain Mark's absence.

THE SMELL OF Pine-Sol drifted out of the open windows and everything was spotless when my parents pulled in. Father got out of the car and stretched. Mother started unloading potato salad, cold ham and her suitcase. They were still unpacking the car when Aunt June and Alice pulled in behind them. There were hugs all around, some stiff, others soft.

"Where's Mark?" Mother asked as she came out of the cabin after inspecting it for cleanliness. I was pleased that I seemed to have passed inspection.

"He's down in Boston this weekend," I said.

Aunt June shot me a look, but I turned away from it. I'd decided to wait until they were halfway through their whiskey and sitting around the fire to tell them. The fridge inside the cabin was filled with food, and the counters overflowed with baguettes, cookies and marshmallows for later. We spent the day cooking and eating, talking and laughing. Mother even laughed when Aunt June slipped as she was trying to get into a kayak and fell in the water, emerging wet and sputtering. She was unhurt and couldn't help but laugh too when she saw my mother bent over, clutching her stomach, tears running down her face.

"A good belly laugh at my expense," Aunt June said, grabbing her sister into a hug, leaving her damp and gasping for breath.

"I haven't had a laugh like that in years. It was worth the drive," Mother said.

I'd rarely seen her this happy. It was so unlike her to give herself over to joy. I felt a pang of guilt for the news I had to share. Father tended to the barbecue while Mother and I set the picnic table. Aunt June and Alice poured some iced tea into a Thermos and went for a walk along the trail that wound itself through the woods and around the lake. Dinner was ready when they got back, flushed from the exercise.

As the night started to settle in and the lake stilled and the moon crept up over the trees, I knew that I had to tell them. Mother had been asking about Mark, how his job was going and how he was feeling. The last time I'd seen her, I had lied and told her that he had the flu. She asked if I was ready to try again. She was looking forward to being a grandmother. I mumbled incoherently and turned away from her hopeful face. We were sitting around the fire, all five of us a little tipsy. There was a lull in the conversation and a loon warbled out on the lake.

“Mark and I are getting divorced. He is in Boston this weekend because he lives there now. We got rid of the house and I live in a nice apartment.” It came out as one long word, the pauses between words disintegrating in the telling. The loon called again but all eyes stayed on me. The orange light of the fire cast their features into semi-darkness. I was light-headed, and their confusion made them look evil. Aunt June and Alice looked down at their hands, Mother looked at me and Father looked at Mother.

“Well . . . ,” she said.

“Lenore?” my father said, waiting to see how she was going to react. He seemed ready to get up and pull her away.

“What did you do?”

Father stood, but I waved my hand and he sat back down.

“I didn’t do anything, Mother. It was a mutual decision. We wanted different things, that’s all.”

“Is this because of the baby?”

My heart quickened. I knew she would ask, but I still felt a stab of pain. I took a sip of wine before raising my eyes to meet hers.

“Yes, in a way. Mark wanted to try again, but I didn’t. I didn’t want to go through what you had to go through before I was born.”

“Are you blaming me?” She leaned forward in her chair and looked like she was about to fall into the fire. Father put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her back into her chair.

“No, of course not.” I wasn’t sure what else to say. Only my mother would take my grief and make it about her. But hadn’t I expected this? Even expectation doesn’t always prepare you for the way things turn out.

“Lenore, I think what she’s saying is that she doesn’t want to endure the pain that she watched you endure. She’s making a sensible decision for her,” Alice whispered across the fire. The crackle of the flames rang in my ears, and I got up and walked toward the water. Their voices were carried away by the sounds that the woods make at night. The moon was almost full. A tiny sliver was missing, but its brightness reflected off the water. There was a ring around it, a halo of blue. I turned back and saw Alice leaning in to talk, saw Aunt June get up and pour another drink. My family was cast in silhouette. When I turned back to the water, I was overwhelmed by the scent of campfire and boiled potatoes. I swear I heard a child laugh from somewhere close by and the quiet murmur of adult conversation. Not

the voices of my family. Voices that carried an accent unfamiliar but known. I could feel the cold grass on my small feet and the rough fabric of a patchwork dress. The edges where patches were sewn together rubbed against my leg. I could see my tiny hands holding a doll made of socks and button eyes. I looked back up at the moon and then to the fire, where I thought I saw my mother wave for me to join them. Or maybe the light was playing tricks on me. Or maybe it was a dream, a vision meant for sleep creeping in, confusing and unfinished.

"Norma."

I jumped and the feeling disappeared just as quickly as it had come. It felt like a waking dream or maybe even a memory. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

"She doesn't mean to be this way." My father took my hand in his. "You know she doesn't mean to be this way."

"Yet she is." I was determined not to cry.

"Please give her time."

"But you understand, don't you?" I looked into his face, barely discernable in the faint light of the fire and the glow cast by the moon.

"I do. And I don't blame you. It was hard watching your mother suffer. And it was hard on me as well. That kind of grief leads people to do things they normally wouldn't. It's good that you and Mark could part as friends. It's good you didn't let it happen to you."

Aunt June and Alice had talked to them about the breakup while I stood by the lake, lost in a memory stirred alive by the moon.

"Do you remember my dreams?" I said.

I felt his hand stiffen. His fingers held mine just a little bit tighter.

"I do. I didn't think you did."

"I didn't until now, until the moon."

He dropped my hand and started to pick at the skin at the corner of his thumbnail.

"Give your mother time. She'll come around. And let's not mention the dreams." He hugged me, a long, tight hug, before he turned and headed back to the fire. I took one last look at the moon and its reflection.

Aunt June had put my mother to bed, and Father followed, closing the screen door gently behind him.

“To be honest, that went better than I thought it would. Although I suspect that she isn’t done with you yet.” Aunt June placed another log on the fire.

“I need another glass of wine.” An intense feeling had just hit me, something I couldn’t put my finger on. All I knew is that I wanted to dampen it.

“Wine isn’t going to make this any better,” she said as she went to the picnic table to open another bottle. She handed me a coffee mug half-full and leaned over to embrace me in a half-hug. “Things always seem the worst just after they happen. Time will take care of this as time always does.”

“Thank you.” I laid my head against hers for a second before she walked around and sat down beside Alice, who took her hand and held it in hers. We stayed out in the dark, feeding the fire and drinking wine well into the night. Aunt June began to mix my wine with water, something I was grateful for when I woke later that day.

All morning, Mother avoided being alone with me. We understood there was a chance that we would say something we would forever regret, so I was pleased when Father told me that they were going to leave a day early. I needed them gone. There was too much quiet between us. An unnatural quiet that comes with so many things left unsaid. As they backed out of the driveway and turned toward Route 9, my father tooted the horn goodbye. All I felt was relief.

Thanksgiving was quiet, as was Christmas. By Easter, Mother was talking to me again, and the Fourth of July brought a few laughs. I didn’t always spend the holidays with my parents, but that year I did. It was penance for leaving them without grandchildren. Only once did my mother bring it up, just after the fireworks, after she’d had more whiskey than usual and topped it off with a mint julep.

“You could adopt, you know. Raising a child not your own can be very rewarding. Janice Hall and her husband, the ones from the church, they adopted a cute little boy. Nothing wrong with him.” She was slurring and waving her drink around. “I would learn to love the little one.”

“I’m good. I have the kids at school. That’s enough for me.”

“Well fine, then. Don’t listen to your mother, not that you ever did.”

She was drunk and finally talking to me, so I let it pass. I'd been an obedient child and spent my entire childhood doing nothing but listening to my mother.

"But being alone isn't the way to make you happy," she said.

Yet, I was happy, eventually. All things take time. Grief can be wide and feel bottomless sometimes, but eventually, it begins to subside, to grow into something useful. I spent my time volunteering as a tutor, training for and running half-marathons, visiting Aunt June and Alice in Boston. For my fortieth birthday, I forced myself out of my comfort zone, took cash out of my savings account, hopped on an airplane and spent the summer in Italy and France, reading books and wandering through ancient cities. I dated but never found affection enough for a relationship. As much as other people couldn't understand it, I was content. Did I get lonely? Of course, but those bouts of loneliness passed quickly, and I could always find comfort in my own company. Alice told me this is a strength that many people don't have. The need for conformity and for the attention of others can lead to a life of misery. I knew that half the people I taught with were simply going through the motions instead of actually living. So, I allowed them to judge me, and I judged them in return.

MY FATHER DIED on a Saturday afternoon. Mother was at one of her church functions and came home to find him slumped over on the lawn tractor. The grass was mowed, so he must have been putting the tractor back in the garage. It brings me comfort to think that the last thing he probably felt was satisfaction. He loved mowing the lawn. He was gone long before Mother got home, long before she dropped her purse, cradled his head and cursed him for leaving her. Before the neighbour noticed and called the ambulance.

I'd just walked in the door and placed my purse on the counter when the phone rang. It was Alice. Aunt June was already on her way to Maine and had asked Alice to call me. Even her calming voice couldn't protect me from the sudden grief. I slumped onto the floor, my back against the kitchen cupboards as disbelief washed over me. My father was older, yes, but in my mind, still too young for death.

I cursed them both, my mother and my father. They hadn't prepared me for death. I hadn't had any great-aunts or great-uncles or grandparents to

mourn when I was younger. There had been no gradual understanding of death to help me prepare for this. My grief was absolute. I hung up the phone and called the school to explain that I wouldn't be in for a few days. I had the sense to pack a small bag and water my one houseplant before I locked the door and was on my way to my parents' house. Only now it wasn't my parents' house; it was my mother's house.

I sat in the driveway for a few minutes, admiring the perfect lines on the cut grass. The same neighbour who'd called the ambulance waved from the front window. The curtains were open to let in the light. Inside, it smelled of fresh coffee.

"Your mother is in her bed. A headache." She handed me a cool cloth that she had been taking down the hallway. "She asked for a cloth."

I placed my bag by the door and took the cloth from her hand, running it under cold water to chase away any warmth. "Thank you for everything. I can take it from here." The neighbour nodded, turned and softly closed the door behind her. I squeezed out the excess water and walked down the hall. The door was ajar, and I slipped in quietly and took my shoes off. I lay down on the bed beside her and replaced the warm cloth with a cool one.

"I'm here, Mother," I whispered.

"Norma, what am I going to do?" She started to sob.

Just like she used to do when I was a child and had those dreams, I gathered her in my arms and held her, her sparrow-like body heaving as I rocked her. I smoothed her hair and kissed her forehead. I cooed and shushed until she fell asleep. When Aunt June arrived, we were still lying there, my mother fast asleep, her head cradled in my arms, and me staring at the wall, watching the shadows fall as the sun set outside.

The next few days were a blur. Father had set out everything in his will. He'd agreed to a church service so long as there was a barbecue after. He left the house to Mother and a sum of money to me, enough to pay off all my debt and travel a bit. He even left a small sum to Aunt June to thank her for all she'd done for us. He was buried in the cemetery beside baby Sarah and his parents, who'd died long before I was born. As they lowered him into the ground while mostly strangers watched my mother and me grieve, something stood out to me. The name of my great-grandfather, the Italian one who had apparently bequeathed his Italian pigmentation to me, had the very un-Italian name of Brown. So many lies from the people I loved. As

the others walked away, leaving small piles of dirt and a single rose from Mother cast on the coffin of my father, I stared at the family headstones, lined up in a tidy row, the names hinting at a history of pale skin.

"Would you like to place dirt on the casket?"

I was alone when the funeral director handed me a small tin bucket. As I reached in and gathered a handful of dirt to scatter on the casket of my father, I forgot all about the names of my ancestors.

Mother hadn't cried at the funeral. She'd saved it all up for the car ride home. Alice had to pull over so I could crawl into the back seat with Mother and Aunt June. Each of us held a hand as Mother released her grief. It was big and it was ugly, yet she seemed so small and vulnerable, so filled with emotion I'd thought she lacked.

The day was chilly for September, but we had promised a barbecue after the funeral. Mark had heard about the death and attended, alone. It was nice to see him, but he stayed only long enough for hugs from Aunt June and Alice and condolences to Mother and me. I know that she appreciated his effort. Inside the house, people milled about. Having that many people in the house that had never welcomed visitors felt absurd, and the stress of it showed in my mother's fidgeting—cleaning a spot of condensation from a water glass, wiping the dust from a shelf before it had time to settle, straightening a picture that wasn't crooked. Finally, I got her to sit down by taking her elbow and lowering her into Father's favourite chair, a glass of whiskey in her hand to help settle her.

"He was always the sensible one," she said as she picked up the book he'd left sitting on the stand beside the chair.

"You're sensible, too, Mother."

She didn't reply as she stroked the cover of the book.

I got her a plate from the table holding hot dogs, sandwiches cut into triangles, and squares made almost entirely of sugar, coconut and maraschino cherries. A man I didn't know reached across me and took a peanut butter cookie. He startled me when he started to speak.

"I remember this one time your father told this joke. Between you and me"—he stopped to look around the room, as if he were ready to reveal some great secret—"it's probably a joke he shouldn't have told at work. But you know your father. Great guy, your dad. Funny guy." He took a bite out of the cookie and nodded toward my mother. "Give my condolences to your

mom." He spit cookie crumbs when he spoke, and under any other circumstance, I may have been disgusted, but at that moment, I didn't have the energy for disgust.

My memories of my father are generally not ones full of jokes. They tend to be limited to him reading in the den, mowing the lawn, and drinking whiskey with my mother. If I try really hard, I can see him at the beach with a detective novel in one hand and a beer in the other, or maybe I see him at the barbecue, inspecting a steak for doneness and flipping burgers. But him telling jokes is something even my vivid imagination couldn't conjure. There were stories he used to tell when we cleaned the gutters to prep the house for winter. It was the one chore we did together without Mother, and perhaps that's why the stories were reserved for then. Mother would stay inside and watch out the window, worrying every time I climbed the ladder to help.

"Did I ever tell you about your grandfather? He was shot once in the chest and once in the back during the Great War. I can't remember the battle, but I know he convalesced in France in a little town by the ocean."

On the ladder next to him, I reached in with my gloved hand, scooped a handful of leaves and threw them to the ground. "He was okay?"

"Sure was. Never complained a day in his life. About his health, anyway."

"I wish I could have known him."

"Me too. He was a funny guy. Used to tell us how he'd lie in that bed over there in France and whistle at the nurses and then pretend he was asleep." My father chuckled. "He was a good man." Father went quiet, his hands on the ladder and his eyes pointed to the sky.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Oh yes, just remembering. You do that a lot when you're old. I got a joke for you: Why were the trousers not allowed to enter the school?"

I shrugged.

"Because they were suspended." Father started to laugh, and though I failed to see the humour, I laughed with him. His laugh made me laugh. "That was one of your grandfather's favourites."

It was unfair that I laughed so little with my father. Our conversations consisted mostly of my complaints against my mother and his defence of

her. I would have liked to laugh more with him, and I feel cheated and a little annoyed that he never gave me the chance.

"Nonsense. That's your imagination again. You overthink everything." Aunt June was sitting across the table from me at the house. Alice had left to return to Boston, leaving Aunt June with us for a few days. "Your father loved you and your mother. He was just . . . reserved."

I took a sip of my tea. "Apparently, he wasn't."

"People always say nice things about the dead. Especially when the family is in the room. They probably made it all up."

"Aunt June?" I said as I reached across and took one of the leftover squares. I licked the frosting stuck to the plastic wrap.

"Well, I knew your father for more than a decade before you even came into the world, and while I never found him to be particularly funny, I know that he loved you." She sounded like she wanted to say more, but she held her tongue, and I could see something was swirling around behind those blue eyes. Mother had gone to bed, complaining of a headache, and Aunt June and I had cleaned everything up so Mother wouldn't be upset in the morning, or at least any more than she needed to be. A dead husband and a dirty house and I might have lost both parents.

I've always wondered at the secrets the dead take with them. Some are unintended secrets, things they never got around to saying, like "I'm sorry" or "The money is hidden in the shoebox at the back of the closet." Some secrets are so dark that it's best they remain buried. Even people who exude light and happiness have dark secrets. Sometimes, the lie becomes so entrenched it becomes the truth, hidden away in the deep recesses of the mind until death erases it, leaving the world a little different. Secrets and lies can take on a life of their own, they can be twisted and manipulated, or they can burst into the world from the mouth of someone just as they are starting to lose their mind.

ELEVEN

JOE

 I'M FLOATING IN THE WORLD BETWEEN ASLEEP AND awake, where my body lacks weight and the world is emptied of colour, in those moments before the dim light of reality gives way to the vividness of dreams. Where sound is funnelled through drowsiness, and the world on the other side of closed eyelids feels close but far away at the same time. I'm navigating my way to sleep when I hear voices, two of them, approach my door. One voice, I know, belongs to Leah. The other is achingly familiar. I shiver under three layers of blankets, but not from the cold. The door opens and Leah peeks in.

"I brought someone to see you."

"Hello, Joe." Cora walks in behind our daughter. Through my eyes, blurry with medication, I take her in. Her waist is still small, her legs short and solid, her smile thin. Time has given her wrinkles around her mouth and eyes, silver threads of hair have appeared where auburn used to be and, I'm ashamed to say, her nose is a little crooked.

"Cora." Her name falls from my mouth and takes my breath. The warmth of embarrassment rushes to my shallow cheeks when I try to sit up. I'm weak and I fall back onto my pillow. Cora bends down and touches my hand. I move mine and gently set it on top of hers, taking in our skin, together. Skin that used to be taut and young and in love. Her skin is the soft that comes with aging. Not paper thin, not yet. Soft like melted ice cream. She lets our hands rest together for a moment before she slips hers out from under mine and retreats to the end of the bed.

“Good to see you,” she says as she tucks the blanket around my feet. I’m surprised to feel desire—the same desire I felt for her the day I walked into the garage and she was sitting in my chair behind the register. Desire in the dying is a cruel trick.

An uneasy quiet settles on the room. Leah sits on the other bed, her legs crossed, her back against the wall. She looks at her mother and not at me. Waiting. Cora picks at the small pills of fabric dotting my blanket.

“I never told you I’m sorry.” The words spill out despite the heaviness behind them. In my mind, I have apologized a hundred times. Lying awake at night, I tried to find the right words to make her forgive me. But there were no right words. I know that now. “And I *am* sorry. You never deserved anything I did to you.”

“No, I didn’t.” She sets her hands on her lap. “But that’s the past.”

“I don’t know why.” I coughed to clear the saliva caught at the back of my throat. “I’ve asked myself so many times, and I don’t have an answer.”

“Those boys you used to call friends went around telling the town that you couldn’t hold your alcohol and your Indian demons took over.” She took a deep breath. “That broke your dad’s heart. He thought the people around here had . . . changed, I guess. I told them it had nothing to do with that and everything to do with your foul temper.”

“Thank you for defending me.”

“I wasn’t defending you, Joe. I was setting the record straight. There’s no defence for what you did.”

“Well, thank you, anyway.”

Leah sat on the other bed watching her parents speak to one another for the first time.

“The thing I never understood is why you never came home. After all those years, even when Mae told you about Leah, when your dad died, you never came back.”

“I always thought Leah was better off without me.”

“I guess we’ll never know. But you should have come home,” Cora said.

“You’re not wrong, Cora.” It felt nice and familiar to say her name after all those years.

AFTER I STOLE my dad's truck and almost ran down Archie Johnson alongside the highway, I kept going. I drove past tiny towns with names born on the other side of the ocean. Truro, Londonderry, Amherst. I passed off-ramps that led to red cliffs, which retreated from heaving tides. I drove through the green woods of New Brunswick, stopping only for gas and something to eat. The money I'd stolen and the little bit I had in my wallet weren't going to last, but that didn't worry me. I had other things on my mind. I still had blood on my jeans, and each time I looked down at it, I pushed that gas pedal harder.

When I was almost to the border that New Brunswick shares with Quebec, I pulled in to a truck stop and paid twenty-five cents for a shower and an extra nickel for a towel and a tiny bar of soap. It scratched more than it cleaned and left me with little red lines etched on my skin. I tried to wash the blood out of my jeans, but it was stubborn, a permanent testament to my misdeeds. With a clean body and a spot on my jeans the colour of rust, I passed out of the Maritimes and into unfamiliar land. I went west, like people searching for something seem to do. I drove through Quebec with only two stops to gas up and an extra to take a piss alongside the road. I bypassed the cities. They might have been great places to get lost in, but I was looking for a different kind of lost. I needed to lose that part of myself that could hurt someone I claimed to love, and I needed to do that alone.

AT THE END of the bed, Cora shifts her weight and leans over my thin legs. "You could've come home. You could have faced the thing you did. Maybe we wouldn't have lasted, but you could've been a father."

For a moment, I feel that distant yet ugly and familiar swell of anger. For just an instant, I want to yell at her: *If I'd known I was a father earlier, maybe I would have come back*. But I don't. I close my eyes and let the anger that I have no right to hold dissolve. After all, it wasn't Cora who left, who decided that I couldn't be a father. The only person I have a right to be angry with is myself.

"I almost did. Once. The police somewhere in Ontario found me asleep in the truck. I assumed he knew the truck was stolen and he was going to drag me out and send me home in handcuffs." I stop, remembering how hard my heart was beating when he tapped on the window, waking me from

a deep sleep. “But he was just checking to make sure I was alive. Told me to keep driving. So, I did. Dad never reported the truck as stolen, a kindness I didn’t deserve.”

“Strange to think what would have happened if your dad did report that truck as stolen, if they did send you home,” Cora says.

I look over at Leah, who just smiles quietly.

“Dad, why didn’t you come back? Even after you found out about me.”

I nearly cry with the sound of the word *Dad*, almost whispered, somehow sacred. Maybe only to me. Cora doesn’t seem to notice, and Leah just looks at me, waiting for an answer. The words grow thick and heavy on my tongue as I try to dissolve the lump in my throat.

“I wanted to, and I tried. But what I did to your mom and to my family . . . I wasn’t fit. And it wasn’t because I didn’t love you. The moment Mae told me about you, I loved you more than anything in this world.” I stop to take a breath. Even talking is starting to exhaust me. “But you couldn’t miss me if I screwed up again and left again. It wasn’t like Mom. She knew Ruthie. She knew Charlie. Her grief was for people she knew and loved. I couldn’t cause you grief if you didn’t know me. I’m not making any sense, am I?”

Leah shrugs and hands me my glass of water.

“So, I did the only thing I knew how: I stayed away and sent money.”

“Money is not a substitute for a father or for a son.” Leah is wise, like Mae.

“No, you’re right, and there is nothing more I can say to defend how I’ve behaved, except I’m sorry.”

BY THE TIME I got to Sault Ste. Marie, I’d had nothing to eat but Pepsi and potato chips for three days, and I needed a meal, something hot and substantial. But I was broke. I pulled into a gas station on the edge of town, hoping to find someone who might need some temporary work, enough to get me a hot shower and a meal.

The little bell rang above the door when I entered. The man leaning against the counter stood up straight and eyed me.

“You know of any work I could get around here?” I asked, standing up a little straighter, hands stuffed into my pockets.

The garage attendant took in my clothes and tired face. “Not for you.” He wrinkled his nose as he took my money.

“I’ll give you work.”

I turned to see an older man, dark-skinned like myself and a full foot taller, standing in the doorway, waiting to pay.

“You paint a house?” he said.

“I can paint.”

He reached around me and paid the attendant. “Follow me.”

I followed him to the pumps and a brand new Chevy pickup truck, blue with a beaded feather hanging in the window. Dad’s old truck looked pitiful next to it. I followed close behind him, past manicured lawns and ice cream stands, until we stopped at a two-storey house with a nice lawn that sat at the end of a road. Behind the house were barren fields and high grass. I climbed out of the truck and noticed white flecks of paint littering the lawn just under the eaves. Scaffolding had been put up, but no painters were in sight.

“I hired a young guy to do the work, a local. He scraped it, took the first week’s pay, and I haven’t seen him since.”

In the garage was a well-equipped gun rack, an ATV and a deer hung up, ready to be dressed. He pointed to the paint cans on the floor. “How long you think it’ll take to paint the whole thing?”

I walked back out and around the house.

“Two coats, one side a day. Two sides are smaller than the others. It’s summer, so I can work later. Six days, maybe.”

“Great, you start tomorrow.” He put on a pair of thick leather gloves and grabbed a skinning knife. The handle was wide and the blade even wider. He turned toward the deer, its tongue protruding, its eyes opaque.

“I was kind of hoping I could start today.” If there is divine providence, it showed itself then with a growl from my stomach. His eyes narrowed before his mouth turned up at the edges.

“How about I pay you for the first day and you start tomorrow morning, sun-up.” He took off one glove, reached into his wallet and handed me fifteen dollars. I took it and headed toward my truck. I was grateful, but he didn’t need to know. I don’t like someone holding that kind of power over me.

“Sun-up,” I hollered over my shoulder.

A diner I'd passed earlier was filling up with customers for supper when I pulled in the parking lot, nearly losing a wheel to a pothole. The sign on the inside said "Seat Yourself," with a smiley face drawn in pencil in the corner. I grabbed one of the postcards, which sat in a little metal holder, and when the waitress came to take my order, I asked for a pen. I ordered the cheeseburger with fries and a Pepsi, and then turned the postcard over to write.

"Mom and Dad, I'm so sorry." I tried to say more, but the words faded into the grease-soaked air of the diner. I turned the card over, picture side up, leaving my apology alone in the dark.

Food doesn't have the same effect on me now as it did that day. Everything has a metallic taste since I started those treatments first designed to cure me, then designed to keep me around just a little bit longer. I quit them a few weeks ago. If I'd known then that the treatment would be useless, I'd have said no to the needles, the chemo, just so I could taste things like I used to. But on that day, that cheeseburger was the best thing I'd ever eaten. The grease oozed out the moment I bit in, scorched my lip and left a little red blister, but I didn't care. My plate clean, I took my postcard and asked for directions to the post office. I mailed the postcard, the first of many I sent in place of myself. Mom reminds me still, even when I'm lying here dying, that I broke her heart, never calling, never coming home to see her.

"All my kids left me. Disappeared, died, ran away. I wonder sometimes what I did to deserve it." She drinks a bit of whiskey now that she's older. "No need to save the liver when everything else is on its way out," she likes to say.

I showed up at the man's house as the sun was creeping up over the back fields.

"Glad you came back." He threw his cigarette on the ground, crushed it under his boot and pointed to the stack of paint cans.

It took seven and a half days to finish that house. It was hot and the bugs were nasty. At the end of the fourth day, as I was washing my head under the hose, he came out of the house with a beer in each hand and tried to give me one.

"No, thank you. Makes me angry."

“Fair enough. More for me. But will you at least stay and have a shower? I can smell you from inside.”

I tried to say no, but he wasn’t having it. I will admit that the hot water felt good. I watched the dirt pool at my feet before it slipped down the drain. While I showered, the man took my filthy clothes off the toilet seat and put a robe in their place, then threw my clothes into the washing machine. When I hollered in protest, he ignored me, so I had no choice but to tie the robe around my waist and follow as he led me to the backyard and barbecued hamburgers. He served them with cool slices of cucumber drowning in vinegar and salt.

“You got a story?” He handed me a glass of water as I buttoned the cuff of an old shirt he said he didn’t wear anymore, over my clean T-shirt still warm from the dryer.

“Everyone has a story.”

“You seem too young to have a story of any interest.”

“I’m not.” I think he wanted more, but I wasn’t giving it. “Thank you for all this. I’ll be back in the morning.”

He paid me every second day, so I could afford a hot meal one night and chips and pop the next. I went to a different parking lot every night and rested my head against the back window of the truck, my arms crossed over my chest. It wasn’t uncomfortable, though. I was too tired by the end of each day to even consider comfort. But on the last day, when the empty paint cans were neatly stacked in the garage, and the light-blue house looked bright and new, he tried to hand me a hundred dollars, the ten-dollar bills spread out on the table like a fan.

“No, sir. You already gave me some. We agreed to fifteen a day.”

“Well, you did a great job and you finished it.”

As I reached for the money, he slapped his hand down on top of the fan of cash.

“You told me that everyone has a story. I wanna know yours,” he said.

I could feel that little flame of anger burning right in the middle of my chest.

“A young man showing up this far from home.” His hand stayed where it was. Mine hovered like a child’s begging for candy. “Something is making you all dark and moody.”

“I lost my sister when I was six, I let my brother die when I was fifteen, and I left my wife bloody and bruised two weeks ago. That’s my story.”

He nodded slowly before he lifted his hand. I took the cash and refused to look him in the eye. The garage door was still open, and a case of beer sat by the stack of paint cans. I grabbed the beer, placed it on the passenger seat beside me and headed farther away from everything and everyone I’d ever known.

I PUT MY hands under me on the bed and shift my body, trying to get comfortable. “That money got me further west. When I ran out, I stopped to help a man on a farm for a few days, and that got me even further.”

“Where were you going?” Leah cocks her head to the side and rests her cheek in the palm of her hand.

“I had no idea. I just kept driving.”

ON THE PRAIRIES, it’s said that you can watch your dog run away for ten days. I believe it. That land stretched on forever, as flat and boring as a place can be. I could’ve crossed the Prairies in a day, but my God, it was hard staying awake with nothing to look at and a few beers swirling around in my belly, making my head all loose. I’d gone through the case I stole trying to get out of Ontario, and I stole some more outside of Winnipeg. A homeless woman wearing no shoes and clutching a two-dollar bill was making a stink in the beer store, and I took advantage of the situation. I tucked a bottle of whiskey—one of those big ones in plastic—under my arm and walked out while she cursed the clerk in a language I’d never heard. I bought a few bottles of pop at a convenience store next door and took turns, a little whiskey for the burn and a little sugar to cool it down.

For no reason in particular, I got off the highway in Swift Current and made my way down to the grasslands just north of the border. A dirt road cut through fields of tall grass abandoning their green in preparation for winter. The yellow stalks swayed with the wind—Mother Nature running her fingers through her hair. It seemed to me that the horizon moved farther away the closer I got. Clouds, every colour of grey, began to settle on the line between land and sky. Then they started to pile on top of one another so

casually I barely noticed, until a flash of lightning erupted from a dark cloud directly in front of me. I pulled over and opened the door to breathe in some of that heavy prairie air—the air that comes before a storm, full of moisture and electricity. The land was so vast and quiet that I could imagine myself as the only person on earth.

"What the hell are you doing out here?"

I shook so hard at the sound of another voice that I thought for a moment that I'd pulled every muscle in my body.

"There's a storm coming."

I turned to see a woman, Indian for sure, around my age. She was wearing jeans and a bright yellow T-shirt. She was carrying long stalks of grass in her arms. I looked around for a car but there was none, just a woman in the middle of nowhere, carrying an armful of grass.

"Where'd you come from?" I said.

"My mother. Same as you." She winked at me and leaned against the truck. "Just so you know, I can outrun you in case you think these fields would be a good place to commit a crime against me. And I hide a good, sharp knife somewhere on my body. I can reach it faster than you can get to me."

"I have no intention of hurting anyone." My heart had just started to slow back down when a strike of lightning burst from the clouds, followed by a peal of thunder. "What's your name?"

She sat down on the ditch's edge, a couple feet from me. "I don't go giving my name out to every stranger I meet. Does it matter if you don't know my name?"

"I guess not."

She was strange, but there was something calming about her. We sat quietly, eyeing the clouds, waiting for the rain.

"Do you want to know my name?" I said.

"Only if you want to give it to me."

"Joe."

"Joe." She reached up to push some stray hair behind her ear. "So, what are you doing all the way out here in a truck that belongs on the other side of the country, Joe?" She pointed to the licence plate.

"I just needed to get away."

"So, you're running."

“We’re all running from something.”

“Well, well, aren’t you the Indian philosopher king.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

She didn’t say a thing, just sat there and looked at me as I looked out over the grass. “You going to judge me?” I said to break the silence.

“Hell no, I have no judgments. I don’t know you, Joe. You just look like one of those Indians who goes out into the grass to find themselves.” She laughed at this. “Better than the white folks, I guess. They come out here to off themselves.”

Another bolt of lightning ripped across the sky, followed closely by a deep growl of thunder.

“I hope this rain holds until I get home. I got new shoes. Wouldn’t want to ruin them before I get to properly break them in.” She lifted up her leg to show off a new sneaker, white with black laces.

Unlike the man whose house I’d painted, she made me feel at ease sitting out here in the middle of nowhere. There was so much empty space for thoughts to escape into. I tried to rein mine in, but I opened my mouth and one just flowed out: “Do you think we’re sour? Do we Indians have something in our blood that makes us bad?”

She laughed at the same time the thunder clapped, drowning it out. It was eerie, watching her throw her head back, her silent laugh bordered by the dirt road, the grass moving faster now under the low, dark clouds.

“The only thing sour right now is your smell, and a quick shower will help with that. Where’d you get the idea we’re sour?”

“I heard it once a long time ago, and since then, everything has just kinda gone wrong.”

“Wrong how?”

“People seem to need to get away from me. And sometimes I help them along.” I held up my hand. The last of the bruising was hard to see in the faded light. The cut where my knuckles found Cora’s teeth was now a thinning white line against my brown skin.

She took my hand in hers, inspected it and then placed it back in my lap. She didn’t ask about the scars; she didn’t need to. I stayed quiet as we watched the first raindrops crater the dry earth with their heaviness.

“You know what I think, Joe?” She placed her hands at her sides, palms on the ground, ready to lift herself up. “I think that we all do bad things, but

that don't always make us bad people." She stood above me, looking down, the dark skies above drowning out the contours of her face.

"Maybe you have bad luck, but there is nothing sour in us. We've been through shit, remember. Every one of us alive today comes from something bad done to the family that came before us. You being alive is a goddamn miracle, so no more talk about sour blood. Own your mistakes, make amends and move on. We owe that to those who didn't make it." She dusted herself off and bent to pick up the grass she'd been carrying. "You want to give me a lift?"

As we got in the truck, the skies opened. The sound of the rain on the roof and the gravel under the tires put an end to conversation as she guided me to the end of the dirt road, her long, slender finger pointing straight ahead. On the corner was a small house painted a patchwork of colours and designs. Gardens overflowing with flowers and vegetables surrounded the house. The leaves on the fruit trees shuddered under the thrumming of the rain.

"Nice house."

"I like things to be beautiful." She opened the door. "You wait here, Joe." She laid the grass on the front stoop, went into her garden and started hauling food from the land and off the trees. She came back wet with a bundle of carrots, some radishes and a few apples, and handed them to me through the window.

"Good luck, Joe. I hope you find some peace."

"I'm glad I found you. Thank you."

"No need for thanks, just take care."

She slapped the side of the truck and ran for the house. I watched as the water fell hard and constant, obscuring everything on the other side of the windshield. I felt a keen sadness when she disappeared into the house, shutting the white door painted with flowers tight against the storm.

When the rain started to settle into a steady rhythm, one my windshield wipers could keep up with, I found my way back to the main road. The radio was useless in a storm this loud, so I drove on with only my thoughts and the sound of the rain. I drove until the grey clouds were far behind me, a reflection in the rear-view mirror.

"SOMETHING ABOUT HER brought me comfort, the same kind of comfort I found in you." I turn to face Cora, who looks up from the blanket and smiles. "I went back there a few times to see if she might want to see me again, but I never stopped the truck, never got out and knocked on that door. Until the last time. But that story is for another day."

The room is quiet as Leah and Cora look down at their hands and I look up at the ceiling yellowed by decades of cigarette smoke.

"You feel things too quick and too heavy, Joe. Love, hate, guilt, anger. You need to let those things go sometimes," Cora says, her head tilted at an angle.

"I guess it doesn't matter anymore now." I try to laugh at my own approaching death, but neither Cora nor Leah smiles.

THE DAY AFTER I met the woman in the field, I stopped near the Badlands and got work as a hired hand, shovelling shit, making repairs, everything just short of being a cowboy. I stayed to myself and found a few books in the bunkhouse, Louis L'Amour and Zane Grey. I stayed on for over a year, reading and rereading those same books, my arms growing stringy with muscle, my back tightening and my skin getting weathered. I saved the money I earned and kept it safe.

When I tired of the work, I drove clear to the ocean, one so similar and yet so different from the one I knew. The mountains seemed to grow right out of the water. The waves were bigger, warmer. The kelp iridescent. The trees were always wet and smelled of life. I got a job in a lumber camp hours from the ocean and any town that dared be named. I left the truck in the company parking lot and boarded the shuttle for life in the camp, three weeks at a time. I cooked food and scrubbed toilets for good money. I slept on a narrow cot in a room with three other guys. I got used to mosquitos the size of birds, and the red welts they left on my skin. It was a dry camp and my saving grace. On my weeks off, I liked to hike into the mountains, fish by quiet streams, pick berries and sit by a fire at night. In the winter, I'd snowshoe through thick snow, sit in the sulphuric hot springs far enough away from civilization that I was often the only one there. On clear nights, I swear, I could see the whole sky. I'd lie on my back like Ruthie and I did the night before she disappeared, and watch the stars make their nightly

journey. I wondered if she was out there somewhere, under that same sky. Once, I stayed in a one-room cabin for a week in the winter, and it reminded me of the times with Dad in the woods, when I'd trace the outlines of animals carved into the walls and eat Aunt Lindy's bread with warm molasses. I sent postcards every once in a while, each time from a different location, letting Mom know I was fine. I never called and never asked about Cora. I didn't want to know.

When you spend as much time alone as I did, you think a lot, and my thoughts tended to rest on my mother, and the weight of her grief. She got to bury Charlie, a cruel blessing but an ending. With Ruthie, there was no resolution, just a void where a child should have been. So many years were spent wondering where she was, what she looked like, if she was happy, if she was alive. Dad grieved too, we all knew, but his grief was harder to define. He kept it close. It wasn't until a surprise call from Mae that I understood that I was a third child gone, but I was too selfish to go home, to be there for all of them. I made so many mistakes.

Despite my best efforts, they did find me. Once. A guy in the lumber camp, a quiet, skinny guy with eyes that watered continuously, came from a town near mine back home, and I'd made the mistake of befriending him. There's something about someone knowing where you're from, I guess. Someone who knows what you mean when you say "the Valley," pronounces *Bay of Fundy* correctly and knows that Musquodoboit is a place and not just a bunch of letters thrown together haphazard-like. But he got homesick and left a couple months in. He was home only a week when the phone at the camp rang and it was for me.

"Hello?"

"Jesus Christ, it *is* you." Mae was almost yelling.

"Mae, I don't want to—"

"I don't care what you want."

"How did you get this number?"

"Skinny fella stopped into the garage and said he worked with you. Apparently, you never told him you disappeared and wanted it to stay that way." Mae stopped to take a breath. "Now listen to me: Mom and Dad are worried sick and have been for all these years. Eight years, Joe. Who up and leaves their family for eight years? I was right when I called you the most selfish man there ever was."

“Mae—”

“Nope, I’m mad at you, so you don’t get to talk right now. You have responsibilities and you need to come home. Stop moping around out there in the woods and get your ass back here.”

“No.”

The line was silent.

“You got a kid, Joe. A girl. I promised Cora I wasn’t going to tell you, but something has to make you see sense.”

“You’re lying, Mae.”

I could hear my heart beating in my ears and sweat started to form on my forehead. I had a kid, a daughter?

“I’m not lying. You gotta come home, take care of your family.”

“I can’t, Mae. You know what I did to Cora. I can’t, Mae. What if I . . .”

“What if you what?”

“I can’t be that man, Mae. I can’t be a father.”

“So, what do you want me to tell Cora? Mom and Dad? Leah?”

“Leah?”

“That’s your girl, Joe. The one who needs a father.”

“I can’t.”

“I guess I’ll tell them that you just don’t care?”

“You know that ain’t true, Mae. Don’t be that way. Tell them I’m fine. I’ve been doing just fine.”

“Mom and Dad are getting older, Joe, and Ben works full time, and I have my own kids to think of, too.”

Mae had kids? In my mind, Mae stayed fixed like that star at the end of the pot handle of the Little Dipper. How had the world moved on like that?

“I’m sorry, Mae, but I just can’t.”

Mae took a deep breath to ready herself for another volley, and that breath was the last thing I heard before I set the receiver down and walked away from the phone. My hands were still dripping water and the pots still needed to be scrubbed.

Three days later, when the shuttle dropped us off in town for two weeks of freedom, I took almost all my money, leaving just enough to get by until my next pay, and sent it home in one of those big envelopes with a postcard that said, “For Leah, I hope this helps.” Then I threw a backpack in the truck with everything I owned and headed into the mountains.

“YOU’RE A FOOLISH man, Joe. Foolish.” Cora stands up to leave, her hand on her back to steady herself.

“I suppose I was.” I’m short of breath; the telling of the story has taken a lot out of me. And I’m so tired, but I want to sit here with Cora and Leah, to keep this moment going for as long as my body can sustain it.

“No need to suppose. You were.” She grabs her purse off the floor, walks over to Leah and places a kiss on her forehead. “I’m gonna walk back into town. I need the fresh air. It was good seeing you, Joe. I hope you find favour with the Lord. I’ll pray for it.”

“Thank you, Cora. Thank you for everything.” I nod toward our daughter, and Cora lets her hand rest on the top of my foot before leaving and shutting the door behind her.

Leah leaves to get me a glass of water and some crackers for my sick belly.

When I wake, long after the sun set but before it stains the horizon in the morning, Leah is asleep on the bed beside me, her hands curled under her chin like a child, and I feel, just for a moment, what it would have been like to know her as a little girl.

TWELVE

NORMA

 A BETTER DAUGHTER WOULD HAVE MOVED BACK INTO her childhood home after her father died. A better daughter would have taken care of her mother, kept her company, played Scrabble with her during the long winter evenings, taken her to medical appointments and accompanied her to church on Sunday mornings. A better daughter would have cared enough to see what was happening to her mother. She wouldn't have passed off her mother's sudden forgetfulness as simply a result of age and loneliness. A better daughter would have understood what was happening when her mother put milk on the stove to warm and forgot about it, burning the milk and filling the kitchen with smoke.

But I was not that daughter. Nothing kept me from being her, but I couldn't imagine moving back into a house so quiet and dark, the curtains still drawn against the daylight. After all those years, decades between Norma the quiet girl and Norma the quiet woman, I still felt the heaviness of Mother's lost babies, and I didn't want to be weighed down by them all over again. I had my own pulling me down.

I called every evening at 6:30 p.m., after she finished washing the dishes and before she sat down at the little table, a glass of her favourite whiskey and her crossword puzzle book in front of her. I replaced being a good daughter with being a scheduled daughter, someone who would do the minimum and still be considered dutiful by anyone who might be watching. I made the forty-five-minute drive from my apartment to my mother's house once a week, on Saturday mornings. We went out for lunch, and I

took her shopping, gathered the garbage and took it out to the bin at the end of the driveway. The whiskey bottles were still hidden away at the bottom of the bag, but there were fewer now without Father. I mowed the lawn in the summer and shovelled the walkway in winter. I used her money to pay someone to plow in case of emergency.

Time quickens the older you get, as if the universe is trying to push you toward the finish line, to make room for the younger, the stronger, to mark your brief place in history and move on. Our tenth Christmas without Father came in the blink of an eye. I was staying the night as I did each year. Aunt June was driving up the next morning. She and Alice had gone to the same Christmas Eve party for years, so it was only Mother and me. It was a cold night. A thick layer of wet snow had fallen a few days earlier, and then the temperature dropped and froze the top layer. The faint yellow of a street lamp and the gleeful colours of Christmas lights from the neighbour's yard gleamed off the crystalline crust. Light is more vibrant in the cold, like it knows that people are stuffed away in their houses, miserable from lack of sunshine, and it needs to put on a show. A pleasant substitute for warmth. After Mother went to bed, I opened the curtains and admired the lights of the Christmas tree against the darkness of the night. I sat in the quiet, with only the creaking of the house to keep me company. I squinted my eyes to blur the lights of the tree like I used to when I was a kid. When the need for sleep finally forced me to bed, I left the lights on. A Christmas tree without its lights makes me sad, and I couldn't bear to unplug it.

The red block letters told me it was 3:14 a.m. when something pulled me out of a deep and dreamless sleep. I sat up and listened, but the world was quiet. It was the dark, deep quiet that comes when the world is at rest. I had just gotten comfortable again, the pillows perfectly placed under my head, when a loud noise lifted me out of the bed and into my slippers.

"Mother?" I made my way down the hall to her room, but it was empty. The bedside lamp was on but turned over, lying on the floor, the shade tilted, throwing weird shadows on the walls.

"Mother?" I ran down the hall, unsure of where to go next. In the light cast by the Christmas tree, I caught a glimpse of her. She was outside in the cold, in nothing but a nightgown, her back bent as she reached into the snow over and over again. She had left the front door, so rarely used, wide open, and the cold was drifting in.

“Mother, what are you doing?”

She looked at me, startled. Her eyes were round and watery, her skin pink from the cold. She had nothing on her hands or feet to protect her from the winter air.

“Oh Norma, good. Help me find it.” She bent down again, throwing handfuls of snow into the air.

“It’s freezing and you’re in your nightgown. Come inside.” I tried to take her by the shoulders and lead her to the front door, but she pulled away and bent to search the snow.

“I have to find it, or your father will be annoyed with me.”

I stopped as my weight fractured the crust of ice and my slippered feet sunk into the cold snow beneath.

“Find what?”

“My wedding ring. I lost it and I can’t find it, and I know it’s out here somewhere. The last time I saw it, I was planting the rhododendrons. He’ll be home soon, and I don’t want him to think I’m absent-minded.” She turned from me and headed deeper into the front yard. I stood dumb as the sound of frozen snow snapped and cracked and echoed in my ears.

“Mother.” I took a deep breath and made my way toward her. “Father died. And you lost your ring thirty years ago. He got you a new one, remember?” I took her hand and showed her the ring, the one she rarely took off, even when she was sleeping, doing dishes or gardening. After losing the first one, she paid special attention, and only took the ring off once a month at the jewellery store to have it cleaned. She wouldn’t leave the store when it was being done, and always waited patiently until the ring was placed back on her finger.

She stared at her hand in the dim light. Both hands were cold and red, stiff from searching. Her bare feet had sunk deep into the snow, and once the panic of searching for the ring was over, I had to help her lift her legs to get indoors. I wondered if she knew that her brain was failing her, taking everything she’d painstakingly built over seven and a half decades, stealing my father from her a second time. If she did know, she didn’t let anyone else into her world of lost memories and confusion until that night.

I walked her to the bathroom and sat her down on the toilet while I ran a bath to warm her. I didn’t know if I was supposed to scold or comfort, to hold her hand while she tried to remember, or chide her for being so foolish.

Instead, I helped her undress and nearly cried when she moved her arms up to her chest to hide herself, her face falling in a state of embarrassment. I realized once again that I loved her, and simply being the dutiful daughter disrespected the life she had given me.

"Mother, give me your hand. I'll help you into the bath." She gingerly accepted my help, and I eased her into the lukewarm water. "I'm going to go make us some tea. You just sit here and relax, okay?" I took her chin in my hand and turned her gaze away from the dripping faucet. "Okay?"

"Yes. I'll stay here." Her voice was barely a whisper and she sounded so small. I wanted to crawl into the bath, gather her into my arms and warm her myself. I wanted to hold her hands in mine until the proper colour returned. Instead, I made tea, with extra milk and sugar. I sat on the toilet as she hummed Christmas songs and sipped. I reached over to turn on the tap and warm the water when I saw her flesh pimple and her body shiver. Her hands and feet turned pink and then white, and I asked her to wiggle her toes and she did. She finished her tea and I helped her dry off and got her into a fresh nightgown and back into bed.

That night, I slept in the same bed as my mother, curled up in the spot long occupied by my father. I smelled the soap, and I remembered the arm slung across me, her snores soft, her words quiet and kind when I was small. I remembered her swaying me, cooing, "It was nothing but a dream. Mother is here now." I felt an intense love for my mother that night. Something that I am trying my hardest to recapture now.

For someone who carries little affinity for religion, I seem to be burdened with an inordinate amount of guilt. I sublet my apartment and moved back into my childhood home, the one thing I'd promised myself that I'd never do. As I carried the last suitcase from the car, I felt a heaviness settle over me. It dragged my shoulders down, bent my back and pushed the air out of my lungs.

"Misery comes in threes," Mother used to say, counting unfortunate events on her fingers and announcing that the world had righted itself when the third event was over and done with. A child gone missing, a robbery at the local legion, the death of the neighbour's cat—all held the same status to her, each one a prong of the misery trident. When Alice passed away in her sleep shortly after Mother's diagnosis, I counted on my fingers: two. I dreaded what three might bring.

Alice had simply gone to sleep, and while she was resting, the blood in her brain overflowed its banks and took her away. An aneurysm, Aunt June said between sobs. So, I bundled Mother into the car and set out for Boston. I loved Alice, more than I understood before that phone call. She had been my saving grace, always on the other end of the phone when I needed her. She was Aunt June's tether to the world, and I wondered what Aunt June was going to do now. I prayed she wouldn't come unravelled and leave me, too. I wouldn't allow her to be the third prong.

The funeral was small and sweet. A few family members attended, but most of the mourners were long-time friends of Alice and Aunt June. After the funeral, everyone was invited to a karaoke bar, a place where Alice and Aunt June used to spend time. I couldn't imagine it and was annoyed at Aunt June for hiding this side of herself. She had always been fun, but not drunk-karaoke fun. I don't like learning things about the people I love after they're gone, but that seems to be the way of it. We ate fried food, drank beer and talked about Alice.

"I've known her so long that I don't remember a time when I didn't know her," a tall woman named Candice said as she wiped a tear from her cheek. Aunt June gave her a hug.

"I met her when I first got to Boston. We were in the same English class at university," Aunt June said, her voice wobbly. "The rest, as they say, is herstory." The others laughed quietly. "Well, let's not mope—she would be annoyed. Alice never got angry, but she would be annoyed with us if she could see us like this. Let's sing!"

Aunt June headed to the stage and grabbed a microphone. Someone unseen turned on the stage lights, casting her in neon pink. A moment later, Aunt June was swaying and singing "In the Blue of Evening." Aunt June's voice cracked near the end of the song, and everyone clapped. Mother huffed in her seat, clutching a whiskey.

"That was playing the first time she and I got a beer together. We always sang that one." Aunt June stood alone in the pink light until Leonard took her hand and helped her down from the stage before taking the microphone himself.

"For Alice. She always understood my predicament." Leonard held up his drink before launching into an enthusiastic and off-key rendition of "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," and everyone laughed. It was nice to see them

smiling, singing along, raising their glasses into the air for a clink. “To Alice.”

So many people sang so many songs, each one prefaced by a memory of Alice. I learned more about Alice and Aunt June in an hour than I had in the last four decades.

Mother, on the other hand, sat in a corner booth, slouched down, both hands wrapped around her glass, eyeing everyone. When it came, it was so sudden I didn’t really have a chance to react, to try to stop her outburst.

“She was a freak, you know!” Mother hollered from the booth, slamming her drink on the table and trying to stand. “I don’t know why I’m here. I know that woman.” She pointed to the large cardboard photo of Alice, which had rested beside the urn at the funeral. “You’re a freak, too, you know. She took you from me and made you a freak,” she yelled at Aunt June. She tried to step out from the booth but caught one leg behind the other. As she fell to the floor, she hurled obscenities, words I didn’t think my mother knew. The room went quiet except for the hum and whiz of the karaoke machine and Mother’s voice, cursing and slurring. Spittle gathered in the corner of her mouth as she lay on her stomach on the sticky floor. I rushed over, took her under the arms, lifted her up and herded her out the door as she yelled the entire time. I turned back to see Aunt June in tears, one of her friends holding her hand and another with an arm wrapped around her shoulders. There was a look of betrayal on her face. She’d kept my mother’s secret, and my mother had repaid her in the most brutal way.

Mother fought me all the way to the emergency room and slapped a nurse who was trying to help her. I wanted to be angry and tell her to behave, but instead I helped to hold her down while a different nurse gave her something to calm her. She had cut her arm in the fall and bruised the right side of her face. Her eye was bloodshot. The nurse bandaged her up, and an orderly helped me get her to the car. I put my jacket against the window and laid her head there so she could rest.

On Sunday morning a week later, I dropped Mother at church, where there were people I could trust to keep her safe and calm. Then I visited Shady Oaks retirement home, a benign name for what was essentially a prison for the dying. I pressed the little rubber button and a horrible buzzing echoed down the hall. Behind the thick glass doors, a nurse peeked around the edge of her desk and, with the same buzz and a click of metal locks, she

let me inside. The fluorescent lighting was dim, and the air was pungent with the smell of urine and disinfectant. The hallway was painted yellow. Old watercolours hung on the wall, their edges curled and sticking out from the corners of the frames. My shoes squeaked on the cold linoleum. I can only assume that the decor didn't concern the owners since the tenants wouldn't remember it from one day to the next. The place reeked of sadness, and it only got worse the further down the hall I walked. The first person I saw was an old man, slumped over in a wheelchair, asleep or unconscious, his arms strapped to his chair. I stopped and stared.

"It's a safety precaution. Ernest hits people. Don't worry, we have the family's consent, and they are soft cuffs," a nurse said to me. I almost turned to leave, but she took me by the hand. "I know how difficult this is, but we value our clients and their well-being. I promise."

It was hard to believe her, standing there with the old man snoring and gasping in equal measure. I could hear a woman singing old folk songs from somewhere down the hall. But I stayed and I listened. And it broke my heart.

"AUNT JUNE, I don't know what to do." I was crying into the phone, a tissue held to my nose.

"Norma, listen to me. They can take care of her. It's what you have to do."

"But she made me promise." I sniffed and put the phone on the table to blow my nose. "God, I wish I could talk to Alice."

"Me too, me too."

Years before, the day after her diagnosis, when she finally came out of her room, my mother sat across from me at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in her hands and a frown on her face. "Promise you won't put me in one of those places where they make you wear diapers and lock you inside." There was genuine fear in the waver of her voice. "They leave you there to sit in your own filth." She stopped to compose herself and took a sip of coffee. "You'll forget me if I'm in one of those places."

I reached across the table and took her hand, and I promised.

"Norma, honey, I don't mean to sound cruel, but she's not going to remember," Aunt June said. "She has trouble remembering that your father

is dead. And I love my sister, God knows I do, but she always was a bit selfish. To make you promise something like that? Just selfish. You need to live your life, too."

The day I dropped my mother off, Janet, my friend from so long ago, met us at the door of Shady Oaks. She took me into a hug, squeezing the life and the tears out of me. Mom was having a good day, and she cried when I left.

"Norma, sweetheart, where are you going? Wait for me." She was already in her slippers and a cardigan. Her clothes were put away and her pictures were placed on the little dresser.

"Mom, I'm going home now. You're staying here, remember?" My heart was racing, beating loudly in my ears.

"Yes, right. I remember. I'm staying here to relax, and you'll be back to get me tomorrow. Yes, I remember now."

"No, Mother. You live here now."

Janet came in with some tea and cookies and set them on the little table beside her chair. Mother laughed, a small, uncomfortable laugh. "Norma, why would I live here when I have a perfectly good house to live in?"

"Mother, we talked about this. It's not safe for you to live there anymore."

She looked at the tea and followed the line of steam upward until she was looking at me. Her mouth turned down, her eyes glistened, and she nodded slowly.

"Okay, then, Norma. Okay, then." She took a sip of tea and pretended we couldn't see her cry.

I had to get out of there.

"I'll be back to visit all the time. They are going to take great care of you. I'll bring Aunt June by to visit, I promise," I babbled in my failed attempt to keep my tears at bay. I placed a kiss on her forehead, turned and left. I left her sitting in a chair beside her bed, her tea still warm, the lap quilt she'd made as part of her church group draped across her, and a rolled-up towel on her lap, something meant to occupy her hands.

The metal locks clicked, the buzzer echoed, and I left Mother. I sat in my car crying until my eyes burned.

THE HALLWAY FILLED with the voice of an old lady singing "It's a Long Way to Tipperary." She sat in one of the chairs in the hall; people strolling past her occasionally reached out to hold her thin, cold hand. I took it for just a second. Mother's room was at the end of the hall, and I hurried my steps. I'd been visiting regularly, but the day before, I'd gotten a call. My mother, the quietest and most solemn person I'd ever known had started screaming, gibberish mostly, laced with profanity. And she was getting violent. She was remembering less and becoming more scared of the strangeness around her. The day before, she'd thought she was a child and the nurses were kidnapping her. She fought them. When I quietly entered her room, she was sleeping. Her frail arms, outside the blanket, were black and blue where the nurses had had to restrain her. I sat at the edge of the narrow bed and traced the bruises with my fingers. The skin was soft and papery. She woke up and looked at me, sadness in her tiny eyes. She tried to sit up, but I helped her back down to her pillow.

"I am . . . there's a . . . My daughter, Norma, would know . . . I can't think clearly, they put something in the Jell-O." She was trying to find the words, but they seemed locked up somewhere. A few snuck out but never the right ones. She started to cry.

"They hit me on the head, you know. They hit me on the head and took my words. They hit me and took my words and my memories." She rolled over and turned her head to the wall. And for the third time in my life, I crawled in bed with my mother, snuggling my head into her neck, my breathing matching hers, our sobbing synchronized.

"Shhh, it's just a dream. I'm here, Mother. It was just a dream."

Before she fell into sleep and I untangled myself, she whispered, "You make sure to tell Norma what they did to me. She'll take care of me." In a frame next to the bed was a picture of me when I was eight. There was also one of her and Father on their wedding day. It was black and white, but I knew the blue of the dress, the tiny sequins sewn into the bottom hem in the shape of bluebells. I'd seen the dress hanging in the closet my whole life. No one had ever worn it. I tried to wear it for my own wedding, but she wouldn't have it. I had to have a new dress; I had to have the best. I sat on the edge of her bed, watching her shoulders move up and down with the rhythm of her sleep. I kissed her on the top of her head where her hair had thinned so much you could see the pink of her skull, and I left her.

I don’t cry anymore for my parents. I miss them, yes, but I think that as the ones we love get older, we just start to separate from them, like oil from water, a line separating the living and the dying, the living carelessly gathering at the top. When Father died, the grief was so close to the surface. I wasn’t prepared. There was no time to get used to a world without him. After he and Alice died, our already small family was reduced to three. Then my mother began to slowly disappear. Aunt June and I were quickly becoming a family of two.

It was a Sunday in May, almost five months after Alice’s funeral, and Aunt June was coming to visit my mother. She hadn’t seen her there yet. I think she had a lot of forgiving to do. But after selling her apartment building to Leonard for a dollar and moving into the brownstone Alice left her in the will, she finally felt she had the emotional strength to visit. I had always envied their sibling love, the way they could shout at each other and say hurtful things but show up at the next birthday as though nothing had happened. I always felt that I had missed out on the true, unfiltered, unconditional love of a sibling.

I picked up Aunt June at the station at 10:30 a.m. As she stepped down from the train, she swiped away the offered hand of a young man. Despite her eighty-two years, she still had an energy about her. Even in grief, she was a comfort. As we pulled into the parking lot of the home, I tried to explain to her what to expect, but she patted my hand and quieted me.

“It’s okay. I’m an old lady. I know how these things go.”

Mother wasn’t sad that day. She wasn’t happy either. She was just there, her gaze falling on something over my shoulder. Aunt June tried to talk to her, to share a memory, but Mother looked at her blankly and smiled.

I got up to get us coffee, and as I was returning to the room, I overheard my mother.

“June, do you remember when we got her? She was so small and quiet.” Mother rolled her head on the back of the chair to face Aunt June, whose face went as white as a ghost’s.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about, Lenore. Have you been dreaming again?”

Anything uncomfortable in this family was always the result of a dream. I took a step back, out of sight.

“Oh June, you remember. She was just tiny and sweet. She didn’t even cry when I put her in the back seat.”

I heard Aunt June cough. I walked in and handed over the hot coffee.

“Aunt June, what’s she talking about?”

She stood, her back to me, and said nothing for far too long.

“Aunt June?”

“Oh, you know how their minds work. She’s just confused. I’m going to grab a Popsicle from the little fridge. Lenore, do you want a Popsicle?”

Mother nodded, and Aunt June moved past me and out the door. Mother looked at me and smiled.

“You look just like my Norma. She’s my daughter. She never comes to visit me anymore.” A tear slipped down the dried river of wrinkles.

“Mother, it’s me, Norma. I’m here.” I sat my coffee on the small table beside her and took her hand, but she’d laid her head back again and closed her eyes. Aunt June hadn’t returned, so I let go, gathered my stuff and left. It was best to leave when she was asleep.

I found Aunt June sitting at a picnic table outside, sucking on an orange Popsicle, her coffee nowhere to be seen. The heat took my breath away when the automatic doors opened. I sat on the other side of the picnic table, and she handed me the other half of the Popsicle meant for my mother. I took it. It was sweet and already starting to melt.

“Damn your mother.”

I didn’t say a thing as we both waited for her to find the words she was looking for. “Damn her. Leaving me to do this. And damn your father, too. He was always far too lenient with her. He gave in to her every single time. Every single goddamn time.” She looked over my shoulder at the empty fields in the distance. “I kinda hoped I would die before I had to tell you this.”

“I’m adopted.”

She looked at me, surprise on her face.

“Don’t worry, Aunt June. I figured it out a long time ago. Their earlobes were attached to their heads, and mine aren’t. And there is no Italian relative.” I reached up and pulled on my ear, taking another lick of the Popsicle.

“Adopted?” she said. “You knew they weren’t your parents?”

“Yup.”

“You seem very calm about it.”

“I’ve known for decades, Aunt June. I’ve had time to adjust.” I winked at her, but she didn’t smile.

“And you’ve never wanted to find your parents?”

“No. I figure they gave me up. Probably best to let the past stay in the past. And Mother and Father were good to me. For the most part.” I’d come to a comfortable understanding of my parents since my father’s death and my mother’s disease. They’d been so careful with me, always worried. They’d walked around like the ice under their feet was cracking and splitting. Their emotional distance came from fear, fear of losing me. I knew this now.

“Well, here’s the thing.” Aunt June played with the empty Popsicle stick, shoving it between the wooden slats of the picnic table over and over again. “You weren’t really adopted per se.”

I stayed quiet. The sun seemed to get hotter. Absolutely nothing could have prepared me for what came next.

“Your mother and father had had a fight, and she’d taken the car for a drive to clear her head. You need to understand that your mother had always wanted to be a mother and the miscarriages had taken their toll. It was hard on both your parents.”

She paused.

“She was driving through the back roads, crying. She wasn’t in her right mind. And she saw you, sitting on a rock all by yourself, eating a sandwich.”

She finally looked me in the eye.

“What do you mean, she saw me?”

“She saw you on your own, and in her mind—remember, she was grieving another lost baby—in her mind, you’d been abandoned. So, she pulled over and offered you a piece of gum and the shade of the back seat, to get out of the sun. You were so quiet and trusting.”

My heart raced, and a lump formed in my throat. Anger and confusion knotted into a ball in my stomach. My mouth went dry.

“Are you telling me that my mother kidnapped me?”

She was quiet.

“Aunt June, for fuck’s sake, talk.”

I don’t anger easily, and I don’t swear often, and Aunt June jumped at my abruptness. She didn’t say anything; she just nodded her head and reached across the table to take my hands. I pulled them away.

“Goddamn your mother, leaving me with this.”

I looked at her across the table.

“I don’t even know what to say.” I swung my legs out from under the picnic table. Both legs shook as I placed my feet on the ground. I walked unsteadily to the car and waited for Aunt June, my hands so tight on the steering wheel that my shoulders began to ache. On the drive to the train station, Aunt June tried to talk, tried to explain, tried to defend herself, my parents.

“You’d already been with them a month when I found out. It was too late then to do anything,” she tried to explain. “At least that’s what I told myself. Of course, I tried to talk to her, but she wouldn’t listen. She already loved you so much, and I know she had a weird way of showing it.”

“And Father. He just let her keep me like a found kitten? He was a judge, Aunt June.”

“Yes, and that was convenient. He had a birth certificate drawn up for you, and no one was the wiser. They moved one town over, where no one knew them. Now, I’m not sure what he did when she brought you home, but by the time I got involved, he was resigned to it, I guess. You need to understand how much she loved you.”

I ignored her until she stopped trying to explain. She turned on the radio, but I turned it off. I didn’t get out of the car to hug her; I just dropped her there at the curb outside the station and drove away, watching her wave goodbye in the rear-view mirror. I wasn’t ready for details. I needed time to let the secret sink in.

I stopped and bought a bottle of red wine. An expensive bottle. A bottle befitting the news that my entire life had been based on a crime. I used a coffee mug to drink it. The wineglasses were dusty and in need of washing. It felt warm and burned going down, but there was something therapeutic about the act. I sat at the table in the small kitchen, picking at the threads of an old tablecloth my mother had made years ago, once white, now yellowed with age. I sat and drank and pulled at the loose threads, until I found one that gave way and unravelled the whole thing, watching as the thread piled up on the floor, letting the truth of it all sink in and swallow me whole.

I thought of my decisions. My decision to make teaching my career, my decision to leave motherhood to those better equipped, to sacrifice Mark for my own sanity. And I thought they were wise and carefully considered. In my wildest dreams, I could not fathom making a split-second decision to steal a child. The deception was even greater because there were people who knew, who could have stopped it, could have rectified it, and they didn't. They chose to stay quiet and, in doing so, created a home life so heavy it almost crushed me. And I wanted to hate them, I wanted to rage against them, but I couldn't. The rage wouldn't come. Instead, it turned itself into sadness, into tears. Alice once said that anger and sadness are just two different sides of the same coin. Every time I started to feel angry, the coin flipped, and I cried.

I didn't visit my mother again that week or the next. I needed some time to lapse between the truth and her. So, I filled my days with cleaning the house and running to the grocery store to secure boxes to pack away our shared lives. I wrapped my grandmother's china in old newspapers and placed each dish carefully in the box.

"But Norma," she would say, "generations of our family have eaten off those plates." And I suppose, to Mother, that justified their importance, their sacredness. I found it amusing what my mother considered sacred, now that I knew. I packed up my father's suits, still hanging in the closet, dust piled on the shoulders of his jackets. I gave all her craft supplies to the ladies from the church, donated the everyday dishes and furniture to the Salvation Army, and piled the photos on the floor. As I looked through the pictures of me as a child, I knew I would have to call my aunt. I knew I needed to see what was in the box she took from my mother's closet before she told me the truth.

I turned on the radio to drown out the silence and quiet the ghosts. I wandered aimlessly from room to room. I walked the edges and looked into empty closets. I dragged my finger along the windowpanes and brought up dust, a sure sign that my mother hadn't lived in her own home in a while. I hummed with the music and stood at the sink, staring out the window. I wondered how I could have been so naive, how I didn't figure it out.

My diary, I thought.

I hadn't touched anything in my own room. Mother had kept it the same as the day I left, nothing out of place. Only the Noah's ark lamp that I had

taken with me was missing. Old textbooks wrapped in brown paper sat on the bookshelf by the window, dusty and faded where the light rested during the day. I took one down, the one labelled *Introduction to Chemistry*, and opened it. I knew Mother would never think to take down a science text for her own reading, so when I was young, I covered a notebook with brown paper and doodled on the cover. It creaked when I opened it, and there on the first page, in my loopy grade-school writing, was the title: "Norma's Personal Thoughts—Please don't read!" Each *o* had been made into a little heart. I smiled thinking about myself back then. I ran my hand over the thin paper as I sat down on the bed, the old springs welcoming me back.

There on the pages, written decades ago, were the dreams that I now knew were memories of a life stolen from me. I slid off the bed and onto the floor as the room filled with the scent of potatoes cooking and the campfire. I used my finger to outline the figure of a doll, the eyes far apart and made of buttons. I read stories I had written about Ruthie, and her brother Joe. My grief was hard and fierce. Sounds came from my mouth that I could never have imagined, wild and broken. The heaviness of that house, of my mother's love and my father's distance, pushed me to the floor. The notebook fell from my hands as I gasped for air, the dust of the carpet scratching my throat. The enormity of my mother's lie was coming into focus. I don't know how long I stayed on that floor, the same one where Mother used to comfort me when I had my dreams. But when I woke, the sun was sneaking in through the blinds, tracing thin lines of light on the floor. I watched as the sun pushed a line over the top of my hand, the skin starting to wrinkle and colour with age, and I thought to myself, *I wonder who I am. I wonder if they miss me*.

THIRTEEN

JOE

I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT GIVING UP THE MEDICATIONS. They aren't going to save me anyway, and they make my thoughts cloudy, my memories more difficult to retrieve. They keep the pain at bay, that's true, but I'm still confined to this bed. Nothing destroys a man's pride more than having his sister help him with his bed pan, or his brother bathe his disease-ridden body. I won't let Leah help. A daughter should not see her father this way. I'm only holding on to this life to make up for lost time. If Leah wasn't here, maybe I'd wander off into the woods like cats do, to die alone, to give the family distance from the deed.

I'm going to miss her when I'm gone. Seems like a foolish thing to say since I'll be the one who's dead, but I will. I don't know if she'll miss me—she barely knows me. She only knows that I beat her mom and left before she was born. That's a terrible legacy to leave a daughter. It seems unfair that time is almost up for me just when I'm finding true happiness again, but time is never a friend to the sick or the old.

Frankie, in a rare moment of lucidity, told me decades ago that I needed to enjoy my youth, because once you become a man, time speeds up. He claimed he went to bed one night a spry eighteen-year-old and woke up as a forty-eight-year-old drunk. Now I consider his words gospel. I stayed west of the Rockies for far too long. I worked, hiked, moved, sent money home when I could. I thought I was content, but I don't know if I even understand what that means.

I WAS HIKING back from a week-long camping trip in the mountains. I had made my way down the narrow, rutted trail until it met up with a tidy line of packed earth that belonged to a national park. The sun was starting to sink when I looked at my watch and realized that the park would be closing soon and the trails would be empty. I hurried my pace and was about ten minutes from the trailhead, where I'd parked my old truck. Then I saw something, a tiny plastic hand sticking out of the brush. As I bent down to pick it up, my foot slid on some dewy moss and I caught my ankle in a small trench just off the trail. My backpack slid off to the side, unbalancing me. The pointed needles scratched my face as my head just missed the trunk of a Douglas fir. The pain in my ankle was immediate. I struggled to get the backpack off and roll onto my back, the small plastic doll clutched in my hand.

My ankle throbbing, I pulled myself up and sat against the tree that I had just missed moments before. The trail was only feet away, but the dark was settling in. The thick summer foliage only helped to darken the forest floor. The ankle wasn't broken, thanks to the tall hiking boots tied tight, but I knew better than to take the boot off. The swelling would stay down so long as the boot stayed on. I looked at the doll in my hands.

"No offence, but I don't think you are worth this much trouble." I sat it down beside the backpack and took out my canteen, which I'd filled before starting back down the mountain. If I ended up there for the night, I'd be fine. I still had water and a few chocolate bars. It was chilly when the sun went down, but I had my sleeping bag. When I'd been there for over an hour and had to light my kerosene lantern to see the trail, I knew I was staying one more night in the woods.

I sipped my water with a bit of whiskey and watched the stars appear through an opening in the branches, just enough space to watch the stars float across the sky.

"Reminds me of Maine." My ankle was propped up on a stone and the doll was still lying on the ground beside my backpack. I set her against my knees, facing me. She had blue eyes far too big to be realistic. Her brown hair was woven into two braids, and the lips were painted light pink. She wore a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, doll-sized.

"The stars, they remind me of Maine," I repeated. "Jesus, Joe, you're talking to a doll." I shook my head and put her face-down on the ground

beside me again, but it didn't last long. Another sip of drink and I put her back against my knees.

"Someone is probably missing you." I picked off a piece of dried moss from one of her braids. "I have a girl, you know. She might like a doll like you. Not that I know what she'd like. I don't even know what she looks like, let alone what toys she likes. She might be out of the doll phase by now. Maybe, I guess. I don't know when girls stop playing with dolls."

In the light cast by my little lantern, the doll appeared annoyed. Maybe she was judging me, this silly doll who had no business being out in the woods. Somewhere off in the distance, an animal howled, and I remembered a moon, a bright moon with a blue halo.

"I don't know if Leah likes dolls or if she ever did, but my sister Ruthie had one she loved. She used to travel with it tucked under her arm. My mother made it with old socks and a few buttons. I don't think Ruthie would like you as much. You're all plastic and hard. Her doll was soft and easy to love."

I fell asleep holding that doll on my lap, the kerosene lantern empty and dark, the throbbing in my ankle starting to dull as the stars crossed over us above.

I had just started to wake when I heard the voices of early morning hikers. I called out and they found me easily. One of them drove me to the emergency room while the other gathered my things and followed in my truck. Torn ligaments. A tight wrap and some painkillers and I was on my way again, grateful that it was my left leg and I could still drive. The two men who'd brought me to the hospital had waited for me. I thanked them and offered to buy breakfast, but they declined, telling me they were just happy I was okay. They gave me my keys and disappeared out the hospital doors.

I sat in the cab of the truck and tried to get my thoughts together. The painkillers were making me a little woozy and nostalgic for a life I never had. I missed Leah, a girl I'd fathered but never met. I missed Ruthie, a sister I'd lost and never found. I cursed the doll sitting on the seat beside me.

I headed out of town, back to the national park, and dropped the doll off at the lost and found before starting out again. When I got to the turnoff where the rural road met the highway and I should have gone west, I didn't.

I turned toward the child I had abandoned, back to the parents I had left to grieve not two but three missing children.

I was going east. I was going home. I could be a father to Leah, a son to my parents, maybe even a friend to Cora. I expected nothing from her, no sympathy, no love. I'd done the unforgivable to her. I'd drawn blood and left her alone to raise a child I had helped create. The longer I drove, as flat land gave way to rocky and trees started to populate the landscape, the more I thought about how much of a disappointment I had been. As I circled around cities, the more I thought about my mistakes, the less comfortable I was with my decision to turn east. I made it to New Brunswick before fear replaced the confidence I'd had when I left that doll in a box in the Rockies. At the border crossing at Madawaska, I turned and headed into Maine.

If it was possible, Route 9 looked worse than it did when I was a boy. The potholes were bigger, the houses even more decrepit, but the fields looked the same, and those alders grew out of the ditch as they always had. I felt a little annoyed that the place just kept on going. The sun was high when I pulled over and got out of the truck. The cicadas were chirping away, as if I couldn't tell on my own that the sun was blisteringly hot. I sat down on that rock and closed my eyes. Behind my eyelids, I watched my six-year-old self throw bread to the crows and stuff the bologna in my mouth, waving to Ruthie as I wandered away. I can't be sure how long I sat like that, but the sweat was starting to soak through my shirt.

"Hey, you okay, man?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin. "Yeah, I'm fine. You scared the shit outta me, though." I used the back of my hand to wipe the sweat off my forehead.

"Sorry. You were all bent over—I thought maybe you were having a heart attack."

"No, nothing like that. Just remembering, that's all. And I got a bit of a banged-up ankle. Nothing so serious." I stood up and extended my hand.

"Well, sure looked like a heart attack from this angle." He had a strong handshake.

"You work around here?"

"Yup, my granddad owned these fields, then my dad, but they're both gone now. Heart attacks." He pointed at me. "So, you can see why I was a bit concerned."

“Your name Ellis?” I asked.

“It sure is. We know one another?”

“No. I knew your father, I suppose. I worked these fields when I was just young.”

I turned my head to look down to where the cabin should have been, but the bushes had grown up around it and the road was nothing more than two ruts in the dirt, almost gone to time and overgrowth.

“So, where’d the cabin go? Where’s the pickers?”

“The pickers live in the bunkhouse down the road. Not sure what you mean about the cabin. Unless you’re talking about the pile of wood and stone at the end of this road.” He walked closer and put his hand on my shoulder. “You sure you’re okay? You look pale and red-faced all at the same time.”

“Just the heat.” I sat back down on the rock.

“You sure I can’t do anything for you?”

“You could give me a job.” I don’t know why I said it. I don’t know why I would want it. There was so much misery associated with those fields.

“What about that ankle?”

“Won’t slow me down. I give you my word.”

“I do have some work raking berries, cutting lines. Just had one of the Mexicans quit to go back for his mother’s funeral. Can’t say how long I’ll need ya, but if you’re up for it.”

“Sure am.”

He motioned for me to follow, and I got up from the rock and into my truck. The bunkhouse was a long, narrow building with bunks that lined one side and closets on the other. The distance between the end of the bunks and the closets was just enough to let a man pass through. The blankets were all the same dull grey. The occasional bed held a handmade quilt that someone probably brought from home to keep them from getting heartsick.

“There are four toilets and four showers.” Ellis pointed to two doors at the end of the bunkhouse. “You gotta share them with twenty-four other men. It’s best if you’re an early riser, if you want hot water.”

It smelled of working men and earth. He showed me to a bunk just outside the bathroom door. I laid my backpack on the bed, all my worldly possessions tucked away in the dark of the canvas bag.

“You start tomorrow. Breakfast is at sun-up.” He turned and left me alone. I laid my back, tired of driving, down on that mattress, crossed my feet, put my hands on my chest and fell into sleep.

That night, under the roof of the dining tent, an older man waved me over. It took me a minute to recognize him, but he knew me right away. Juan, the same man who had taken over our fields when we left all those years ago, was still there. He was a foreman now and the only person to remember me. I sat and he watched me eat. It was unnerving, and just as I was about to say something, he whispered, “I remember your brother.” That was the first and last time he mentioned it, and I was grateful for his understanding.

The next morning, the newest Ellis, as if testing me, put me in a row all on my own. I picked those berries with a fierce intensity, determined to prove that I was every bit the picker these new folks were. Beside me, a man named Diego from a small town in southern Mexico lagged behind a few feet. At lunch, we sat at the edge of a row with a ham sandwich with mustard, a bottle of water and an apple courtesy of the company. In his fractured English, he told me that this field was for the Mexicans, and if I wanted, there were a few fields down the road that were still worked by the Indians.

“Nah, I’m good here. I don’t like to see people I might know.”

“You’re a strange man.”

I nodded.

“I love to see my friends.” He shook his head, threw his apple core into the trees and went back to work.

Saturdays were half days, just like they’d been when I was a boy. Since it was early and I had nothing else to do, I went to see what had become of the cabin, that place that held some of my greatest memories. And most of my saddest. The road that was once well used, the one where my father knocked out the tail light of a police car, the one where Mae held Mom and walked her back to the campfire, was overgrown now. New roads, new machines and new workers had taken their place. The dark faces of the Mi’kmaq were replaced by the dark faces of men from southern countries, men who spoke lyrical languages, who sent money home for their families, who stayed to themselves, who worked hard and laughed even harder.

Behind a collection of alders growing wild and abundant sat the cabin. Or at least what was left of it. The two small windows that framed the door were broken, the glass scattered on the floor inside. The right side of the roof had been eaten away—raccoons, I assumed, or maybe rats. The door was hanging on by a single rusted hinge. Inside, the dust had settled thick and grey, and the prints of animals and insects weaved in and around like an odd but beautiful labyrinth. Only the steel springs remained of a mattress leaning against the back wall. The wood stove was about the only thing that looked like it had survived the ravages of time and neglect.

I kicked away the skeleton of a mouse and went to sit on the outside steps, soft with rot. Growth obscured the view of the campfire, and the firepit had been eaten by time and nature. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, the voice of my mother came through, so clear that it scared me up off my ass.

"Get those weeds outta there. Clean this place up. We gotta live here for the next couple a months. Let's make it nice."

When I want to remember the sound of my mother's voice, I can't recall it, but when she wants to be heard, she lets me know. I lifted myself carefully off the rotten steps and started pulling weeds, clearing a little space around the steps. I stood back, admiring the work, the clean patch of earth. A trip to the hardware store was next. I picked up a broom, enough wood to repair the steps, some nails, a hammer, a measuring tape and a handsaw. I loaded the cab of the truck with cleaning supplies, and my wallet was as close to empty as it had been in years.

By the time my belly was good and hungry, the place was clean. The cobwebs, the dust and the bones of mice were gone. I covered the windows with bits of an old tarp I had in the back of the truck and nailed the rest over the hole in the roof. It would do until I could get more wood and some shingles. By the time I joined the others for dinner, I was covered in dust and as hungry as I'd ever been.

For the next few evenings, I stayed out at the cabin, tinkering, repairing, wandering in the woods, which were familiar but different. I returned when most of the men were already asleep.

"Come, sit, have tea." It was a Saturday night and Juan was sitting on the floor with three other men. The bottom bunk acted as a table between them, cards spread out in the middle, and a man snored on the top bunk.

“I’m okay. Going to go to bed,” I said quietly.

“Come, play.” The same way he waved me to eat with him, he waved me to sit with them, to take time to be with other people, to get lost in a game of cards.

I stayed awake until the early hours, until my body protested my seat on the floor and forced me to bed. They were a good bunch of guys, but I wanted to be alone. Alone was where I found my peace, and after years of living in camps, I was determined. A week later, those same men who’d welcomed me into their little community watched and nodded as I took the mattress off my bunk and carried it down the long corridor of beds. I drove it to the cabin and placed it on the side where the roof still held. I fell into a deep sleep, a quiet, dreamless sleep. When the sun dawned the next morning, I was already up, sitting on the steps, catching the light as it filtered through the trees and fell on the ground, setting the day ablaze.

“Mister.”

I was standing in line at the food tent, talking with Juan, when Ellis pulled me aside.

“I saw that you took a mattress from the bunkhouse and haven’t been sleeping there. I don’t want trouble. I need to make sure nothing fishy is going on in my fields.”

“Nothing fishy, I swear it. I just took it to that cabin down the old overgrown road. The one with the big rock at the end.”

“That cabin ain’t safe for living in. I’m gonna have to ask you to bring that mattress back, and if you don’t want to sleep in the bunks, you might not have work here. It’s an insurance thing, you understand.”

“Well, how about I use my own money to fix it up and I’ll sign a waiver or something.”

The other men waiting in line watched to see if I was about to be fired.

“I guess that’s fine. Just know that I won’t be paying you for making any repairs. I’m happy to let the place crumble where it’s at, let nature take care of it. And it ain’t yours either. You know that? It belongs to this company, my company, whether it’s falling down or fixed up.”

“That’s fine with me.”

The supply store along Route 9 was almost unchanged since the time the people behind the counter called me sour. It was still a catch-all store with groceries, tools and hardware, a service station and a diner. My

presence among the tourists stopping for the bathroom and snacks, the locals and the migrant workers went unnoticed. When I was younger, my brown face would have meant eyes on me the entire time. Now, most of the faces were brown and no one seemed to care. Around back, a bar sold bottles of beer and shots of hard liquor. That was new. Juan told me to avoid it. Only the lowest class of folks spent time there.

I bought a pot and stocked up on cans of soup, bread and butter. Enough to get me through to my next paycheque.

"You got any whiskey here?" Something to take the edge off the stiff joints and help me sleep.

"Sorry, we don't carry whiskey."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. We got beer on the shelves over there, and shots of hard stuff at the bar around back. That's it." He was a fat boy with the yellowest hair I'd ever seen. He was sweating through his shirt. He rang me up and handed me my receipt. I went to put it in the bag with the groceries.

"Take a look at that receipt and make sure I got everything right."

"I'm sure you did." I turned to leave.

"You better make sure, just in case."

I took the receipt out of the bag and looked at the items, all of them accounted for in the bag. I turned it over and saw a note in barely legible handwriting: "Out back, blue truck. Tell him Roger said it's okay." I nodded at the yellow-haired boy, put my supplies in the cab of my truck and wandered around back. There, in a blue truck, sat a boy with the same yellow hair but a few years older, an unlit cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. He was sound asleep, his head against the headrest. I tapped on the window, and he jumped about as high as a man can jump inside the cab of a truck. I let out a little chuckle.

"Roger said to see you about something to drink."

He wiped the drool from the corner of his mouth, the cigarette still dangling. He reached around behind the seat, brought out some homemade whiskey and handed it to me. I gave him some cash, he looked at it, nodded, shoved it into his back pocket and laid his head back down on the headrest. The whole transaction took place without another word. I shook my head and walked away.

That night, I had tomato soup with bread and butter and a sip of whiskey, just enough to dull the leftover aches of the accident and the new aches from the field work. I cooked over an open fire in front of the little cabin, where a different fire had burned decades ago. When the sun was low and peeking through the trees, I grabbed the grey, scratchy blanket from the mattress and lay next to the fire. I lay there until the moon moved across the sky and out of sight. I woke sometime in the night to a dead fire and the smooth curve of the Milky Way.

I adjusted well to picking berries again, but as soon as my body decided it was still young enough for the work, the work was over for the season. I helped haul potatoes at the nearby farms and even helped Ellis burn the far fields. I was seven weeks in Maine when I decided I might as well stay. Ellis had no work but told me I could stay in the cabin so long as I didn't make any trouble. I'm not sure what trouble he thought I was going to get into out there all by myself, but I promised nonetheless. I got hired at a dairy farm fifteen minutes away and helped with the milking and the repairs that plague a farm. I had to be on the road before the birds even bothered to start their morning songs. I was home by three and had time to work on the cabin before the sun set. The farm owner let me take scraps of wood and extra nails, and he even gave me a bag of shingles for half price. It saved him from driving back into Bangor to return them. I patched the roof and got myself two small windows, used ones from a yard sale. By Christmas, I had a table and two chairs, a rocking chair to sit by the fire and a steel tub for water. In the summer, it would collect rainwater, but in winter, I put snow in it in the evening and let it melt. By morning, I had enough water to wash my dishes and my body. On weekends, I washed my clothes. The only thing I didn't like was the outhouse in February. It was a cold walk through high snow, so most of the time, I stood in the doorway and pissed off the front steps. No one to see me but the trees.

In the faint light of winter dusk, it's easy to see where age has gotten to you. The skin around my elbows and knees seemed looser somehow, my feet more crooked than they'd been the last time I'd taken a good look at them. In the small mirror I'd bought for shaving, I noticed the wrinkles around my eyes—laugh lines, I'd heard them called, although I don't think I laughed enough to earn them. They crinkled and stretched out from the

corners of my eyes and nearly met my hairline. But I still had a head of thick black hair, the only place age seemed to have left me alone.

That's how I spent the first year in Maine, the first of many. Slowly, the cabin became a home. Once a week, I gathered the supplies I needed and a bottle of that godawful whiskey. I started mixing it with water, which made the burn more tolerable.

"WELL, FUCK ME, if it isn't Joe."

Someone behind me in line at the supply shop tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to see a wizened version of a man I once knew.

"Frankie? You old bastard. How are you still alive?"

He laughed through the two teeth in his mouth, and I could smell the rot in the air between us. "I dunno, Joe, but I am. The Lord must keep me around to amuse himself." He stepped forward and threw his arms around my midsection in an awkward hug. "And look at you, all old and shit."

"This coming from a man with no teeth and who, by my estimation, has shrunk about a foot and a half."

"It's my back from all those years in the berry fields. I'm all crumpled up."

There were so many things that neither of us knew how to say. There could have been apologies, there could have been jokes, and there could have been anger. With so much resting on that silence and the unknowns of what would happen if we broke it, I turned back toward the counter and paid for my groceries. I was leaving when I heard the teller.

"Sorry, Frankie, you ain't got enough for smokes. Either that sandwich or the smokes." Frankie stood there looking pathetic, a pile of change in his weathered hand.

"Just get out of the line, you old drunk." A man about my age was waiting behind him, milk and a packet of beef jerky in his hands.

Frankie turned to look at him.

The man leaned in closer as if Frankie couldn't hear him. "Get. Out. Of. The. Line. Idiot probably don't speak English."

I watched Frankie's thin fingers form a fist, not one that would do any damage, but one that would no doubt end in Frankie bleeding.

“I got it.” I handed the teller the money and left before Frankie could make a show of it.

“Wait there, Joe, wait a minute. At least let me thank you.”

“No worries, Frankie.”

“Now let me buy you a drink, Joe. Just let me do that.”

“And how are you gonna buy me a drink if you can’t even buy yourself a sandwich?”

“I got a tab. Just paid it off. That’s how come I got no money for the sandwich, but I got a tab at the bar. Come on now, Joe, for old times’ sake.”

“We never drank together, Frankie. The last time I saw you drunk, I lost my brother.”

Frankie whistled out of the corner of his mouth, a weak whistle, mostly spit and air. “That hurt, Joe. You know I’m sorry for that. You know it.”

“Fine, Frankie. Let’s get a drink.”

I’d never been to the bar. I preferred the quiet of the cabin, the warmth from the wood stove, the books I’d been getting from the supply store, ones left at the nearby hotel and dropped off by people thinking they were being charitable to the migrant workers, helping them with their English.

The bar was about as nasty as you’d think a bar behind an old supply store in the middle of nowhere would be. The ceilings were low and the floor was sticky. It smelled of stale beer, cigarette smoke and the sweat of men with no women. The smoke was so thick my eyes began to water the moment we stepped inside.

The bar itself was made of old two-by-fours, unsanded. I was careful not to run my hand along the edge, in case of a splinter. The stools were mismatched, old, torn vinyl wrapped over steel. The whole place screamed defeat. The radio played country classics on repeat. Frankie and I took a place at the bar. He hopped up on the only remaining stool, leaving me to stand beside him. He ordered us each a beer and put it on his tab.

“Been ten minutes since you paid the last one, Frankie. Sure you want to start so soon?”

“Sure do. It’s a special occasion. This here is Joe. He used to pick these fields with me back when we was younger.”

“You were young, Frankie? I figured you came out of your mother looking like that.” Everyone at the bar laughed.

Frankie smiled and snapped his fingers. “You’re a funny fella. Now just get my friend and me a drink.”

The beer tasted hopeless and flat. I didn’t drink much anymore and almost never in public. I preferred my whiskey solo. On the rare occasion when I drank too much, I hurt only myself. It didn’t take Frankie long to down his first drink. I wasn’t even halfway through the first when he was looking at the bottom of his second glass.

“Jesus, Frankie, slow down.”

“No need, my friend, I’m pickled, eh. Don’t have no effect on me at all anymore.” He was already slurring. “I’m so sorry about Charlie, you know I am, don’t ya, Joe? You know I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago, Frankie.” I took a drink of my beer, still my first and getting warm.

The bar had no windows except for a narrow one along the back wall. It was covered in cooking grease so thick that the sun couldn’t even push its light through. When the door opened, the sunlight was blinding.

Frankie rambled on about me coming to work in the Indian fields instead of the Mexican ones. The door opened, and a black silhouette of a big man entered. He ducked low to avoid hitting his head on the top jamb, and his bulk took up the entire doorway. I was raising my hand to order one more beer before I headed back to the cabin, looking forward to being alone again, when he walked by. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I looked at him, those beefy cheeks and fat lips, his hair still long and stringy, just like it had been all those years ago when his features had been hidden in the shadows of a carnival tent. Archie’s younger brother, the one who’d held my brother while Archie beat the life out of him, stepped by me on his way to the bathroom.

That rage that I had run from, that emotion I thought I had tamed, reared its head one last time. I felt my mouth go dry and my palms go damp. I felt a heat so intense I was afraid I would catch fire and burn us all down. I looked at Frankie and saw fear cross his face. He reached for me and missed. I’ve heard of blind rage, of being so angry that your memory hides your actions from you. But I wanted to remember this. I wanted to see his face before I smashed my hand into it. I wanted to lie in bed at night and know that I had caused him pain. I wrestle with this now that I’m dying, thinking I should maybe atone for my sins in case there is a God, but I

can't. I don't want to. I'm not saying I'm proud of what I did, but I don't feel shame in it either. The bastard is still walking this earth while I'm about to leave it, and I never killed anyone.

He didn't notice me, not that he would. He probably hadn't thought of me in years if at all, but I would have known him anywhere. He reached the men's room door, but before he could grasp the handle, I tapped him on the shoulder. When he turned, I punched him. There were decades of anger behind that punch, and it landed hard. My arm, strong from years of manual labour, crushed his nose, and for an instant, Cora's face flashed before me. He stood there, hand to his nose, blood leaking from between his fingers, shock in his eyes. I looked down at my hand, a hand that had not been raised in anger in years, and then I punched him again. I heard teeth clatter against the floor and blood ran from his lips. He didn't have time to react before I placed my hands on his shoulders, pulled him toward me and drove my knee between his legs. He groaned and dropped to the ground.

"That's for killing my brother, asshole." I kicked him one last time in the stomach before I felt Frankie's fingers wrap themselves around my arm and pull me toward the exit. The other men, drinks in hand, didn't move, didn't defend him and didn't help him. He lay there cursing me in between groans. I let Frankie lead me through the door and into the sunlight.

"You need to get your ass out of here before he gets off that floor."

Frankie was right. I got in my truck, made sure no one was watching and took off, leaving Frankie in a cloud of dust. I drove all day, down along the coast, waiting until dark to head back to my cabin. When I finally turned off Route 9, I kept my headlights off. I was relieved when I stopped the truck and found myself alone.

I heard later that when he finally got up off the floor and started breathing again, he went into a rage, looking for me, asking who I was, where he could find me. Not one person in that bar told him a thing. He walked out of there bloody and angry, not knowing it was me who beat on him. In some ways, I was happy he didn't know. In others, I wanted him to know that Charlie's death wasn't forgotten, that I knew what he'd done, and that while he got up, unlike my beautiful brother, I got the last word.

I could have walked away that time, but I didn't. I ran the first time and fought the second. It should have been the other way around, but we can't change the past. That was the last fight I ever fought with my fists, and the

last time I ever saw Frankie. Years later, Mae told me that he'd come back home just after that fight. Maybe he was scared that Archie's brother would look for revenge on him for being with me. Apparently, one day not long after returning home, he sat down to a big bowl of beef stew at his sister's table up on the rez and died. Just like that. No fuss, no commotion. Just died. I envy Frankie that ending, that grace.

It seemed remarkable to me that in all my years in Maine, Frankie was the only one from the camps I ever ran into. And what was even more remarkable was he didn't tell anyone I was there. At least that's what I thought.

I never stepped foot in that bar after that day. It didn't hold anything for me. I didn't crave friendship or conversation the way some people do. Funny to think about it now, since all I do is talk whenever there is someone around to talk to. I have a desire that most dying people must have, the desire to get every last bit out, every last thank you, every last I'm sorry.

I was in Maine nearly ten years when I came home one evening in midsummer to find a note on my door informing me that my father had died. I could only assume Frankie had told them where I was. I could've gone home, but I didn't. It didn't mean that I didn't grieve him—I did. But I didn't go home. I sent money, and I hoped it would help with the grieving, although I've found that money rarely helps with the things that are the most important.

Money sent and my guilt fresh on the surface, I took a few days off work and returned to the grasslands. I parked alongside the ditch, the dust of a dry summer dirt road billowing behind me, and I admired the little house. With each pilgrimage north of the border, I marvelled at her wildflowers that brought colour to the yellows and browns of the landscape. Black-eyed Susans, lupines, alpine buttercups and wild roses, the same ones that grew along the roads back home.

This time, I was surprised when the front door opened and she stepped out, shielding her eyes from the sun with one hand, the other hand resting on her hip. I waved a small, shy wave, but she didn't wave back. I realized then that I might look quite sinister, a strange man pulled over in a beat-up truck, staring at the house of a woman who lived so far from everyone else. I opened the door and stepped out. She stayed where she was.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I don’t mean to be all creepy. You were kind to me once, and I remember that kindness. I don’t mean any harm.”

“Come closer, then. Closer but not too close.” She stood like a statue, moving only her lips.

I looked both ways on a road where I’d never seen another vehicle and stepped across. I stopped at the end of the driveway.

“A little closer.”

I took a few steps and stopped.

“A little closer.” She took her hand down from her brow and placed it on her other hip. It was the same way Mae did it when she was about to lay into you for doing something she considered stupid. The woman was quiet, and I felt the warmth of embarrassment on my cheeks. I was about to turn around and head back to the truck, put it in drive and get out of there, when she said, “You go around back. There’s a little table. I’ll bring out some water.”

I rounded the corner of the house, weaving my way through knee-high grass and flowers. Out back, she had vegetable gardens green and lush. The entire place seemed like a mirage. A small table made of iron sat just outside a set of sliding doors. Two chairs sat across from each other, waiting for people to sit, to converse. It was one of the most welcoming places I’ve ever been.

The door slid open, and she walked out carrying a jug of water and two glasses. She didn’t say anything, just poured us each a glass and sat down. We both took a drink. I was nervous, in the way a thirteen-year-old boy is nervous when a pretty girl looks at him. I suddenly felt nothing like the mystery man of the Maine woods, who worked his bones to dust and stayed to himself. I felt like a boy, small and waiting.

“I remember you.” She sat back, her glass still in her hand.

“You do?”

“It’s not very often I get strangers out here. Most everyone comes out here is on their way somewhere from somewhere. You were nowhere. And now you’re here again.”

I took a deep breath and started to cough. My eyes watered and she handed me a napkin as she inspected me. When I stopped, short of breath and a little red-faced, she asked me, “You’re not expecting anything from me, are ya?” Her eyebrows arched.

“I’m a married man.”

“I don’t see a ring.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true.”

“Good. A lot of men expect things of me and I’m tired of it.”

We stayed out there, listening to the wind whistle through the grass, watching birds flit in and out. The occasional scent of the wild roses passed on the wind.

“The wild roses remind me of home,” I said.

“Where is home for you?”

“Nova Scotia.”

“Long way from here.”

“Yup.”

“You headed there now or the other direction?”

“Neither. I headed up here to see you.”

It was her turn to stay quiet, to consider the strange man sitting across from her, who had appeared not once but twice out of nowhere to take up her time. She was quiet for so long I thought about getting up and leaving.

“So, what’s at home that’s got you scared to be there?”

“I’m not scared.”

“You know, when you say you’re not scared instead of answering the question, I can tell you’re scared.”

“My family.”

“They do something bad to you?”

“You don’t remember the conversation we had alongside the road that day, just before the skies opened?”

“I think I made more of an impression on you than you made on me. I don’t mean to sound cruel. I remember your face, that long, sad face. Ain’t that enough?”

“I suppose. They didn’t do nothing to me. It’s what I did to them.”

She invited me to stay for supper, chicken stew with gravy and bannock cooked in a frying pan, smothered in butter. The inside of the house was small but bright, lived in and happy. So unlike my cabin back in Maine with its weathered, grey walls and not a picture or a decoration to be found. If I wasn’t going to use something to hunt, cook or clean with, it wasn’t welcome. As I stood at the door, I began to think that my disposition might be a bit sunnier if I decorated like she did. She’d painted every inch of wall

with flowers and trees, insects and animals. With the blue sky reflected on the walls of her house, the outside had come in.

"You do this?"

"Sure did."

"You an artist?"

"Thought about it a few times, but it never comes to nothing." She pointed to the kitchen table, a small, round wooden thing with a pot of flowers in the middle. I sat while she took the stew out of the oven and ladled it into a bowl. When she set it in front of me, I nearly cried. It smelled so warm and savoury. So many memories were wrapped up in the scent of stew. I waited until she was seated.

"Don't stand on ceremony here. Eat up before it gets cold."

It was every bit as delicious as it smelled. In that moment, sitting in the kitchen of a stranger thousands of kilometres from home, I was thrown back to the night of my accident, to the carrots on my plate before I stormed out and changed my own history, before I walked in front of that truck and ended up with a life full of aches and pains. The first time I let the anger win.

We ate in quiet while the sun began to set, throwing light onto the yellow grass and making the world outside the window glow gold. Some of that light came to rest on the floor at my feet, and I marvelled at it while she cleared the dishes from the table. I didn't ask, but she made a pot of tea and set it in front of me.

"So, why me? What did I do, what did I say, to make you sentimental enough to drive all the way here just to look at my house?"

I didn't think I had the answer until it started to come out of my mouth.

"You told me that we aren't sour. We make mistakes, but we aren't any better or any worse than anyone else."

"Well, wasn't I smart." She smiled over the lip of her teacup as she softly blew on the tea.

"I was in a bad place then. Your words made sure I didn't get to a terrible place. I guess I just wanted to thank you."

"Well, you're welcome, I guess. And just so you know, I still believe that."

I helped her wash the dishes and brought some wood in from the pile outdoors for the morning, when she needed to make her coffee and do her

laundry. She still had an outhouse and washed her clothes by hand, hanging them to dry, even in the dead of winter. She told me it had worked since people were put on earth, so she guessed it worked for her. When I was standing at the door, readying to leave, to go somewhere—I wasn't really sure where—she reached up and stroked my face. Her hand was soft and warm, and I leaned into it. She stood on her toes and kissed my other cheek.

"Well, I'd best be going. Thank you for supper."

"Take care. Drive safe and get that cough checked out. And stop thinking that you're the cause of other people's misery. The only misery you're causing is your own."

I turned and nodded. When I got back into the truck and turned it back onto the road, I saw her wave and close the door behind her.

I drove right through to Maine, stopping only to gas up and use the restroom. When I got home, sometime in the middle of the night, I looked at those grey walls, so bare and sad looking. I closed my eyes and saw her house again, so full of colour and joy, and I started to paint. The next evening, under the dull light of a kerosene lamp, I painted ocean waves and apple trees, a small substitute for a place called home.

That summer, after my road trip, I collected seeds and stored them away. The next summer, I grew a garden and it flourished. I don't know how, because I'd never tried growing anything before. But when fall came, I had enough vegetables to last half the winter but no way to keep them. The supply store didn't have jars for canning, so I had to travel into Bangor, and I decided to make a trip of it. I washed my clothes and took myself to the casino hotel. I had a steak dinner and a real shot of whiskey, lost fifty bucks to the machines, watched a woman twice my age sing cover tunes in a dress that was far too small, and slept in a comfortable bed. I was leaving the next morning, checking out, when I heard my name. I don't think I'd heard my own name from someone who wasn't telling me what to do in a very long time. And I knew the voice, knew it as well as my own even if it had been years since I'd last heard it. I slowly turned around and saw my brother staring at me.

"Morning, Ben."

"*Good morning, Ben*? Really?"

"You're not gonna make a big scene, are you? I just want to check out. How about I meet you in the parking lot?"

I paid, left and stood leaning against my truck, my heart racing. When he finally walked out the doors, I stood up straight, just in time for him to punch me in the chin.

"Jesus, Ben." I rubbed my chin. I could feel the swelling already.

"Don't act like you didn't deserve that." He leaned against the truck alongside me, and I moved a couple inches away.

"Mae and I know you've been in Maine. Frankie came to pick apples a couple times before he died. We didn't tell Mom and Dad. I sent word when Dad died, and you didn't come. How many times you gonna break Mom's heart, Joe?"

I was confused. I always thought that if they knew where I was, they'd come and get me, that they'd want me to come home. Maybe not Cora, but the rest. Confusion turned to hurt, and hurt was trying to turn to anger, but I wasn't going to let it.

"Why didn't you come get me, if you knew I was here?"

"You seemed like you wanted to stay lost. Am I wrong?"

"No."

"Time to grow up, Joe. Come home, take responsibility, be a man."

"How's Leah?" I asked.

"She's an amazing woman. Cora did good raising her."

"I sent money."

"Money isn't a father, Joe."

Ben stood up, pushing himself off the truck, and for the first time, I noticed how old he'd gotten. I opened the truck door, reached under the seat and took out the leather bag that held all the money I had saved. I handed it to him and got into the truck, closed the door and rolled down the window.

"Give that to Mom or Leah. Tell them I'm sorry."

"I'll give the money to where it's needed, but I'm not speaking for you, Joe. You need to do that for yourself."

"It was good seeing you, Ben. Real good." I started the truck and rolled up the window. As I pulled out of the parking lot, I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw him turn and head inside, the leather bag tucked under his arm.

I drove the whole way back to the cabin in the quiet, the hum of the road the only sound I could handle. I thought about the creases in Ben's face, the slight stoop in his shoulders, his voice deeper than I remembered. I

looked down at my hands, resting lightly on the steering wheel, the knuckles swollen and sore, the skin blotched with dark brown. I looked in the mirror and saw the creases around the frown I wore as a badge. Time had slipped away, had taken off without me.

"Fuck," I whispered to myself. "Fuck," I yelled out the window.

Route 9 seemed longer. The asphalt snaked into the distance. When I passed the supply store, a familiar calm began to settle over me, until I came up on the small road that led to my cabin. I pressed hard on the brakes and yanked the steering wheel. I parked the truck just before the turnoff and looked on in disbelief. Ruthie's rock was gone. A hole was left in its place, a gaping hole in the ground. A pile of dirt lay next to it, ready to fill it in, ready to erase her completely. I could feel the tears before I knew I was crying. I kicked that dirt. I kicked it everywhere except that hole in the ground. I kicked and I screamed and I cried. When the coughing set in and sent me to my knees, I bowed down to breathe. Blood came from my lungs, and I cried harder. I grabbed at the dirt, hard and biting in my hands, and threw it away from where the rock once sat. I scattered the dirt until I fell, exhausted and struggling to breathe. I lay on the ground as the sky seemed to waver and crease, as the clouds shuttered and escaped. I breathed deep, painful gulps of air, forcing it into my lungs and forcing it out again. I don't know how long I lay there. Probably not long but it felt like a lifetime.

Someone stopped, pulled a car up beside me and asked if I was okay. It took all the energy I had left in me to wave them on, to turn my head away so they wouldn't see the thin lines running through the dirt on my face, the red spittle in the corner of my mouth. When the sound of the car was gone, I got up, slow, and pushed myself up off my hands and knees and stumbled to the truck. I didn't turn down my little road to the cabin that had been mine for years. I didn't return to the supply store or to the warehouse. This time, my anger wasn't holding me back. My sadness was throwing me forward. I headed north on Route 9, and when I came to the border, I parked the truck in the parking lot and walked across. The truck belonged to Mr. Ellis and I wasn't a thief. I added his name to a long list of people I needed to beg forgiveness from. I was fifty-six years old when I walked past the place where Charlie took his last breath, and I sat, my back to the highway, my eyes to the trees as cars raced by me. A few honked, a reminder that the highway was no place to take a walk. I was just out of Saint Stephen, my

thumb out and the sun in my eyes, when a car finally pulled over. I ran to catch up.

"I'm headed to Nova Scotia," I blurted before I realized that Ben was at the wheel.

"Get in." He reached into the back and grabbed the leather satchel I had handed him earlier that day and threw it against my chest. "You can take care of this now."

I was going home.

Ben barely spoke a word to me the entire drive through New Brunswick and down the Valley highway. I stared out the window and watched as the green of New Brunswick gave way to the green of Nova Scotia. At the provincial border, giant windmills stood sentinel over the entrance to the place I once called home, their giant blades cutting the sky, ghosts in the light of dusk. When we finally pulled into the yard later that night, my stomach was aching with hunger and fear. As I crawled out of the car and stretched, the blue light of the television flickered in the picture window. Ben walked up to the door and held it open. I was taking off my shoes when Mae came around the corner from the kitchen, drying her hands with a dishtowel.

"Mom, you're never going to believe what Ben brought home." She laid the towel over the back of a chair, took my hand, gave it a squeeze and led me into the living room. No yelling, no blame, just a peaceful nod to my presence in my childhood home.

"Hi, Mom."

She looked up from her chair, her hair white and thin, the pink of her scalp clearly visible. Her skin was creased and lined, and she reminded me of a dried apple doll. But her eyes were the same—the eyes that had loved me, nursed me back to health, held me when I cried, smacked me when I was bad, the eyes that were proud of me when I stayed hidden in the maple, the eyes that said it wasn't my fault when Ruthie went missing and when Charlie died, the eyes that glowed with pride when I married Cora.

"My Joe, you're home."

FOURTEEN

NORMA

THE DASH SADDENS ME. THE SIMPLICITY MISSES SO much. It doesn't allow for all the downs that bring a person low or the joys that lift them up. All the bends and turns that make up a lifetime are flattened and erased. The dash on a tombstone is wholly inadequate. Everything around it is more remarkable. The name, etched in cursive or dignified fonts. Sometimes a photo is carved into the grey granite, giving life to the dead. Yet the dash, that line that carries the entire sum of a life within it, is unremarkable.

My knees cracked as I bent to trace the edges of the dash. It was cold but smooth. It eased the pain in my finger, cut open while trying to liberate the seeds of a pomegranate. The juice stained the skin under my nail. The engravers hadn't been here to add the year of her death, and the grass had already started to grow. A stranger might think she was still walking around this world. I'd bought a wind chime for the grave, a small pewter one with long cylindrical chimes dangling from a bouquet of grey roses. As I pressed it into the hard-packed earth beside the tombstone, I heard her voice reminding me that chimes are not music but an annoying scattering of sound. I sighed at the memory and pushed the little instrument harder into the earth. Dirt blended in with the pomegranate juice under my nail. I tapped the chime with my fingers to make it sing, since there was no wind today. Then I whispered a little prayer in the hope that it wouldn't be stolen, kissed the top of the stone and left. I walked through the rows of granite, stepping lightly over the men and women six feet below. I wrapped my arms around my chest against the cold, my head down as I tried to fight

through my complicated grief. I hoped that Mother wouldn't be angry with me for searching for the woman from my dreams. Even now, after everything, I couldn't bear the thought that she would consider me an ungrateful daughter.

ON A COLD night in late September, Mother died in her sleep, quietly separating herself from me and the world. A worker from the home called me at 7:45 a.m. on a Tuesday, as I was about to leave for work. I took the rest of the week off and called Aunt June. We hadn't spoken like family, like people who love one another, since the day she told me about my past. Those months between the truth and Mother's passing may have been the loneliest of my life. Aunt June and I were civil. We made courtesy calls—conversations that revolved entirely around Mother and her care. There was no laughing, no plans for visiting. For five decades now, each and every day I lived as Norma, my aunt June had betrayed me. I had no mother left to blame.

After my call to Aunt June, I headed over to the home, dread settling in at the thought of seeing my mother. But when I got there and Janet's strong arms were draped over my shoulders, I felt relief, not dread. Mother looked so calm and serene. Her mouth wasn't twisted in a grimace. Her hands weren't pulling at anything she could find to soothe her anxiety. Her eyes were closed and not searching frantically for something or someone familiar. I pulled up the chair and sat beside the bed, taking her hand in mine. I rubbed it softly, kissed it and placed it back before leaving. I stayed for five minutes maybe. I signed the papers at the nursing station to transfer her body to the funeral home. I told them I would be back the next day to retrieve the pictures. The rest they could give away. I stopped at the funeral home to make the arrangements. She'd planned everything the month after my father died, so there was little to decide. They offered me coffee and a tissue, but I refused both. Only when I was sitting at my own kitchen table did I feel the stab of grief, deep and hard. There, in the quiet of the kitchen, I cried. It wasn't a solemn cry. I wailed. I let loose a tide of salt water. My head pounded and my throat burned, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. Grief seemed to possess me. I was fifty-four years old and alone. I had no one to comfort me when I needed it the most.

The funeral was three days later. A small group assembled in a room that smelled of lilac and ghosts. Mother was laid out in a coffin in her favourite blue dress. Aunt June and I spoke little and softly. A few of the ladies from the church came and paid their respects. A distant cousin who'd seen the obituary in the paper introduced herself. They hadn't seen each other in decades, but she felt the need to come. She shook my hand and took a seat as Aunt June leaned in and whispered, "Ghoul. Just wants to be part of the ritual. I don't even remember her. Folks like her watching the death ads all the time, they give me the shivers." I couldn't help but smile. We laid Mother to rest alongside Father. I placed a bouquet of roses on the grave and took my leave. I visit now, occasionally. I'm always pleased to see that no one has taken the chime.

I'd sold the house when Mother went to live in the hospital, and moved back to my own apartment. Aunt June stayed with me for a week to help with the arrangements, and as much as I wanted to be angry with her still, she was a comfort. The quiet had taken on a different hue now that my parents weren't there to enforce it. It felt lighter somehow. Aunt June sat down opposite me and set a bottle of whiskey between us. She handed me one of the glass tumblers my parents had drunk from for as long as I could remember, etched crystal. A wedding gift from long ago.

"Let's have a drink. To your parents. As flawed as they were, we loved them." She tipped an inch of the amber liquid into each of our glasses.

"Flawed?" I tipped the glass and downed the whiskey. It burned and my eyes welled up.

Aunt June pretended not to notice my discomfort and poured a second. "Flawed, yes. Maybe they went a little too far with you, but you cannot say they didn't love you." She eyed me over the lip of her glass.

"I wonder if my actual family loved me, too?"

Aunt June was quiet as the hum of electricity filled the silence. She cleared her throat. "I can't change the past, Norma. I can only help you with the future. You are the one thing on earth I love more than anything. You are the only reason I still keep going, why I don't give up and die. God knows, I'm old enough, but I want to see you through this."

"You could have said something back then. You could have told me when I asked why my skin was so brown. You had the chance, but you

helped them live this giant, disgusting lie." I took another drink and set the glass down a little too hard, rocking the table.

"Norma." She said my name with force, making sure I was listening. "She was my sister and I loved her. I loved her enough to make sure that she was happy. Were there consequences? Yes. She became obsessive, scared they would find you and take you away. That's why she drank. But you can never say she didn't love you, that she didn't take good care of you."

"I could have had brothers and sisters. I could have lived in a house where the windows were open, and people laughed all the time, or fought and made up. I could have . . ." Anger makes people say things they don't mean. Makes them want to hurt others like they've been hurt. And I didn't mean it, not entirely, but I couldn't stop. "It doesn't bother you that there might be my actual parents out there, who miss me, who never knew what happened to me? I might have brothers and sisters. She was so obsessed over losing me, and yet, she did the same thing to another family. I can't be as casual about this as you are."

She looked past me, not at me. I was starting to feel light-headed. I wanted nothing more than to go to sleep. Perhaps this was all a bad dream. Anything that didn't make sense had always been the result of a bad dream, and this one had to be the worst yet.

"I'll help you," she whispered from across the table.

"Help me what?"

"I'll tell you everything I know, and I'll help you find your family." My aunt June wasn't a crier. The only time I'd ever seen her cry was at Alice's funeral. But she cried then. "Just promise that I will still be your family. You're all I've got."

"Then start talking." The whiskey was making me mean.

"Tomorrow. I will tell you everything tomorrow. I need some sleep."

For the first time, I looked at my aunt and saw an old woman. She'd always had so much life in her, so much energy. It was strange to see her so deflated, her shoulders slouched, her head down. For the first time, I noticed the age spots on her hands, the cavernous wrinkles around her eyes, the thinness of her arms.

"Tomorrow." I drained the last of my drink and left her alone at the table.

“I THINK WE should go for a drive,” Aunt June said. She was seated at the table when I woke, eating a toasted English muffin with peanut butter, a banana sliced on her plate. I watched as she dipped the banana slices into the melted peanut butter.

“A drive?” My head was a little sore and I just wanted to be still, to take a bath.

“I need to show you something. Something you’ve seen before but that will have new meaning now.”

“Why so cryptic?”

“I need to get my nerve up. And sometimes words just aren’t enough. So just come on a drive with me.” She sounded tired and a little bit exasperated.

I followed Aunt June’s directions, and we drove out of Augusta, north on the I-95 until we hit old Route 9. Small towns gave way to farms and fields, tractors replaced cars, and the road became rough. I knew the route well; it was the same one I took to my lake cabin, but for the first time, it felt unfamiliar. It felt like I was driving it for the first time, seeing the farmhouses for the first time, noticing the labourers in the fields, their dark skin sweaty and glistening in the sunlight. We stopped at a small shop alongside the road for water and a bathroom break. The place was old and smelled of bread, coffee, gas and fried food. The door was small and the aisles inside were narrow, the refrigerator doors coated in condensation. The shelves were stacked with an odd assortment of tools and food, and everyone inside seemed to know one another. A sign pointed to a bar out back.

We gassed up the car and bought some snacks before pulling back onto Route 9.

“We’re getting close. You might want to slow down,” said Aunt June.

“Close to where?” I looked into the rear-view mirror to make sure no one was behind me before I slowed down. Aunt June didn’t answer, just kept her eyes focused on the road.

“There, pull over.” She pointed to an old dirt road. I pulled in and put the car in park. Aunt June got out and gently closed the door behind her. I turned off the car and followed. The field to the right was empty, the earth still ashen from a burn. To the left was a thick stand of trees. Aunt June walked toward where the ground looked freshly disturbed.

“This is where she found you. Right here.”

I took a deep breath.

“You were alone, sitting on a rock that used to be here.”

I’d passed this rock before, this place. I’d passed it with my mother in the passenger seat, headed out to the lake. I was finding it hard to breathe. There was no wind, not a cloud in the sky, and I wished there was. I needed something to look at besides this field and this dirt where a rock used to be. I needed to follow something as it escaped this place. A truck rumbled past, casting dirt into the air and breaking me out of what I was sure was about to become a panic attack. My eyes followed it until it was out of sight.

“I’ve been here. Well, not here, but I’ve driven past, with Mom in the car. She never said a thing. She never even let on.” I bent down and picked up a handful of dirt, looking intently at it.

“She brought me here shortly after . . .” She paused. “After she took you. It’s hard to say that, that she took you. She wanted us to consider it like you came to us.”

I dropped the dirt and dusted my hand on my pants. Aunt June took my hand, and we started walking down the dirt road, she in one rut and I in the other, our hands held across the grassy knoll in the middle.

“Did she ever feel bad?”

“I don’t think so. She had herself convinced that you’d been abandoned and she’d saved you.”

We had only been walking a few minutes when a cabin came into view. It was small and old but taken care of, loved. The outside was awash with colour, childlike flowers and trees painted everywhere. A small vegetable garden lay abandoned. What remained of the greens were withered and the little fence was in need of mending. It looked like an animal had dug under and had feasted on the vegetables. A firepit lay out front, recently used, the wood burned to charcoal, black and shiny.

“We should go back. We don’t want to intrude.”

Aunt June let go of my hand and turned to walk away, but I stayed, my feet rooted to the ground. The place was lovely and familiar somehow. I could smell a fire on a rainy day, see people laughing and drinking tea. I turned to see where a path led down to the nearby lake.

“My dreams.” I turned to Aunt June, who stopped but didn’t turn to face me. “My dreams. They were memories.” I turned back to the small cabin. “I

know this place. I've been here before, before it was painted like this. I can see people sitting around a fire, smell potatoes boiling, the smell of tobacco. I know this place."

I walked up to the steps of the cabin and ran my hands over the crudely painted fauna and wondered if someone I was meant to love had painted it.

"Look at this." My voice started quiet but grew as I traced the veins of a leaf. "So full of colour. I could have had a life full of colour."

"Now, don't get ahead of yourself, Norma. Anyone could have painted this cabin, and we don't know for sure that this is where your other family stayed. I imagine there are a few of these cabins."

I pretended I didn't hear her.

"And you all made me think there was something wrong with me. That those dreams meant something was wrong with me." The realizations came swift and solid. "Even Alice? Oh my God, did Alice know, too?"

"I'm sorry. You will never know how much, but I am. I am so sorry." She started to walk toward me, but I turned and walked past her, slamming my feet into the ground.

"And Alice?" I yelled behind me. Aunt June was walking as fast as she could, trying to catch up.

"It's the only secret I ever kept from her. I told her you were adopted."

"You seem to be able to keep big secrets from the people you say you love the most." I was angry and yelling. "You're not who I thought you were. How could you be part of this? How could you lie so easily? Fuck!"

Aunt June was crying.

I knew what I was doing. I was unleashing my anger at the only person left to feel it. The only person left who I could hurt as much as I was hurting.

"I need to get out of here." I got into the car and slammed the door.

"I sometimes kept secrets *for* the people I loved. And maybe it was wrong, but I have you, and I love you." Aunt June closed her door and put on her seat belt. "Anger is exhausting. Holding on to it will drain the life out of you."

I reversed out onto Route 9, too quickly, and the tires slipped in the soft dirt. The car went sideways, and Aunt June grabbed the door handle. Thankfully, no other cars were near. I pulled over to the side, put the car in park and rested my head on the steering wheel.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“No need to be sorry. Just let me help you.”

After our trip up Route 9, I gave up my apartment and moved to Boston and the brownstone that used to belong to Alice and was now Aunt June’s. The house had no ghosts. The air was light, the curtains open to the outside world. Music played almost all the time from a little silver radio that sat on the counter in the kitchen. With the money from my parents and the sale of the house, I was able to retire from teaching. A young teacher, fresh out of college, was eager to take my place, to teach new and exciting things. I’d never considered myself to be “old,” but apparently I was. George Orwell was being replaced by stories of survival and vampires. It was a good time to leave.

“Why didn’t you and Alice ever live together, all those years?” We were sitting in the living room, quietly reading our own books. Aunt June set hers down on her lap.

“It was a different time.” She looked around at the home that was now hers. “And by the time it was okay, we were set in our ways. I liked my space and she liked hers. We were always together, but both of us had somewhere to go for some alone time. I guess after all those years, it just worked for us.”

“I miss her,” I said.

“So do I, every single day when I wake up and remember she’s not here.”

Despite her age, Aunt June had an active social life and went out with friends to the theatre and karaoke, sometimes inviting me along. I made a few friends of my own, people I met when I started volunteering at the women’s shelter that Alice had helped at throughout the years. I still had my car and loved to get away to the lake for days at a time, mostly on my own but sometimes with Aunt June. We settled into a rhythm of daily life that worked for both of us. And I thought about the truth. To be honest, it took a disproportionate amount of my emotional energy. I felt stuck between wanting to find my family and the fear that they didn’t want to be found or it was too late. I would lay awake at night, staring at the dim light from the street lamp cast on my bedroom ceiling, and I would try my hardest to remember them, to see them in my mind, but I couldn’t. I read my journals over and over again, but the only thing that seemed to be a concrete clue as

to my identity was a name: Ruthie. She had been the imaginary friend of a lonely child and a name called out at a protest. That had to mean something. It was a puzzle, one where none of the pieces seemed to fit, or if they did, I just couldn't see it.

A few weeks after our trip to Route 9, Aunt June and I were sitting at the table, waiting for the chicken Parmesan to finish baking, when Aunt June handed me a folded piece of paper. I looked at it and then at her, curious.

"Open it," she said.

"What is it?"

"A clue to who you really are."

I held the paper in one hand and ran the fingers of my other hand along the edges.

"It doesn't bite." Aunt June smiled across the table.

"It might," I said apprehensively.

I gently unfolded the paper. It was a photocopy of an old newspaper article. I looked up at Aunt June, confused.

"Just read it."

The headline read, "Fight at Carnival Results in Indian Boy's Death." The article was dated August 1971. I read on. Apparently, there had been a fight between two Indian berry pickers in Maine. Alcohol was suspected. The boy who died, a boy named Charlie, was described as a hard worker and loved by his family. I was having a hard time understanding what any of this had to do with me, until I read the last bit: "The family of the young man who died also had a four-year-old daughter who disappeared from the same berry fields almost a decade ago. She was never found."

The last sentence was so abrupt and so unfinished. The oven beeped and Aunt June went to get our food. I was still trying to get my bearings when she set my plate in front of me.

"Where did you find this?"

"I'm an old lady with time on her hands. I started looking for anything that could help us, and I found this at the library a couple days ago."

"I had a brother named Charlie."

"It would seem so. If that's you. Although I don't think many little girls were taken from the berry fields of Maine that same summer." She shrugged.

“I wonder how to find them, my other family?”

“Seems that they worked in the fields. Maybe the company has records of them?”

When I didn’t say anything and didn’t touch my chicken, Aunt June spoke.

“I called the factory where they process the berries, and they are willing to meet with us tomorrow to see if they can help us.”

“Are you serious?” I could hear the shake in my voice.

“Yup. I booked us a little bed and breakfast for the night. So, let’s finish here, clean up and pack. We can leave first thing tomorrow. Leonard has agreed to feed Henri.”

I looked over at the fish swimming in circles in the same fishbowl that had sat at Aunt June’s since I was little. “Okay” was the only word I could find.

We left the next morning, just as the sky was getting light. It was a five-hour drive and we had a two o’clock appointment with the Ellises, the owners of the same berry fields we had visited a few months prior. It was a cold day in early December. A few of the trees clung to their leaves, but for the most part, the beautiful reds, oranges and golds had given way to leafless branches. It was good to witness nature doing what it does best, letting go, moving on. I had a knot in my stomach the entire drive.

The parking lot was nearly empty. A few trucks sat by the office door. When we pulled in, Aunt June reached across and took my hand. We sat there for a few minutes before I took a deep breath, grabbed my purse and headed to the door. Mr. Ellis, a few years older than me, greeted us.

“Good afternoon. You drive up this morning?”

“We did.”

“Must be tuckered. That’s a long drive.”

“We’re good. Not driving back today. We’re going to stay at a bed and breakfast for the night.” I talked like I’d never been here before, and maybe I hadn’t, really. I’d been here before, but as a different version of myself.

“So, what can I help you with?” He pointed to two chairs. We took a seat and he sat on the edge of his desk. I took the newspaper article out of my purse and handed it to him.

“You remember this?” I asked quietly.

He read for a few seconds before handing it back to me. “Sure do. My dad was the boss then and I was young, but he told me all about it when I was older. Said that boy, Charlie, was a good worker and a nice kid. Such a shame. That family was cursed with bad fortune. They had a little one, a girl, disappear years before. Sad state of affairs, I’d say. They never did find her. One of the boys, Joe, just left here a couple months ago. He lived out there near the field where she went missing. Painted up a cabin like you’ve never seen.”

“Joe?” I said softly.

“Yup. Worked here for years. I let him stay in the cabin. It was in shambles when he got here, but he made it nice. A couple months ago, he just drove the company vehicle down to the border and left it there. No idea where he went. I’m assuming back to Nova Scotia, where the family’s from, but I couldn’t really tell ya. I got the truck back, perfect condition, so no hard feelings.”

“I see.” From the corner of my eye, I could see Aunt June waiting for me to say something else. Eventually, the quiet and my confused gaze forced Mr. Ellis to look away, first out the window and then to Aunt June.

“You see, my niece, Norma, here . . . Well, we believe that she is that little one. That Joe would be her brother.”

“No shit?” He stood up and walked over to a filing cabinet that stood against the wall. “You’re little Ruthie? Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Ruthie?” I whispered, the name on the edge of my tongue, the sound soft and airy. “Ruthie.” My entire world was suddenly starting to make sense to me.

Mr. Ellis took a file from his cabinet, opened it and laid it on his desk. He copied something onto a piece of paper. “I probably shouldn’t be sharing this with you, but since you look so much like Joe, I don’t think it’s a mistake. Here’s the address of his parents. They’ve been at the same address since they all started working down here in the ’50s. They quit coming down after that terrible thing with Charlie. But Joe came back, stayed for a long time like I told you, working these fields.” He handed me the paper. “You let me know if it all works out, won’t ya?”

I nodded and stared at the paper.

“Thank you, Mr. Ellis. We appreciate this, and we’ll let you know,” said Aunt June, getting out of her chair. She took me by the elbow and led me to

the door.

"You don't mind if we take a look at that cabin you mentioned?" I said.

"Not at all."

"Thank you," I said, as Aunt June guided me out of the office.

I tucked the paper in the zippered part of my purse, but not before I memorized it. I pulled out onto Route 9 again and headed to the dirt road that led to the cabin that might be my brother's, Joe's. *Joe*, I kept repeating over and over in my head until the word had no meaning anymore. It became a sound. A crooked sigh.

Aunt June walked behind me this time, following my footsteps in the thin layer of snow that had fallen that morning. When I got to the cabin, I took the three steps up to the door and, for some reason, knocked. It felt wrong to just walk in. When no one answered, I pushed the door open. Inside was a sparse but tidy home. Everything seemed to belong, and nothing was out of place. Dust had settled, and I ran my finger over the tea kettle, clearing a long line around the top. There was nothing personal, no pictures or mementoes. Only the walls, painted like the outside. There was an apple tree on one wall, and a campfire on another with two small children lying on a blanket, watching the stars. The painting was crude but beautiful. A coffee cup sat unwashed on the table, a dark stain around the bottom. Before we left, I traced my name in the dust on the table: *Ruthie*.

A FEW DAYS later, as Boston was lighting the giant Christmas tree, a gift each year from Nova Scotia, I tried to write a letter. But each time, I ended up tearing it up or throwing it in the trash. There was too much hope, and I had learned to mistrust hope. Finally, Aunt June put her foot down and helped me write one that I could send.

> *Hello*,
> *You don't know me, but my name is Norma. I was raised in Maine by my mother, Lenore, and my father, Frank. It has recently been revealed to me that I was not their natural child. Apparently, in a moment of despair and confusion, my mother took me from a rock in a blueberry field in Maine along Route 9. This would have been in 1962. I have come to believe that I am your "Ruthie."*
>
> *I can understand if you are skeptical and may not want to contact me. I have attached the newspaper article that helped me to find you, a photo of myself as a child, along with a recent*

photo. This must be difficult for you. However, if you would like to contact me, I have included my return address on the envelope and my phone number is 001 555 9921.

Regards,
Norma, maybe Ruthie

I remember that, as a child, I found the anticipation of Christmas unbearable—the wait for Santa and the one day a year when I was permitted to eat as much sugar as my tiny body could handle. However agonizing I thought that was, the waiting for a response from my birth family was far worse. I couldn't sleep, imagining what I would do if they sent a response back telling me I was wrong, or a response confirming my identity. I checked the mail three times a day, even though I knew the mail was delivered between twelve and one in the afternoon. I volunteered at the women's shelter to keep my mind off a letter that might never arrive. I jumped each time the phone rang and was nearly sick each time I saw the light on the answering machine blink.

At the end of December, I was in the bath when Aunt June knocked on the bathroom door.

"There is a phone call for you. From a woman named Mae from Nova Scotia."

I nearly slipped and fell in my rush to get out of the tub and into my robe. I was dripping wet when I picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hi, are you Norma, the one who sent us a letter saying you're Ruthie?" She was speaking low but there was a forcefulness in her voice.

"I am. Thank you for calling. Mae, is it?"

"Yup. If you are Ruthie, I'm your older sister. And I'll be honest because I don't know any other way to be: you gotta be her. I'm saying it because that photo of you as a little girl is just how I remember you, and besides, you're the spittin' image of my mother. Spittin' image. So, since this all lines up, I think you might just be Ruthie."

I started to shake and cry. Aunt June brought over a chair and a cup of peppermint tea.

"I think I am, as well," I said.

"Now, I don't want to talk on here about your past—it's long distance and that's expensive. But I want to ask you a question."

“Okay.”

“You ever been to an Indian rights protest in Boston?”

A memory of that day with Aunt June and the man who kept yelling, “Ruthie,” flashed before me. “Yes, in Boston in the late 1970s. There was a man who called my name, my real name.”

“Then you’re Ruthie, and I guess some of us have some apologizing to do to Ben. We didn’t believe him when he told us he saw you.”

“Is he my . . .”

“Ben’s the oldest. You’re the youngest. Charlie died, but then you know that. Joe is still here but not much longer. He’s got cancer all through his lungs and into his bones. And I’m Mae. And Mom. She’s old and needs some help, but her mind is fit as a fiddle.”

“My mother is still alive?”

“Yup, but you missed Dad by a couple of years. He’d be happy you found us again, though. I know he would.”

I was having difficulty speaking. Aunt June took the phone from my hand.

“I’m sorry, but Norma—Ruthie is overcome. Can I jot down your number and she can call you when she gets her breath back?” Aunt June got a notepad and took down her number. “Yes, I will tell her. Thank you, Mae.” Aunt June placed the receiver back into its cradle. “She says she can’t wait to meet you in person and give you a great big hug.”

I started to cry harder. It all seemed unreal in that moment. Everything seemed unreal, and at the same time, while I sat there sipping peppermint tea, my hand in Aunt June’s, everything seemed to suddenly make sense. I was a strange sort of puzzle, it seemed, and a piece that had been missing for five decades had suddenly been found. I only needed to put it in place. I was going to go to Nova Scotia. I was going to meet my family.

FIFTEEN

RUTHIE

THE ROOM WAS TOO SMALL FOR ALL THE PEOPLE IN IT. It smelled slightly of mould, the kind that comes with old houses, houses that hold happiness and grief in the walls. Houses where laughter has been absorbed into the cracks in the plaster and tears have washed the floors many times over. This one housed a family whose stories—the memories I had been denied—were captured in its scents. The bedroom had birthed the dreams of my brothers and banished their nightmares. I looked over to see a tiny man, his eyes dark and sunken, his skin loose and yellowed by jaundice. And as I looked at him, so small and ill, his eyes, milky with medication and exhaustion, tried to focus on me. Then he began to cry.

"Hello, Joe." The words were carried to his ears on a sigh, heavy with anticipation and a little bit of dread. I had lost people, yes, but I had never been this close to death before. And I'd never been close to a brother, and yet here I was, one of the people standing in the doorway of the tiny room.

Mae took my hand and led me in, while Ben used a tissue to wipe the sweat from Joe's face. Joe sputtered and turned away.

"Leave me be, Ben." His voice was raspy and low. "Leave me be."

He lifted his arm and took the tissue as I sat down at the edge of the bed. Joe winced and I stood, afraid I'd hurt him.

"Don't worry, Ruthie. Everything hurts now. It's no one's fault; it's just the way it is. I like having you sit there." He lifted his hand again and pointed to the place I'd just vacated, inviting me to sit.

I sat softly, unsure of what I was supposed to say next. It was strange hearing someone else call me Ruthie. I'd said the name over and over again on my drive from Boston to Nova Scotia, whispered it, spoke it aloud, yelled it at one point. I'd even introduced myself as Ruthie when I stopped at a diner in New Brunswick. It was starting to sound familiar, like it finally belonged to me.

"Ruthie? You okay?" Mae sat down on the end of the bed opposite me and beside Ben.

"Yes, sorry. I've just never been called Ruthie before."

"You been called Ruthie many times, you just can't remember. But don't worry, we remember for you."

"Yes. Sorry. You're right, of course. I'm just feeling . . ."

"Overwhelmed," Mae chipped in when I was quiet for too long.

"Yes, overwhelmed but so happy to be here. So very, very happy."

"You just wait until Mom wakes from her nap. I hope the joy don't kill her."

Mae and Ben laughed, and Joe tried. I joined in, hoping some of my laughter would seep into the cracks of this house I'd been deprived of. I didn't know if I belonged here, in this house, with these people. But then again, I didn't know if I'd belonged in the house I was raised in. There was, of course, no way to know, and it was a waste of time thinking about it. But I did think about it anyway. I wondered how the story would have gone, had I not been sitting on that rock, had I not been so quiet and trusting. At the same time, I felt terrible thinking of it, for betraying the memory of my parents, for not telling my newfound family about Aunt June and Alice, about the love I did receive, no matter how different it was.

"Mae, would you grab Ruthie's shoes?" Joe pointed to the closet.

Mae reached in and pulled down a tiny pair of boots. A sock doll hung over the tongue of one. A button eye was holding on by a single thread. Mae blew the dust away and handed them to me.

"Those were yours," Ben said. "Mom wouldn't let anyone throw them away."

I ran my fingers over the leather, old and cracked. I found it hard to believe that I'd ever fit into something so small. Mae reached over and liberated the doll, straightened the hair made of yarn, old and frayed.

“They’ve been sitting on that shelf since you went missing. I took them down once to show them to Leah.” Joe was winded and closed his eyes to rest.

“Leah?”

“Leah is Joe’s girl. A good girl. Better than any of us, I bet,” Mae answered.

“She sure is,” Joe whispered, his eyes still closed. “You’ll get to meet her. She comes by all the time now.”

I wasn’t sure what I was meant to do with the boots or the doll. I set the boots beside me on the bed and, for reasons known only to a higher power, lifted the doll to my nose and breathed in deep. Five decades of sitting on a shelf in a place far removed from Maine had not diminished the scent of campfire and summer evenings. Maybe the doll only smelled of dust, but in that moment, it brought me back to a place where I belonged.

“I think Ben and I will go get dinner started, leave you two here for a bit to get reacquainted.” Mae stood and motioned for Ben to follow.

As he passed by, he knelt and grabbed me into a hug. “I knew it was you. In Boston. At the protest. I knew it was you.” Despite his age, Ben was still a strong man, and his hug was solid, like it could hold the world.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t know it was you.” I could feel the tears before they started to fall, the heat of them burning my insides, pushing the lump in my throat up and out of my eyes.

“None of this was your fault. You got nothing to be sorry for, Ruthie. Nothing.” Ben stood and walked out behind Mae.

Logic told me that he was right, but logic didn’t really have a place in a situation like mine. I could have cried when Mother placed me in the back seat of that car. I could have run. I could have remembered. But I didn’t do any of those things. I had allowed myself to become Norma. Now, I wanted to be Ruthie. I clung to the doll.

“I dreamed about you. I couldn’t see your face, but I could hear you laughing.” Joe started to cough, and the effort of it wracked his entire body. I got a tissue and wiped away the spittle. Joe started to cry again.

“I hate that this is the way you are going to remember me. I hate it that you and my Leah will only ever know the sick Joe, the dying Joe.” He took a deep breath. “I wasn’t an angel—don’t let them tell you that after I’m

gone. I ruined myself all by myself, but I just wish we could have known each other when I wasn't like this. Before I got mad at the world."

"I do, too. I don't know why this happened to us, but I would like to get to know you now, hear your stories." I pulled on the thread and the doll's eye snapped back into place.

"And I would like to hear yours. You look like you have a nice life. At least there's that. You were taken care of." Joe's eyelids started to flutter, and his breathing became slow. I watched him fall asleep. I reached across and took his hand, so cold and thin. I held it that way until my back started to cramp and I had to let go. I placed it gently back on the bed and snuck out of the room, careful not to wake him. I closed the door quietly and headed down the hall. I could hear voices in the living room.

"Here, Mom, your tea. Ruthie is sitting with Joe a bit and then she'll be out to see you," Ben said.

I don't know why, but I ducked into the bathroom. I locked the door and sat down on the toilet lid. It was plastic and it dented under my weight. Guilt, willed to me by my mother, began to surface, but I pushed it back, washed my face with cold water and headed to the living room.

My mother was small but not in the way Joe was. She was small with age, not sickness. When she saw me, she set her tea on the stand beside her chair.

"I prayed for you." She extended her hands toward me, and I walked over and took them. "I prayed you would come home to us. Your father would have been so happy to see you." She didn't cry, but her deep-brown eyes glistened.

"I'm so sorry."

"Ruthie," she said, "what on earth have you got to be sorry for?"

"I don't know. I just feel that it's the right thing to say."

She started laughing. "Well, I will not accept an apology that's not needed. Now give me a big hug, a hug worth fifty years of hugs."

I bent down and hugged her, taking in her smell. It wasn't woodsmoke and potatoes, but baby powder and rose shampoo, and it was the smell of my mother.

"I did remember you," I told her as I took a seat on the ottoman, facing her. "But I thought I'd made it all up, that you were a dream. I dreamt about

you and even wrote about you in my journals. My mother—I mean Lenore, my mother Lenore—she told me I was dreaming. That none of it was true."

My mother, the woman who had given birth to me, who had known me and loved me longer than anyone on earth, smiled and dabbed a few tears as they made their way down her cheek.

"I own a little place on a lake in Maine, not far from the berry fields, actually." I paused to take a breath, to remember fully so she would know I'd loved her all this time. It was something she deserved. "And when I'm out there, standing with my feet in the water, staring at the moon, I can smell you, I can hear your voice. And all these years, it's confused me but also offered a strange sort of comfort."

"I'm happy that you held on to something. It must have been so hard on you. I'm so sorry." She started to cry harder.

"None of this is our fault," I said, trying to comfort her.

She tried to smile. "I'm sad your dad never got to know you were okay. He was a good man. But I guess we'll all be together someday in the great beyond, and he and Charlie will sure be happy to see you."

I wasn't a believer, but one thing my two mothers had in common, aside from their love of me, was their belief in a loving God. For them, these women who'd suffered so much, I acquiesced.

"There's another soul waiting for us. I had a girl. A tiny, beautiful baby girl. She didn't make it into this world, but she will be there with us in the next," I said.

She leaned forward in her chair and took my hands. "What was her name?"

"Sarah."

"Sarah," she whispered, placing her forehead on my forehead. I'd never felt as loved as I did just then. "We will put her name in the family Bible, beside yours."

It was after my first Saturday dinner with my family when my mother asked me to go to church with her. "I would love to introduce you to Father Michael."

I was sitting on the ottoman, facing her. It was a habit I'd picked up quickly, a way to take in the mother I hadn't known, a way to see her eyes when they were happy and understand her frown when something upset her.

“I’d love to.” I wasn’t lying. While I’d never liked church as a child, this was different. I wanted to do something that meant so much to her.

The next morning, I dressed in the best clothes I’d packed and picked my mother up for church.

“No one else is coming?” I asked as she sat in the passenger seat of the car.

“No, I told them to stay home. I want you all to myself today.” She reached over and clasped my hand, and I let her hold it until she was ready to let go.

The church was a solid structure made of wood and freshly painted. A group of people were lined up outside, waiting to shake hands with the priest. Most moved aside and let us go ahead. There were awkward glances, and I knew that the small town had been talking about my return. When I caught their eyes, they smiled shyly and turned away.

“Father Michael, this is my daughter Ruthie.”

He took my hands in his. “Well, the good Lord has brought you home. I’m so happy to see you here with your mother. She has never stopped talking about you and remembering you. I feel like I know the little girl you once were just through her stories.”

I wanted to pull my hands back, but I didn’t want to be rude. They were getting sweaty, but the look of joy on my mother’s face meant I let him hold on a little bit longer. Finally, he let go, and we walked into the church. The interior was dark with wood and deep-blue stained glass. It was cooler than it was outside, and it smelled of incense, old bread and stale grape juice mixed with the perfumes favoured by the elderly. The service was long and unfamiliar, but I liked sitting there with her, her hand in mine, listening to her aged voice quiver when she sang, seeing her nod and smile when something in the service pleased her.

“Let’s go for lunch. My treat.” She was radiant in her mauve pantsuit and matching lipstick, fresh from the word of God.

“Okay, where are we going? Remember that I don’t know my way around. You’re the navigator.”

“That’s not a problem. Just turn left and keep going until we see the water. Up over the mountain.” I pulled out and waved to the bystanders apparently still intrigued by my presence among them.

As we drove out of town, she seemed to come alive with stories. As we passed farmhouses and open fields, she told me all about the Ruthie I had been.

"I remember your birth, you know. All these years later, I remember it like it was yesterday. You were just a small thing, all covered in gunk, but you had a full head of thick black hair. I swear I could've braided it the moment you were born." She laughed at her own joke as we made our way up the side of the mountain until the land flattened out again and the trees that lined the road gave way to more farms and open fields.

"Even though you were a December baby, I had you right under the tree where generations of Indian babies have been welcomed into this world. It was cold, but we had a fire going and lots of tea. You took a while, but you were worth it. My last baby and the last born under that tree. Your dad cleaned you up with heated water scented with pine needles. You smelled just like Christmas."

"Funny."

"What's funny?"

"I've always celebrated by birthday on August 23. That was the day my mother, Lenore, said I was born."

She was quiet for a while, looking out the window, watching the world go by.

"That was the day you went missing. One of the worst days of my life. Makes sense she would choose that day, I guess."

In front of me, the land started to slope down toward the water. The blue of the bay was a backdrop to the green of the land. We came to a sharp corner and turned right, following the shoreline. Ahead of us, I could see the top of a lighthouse, painted with thick black and white horizontal stripes. A few cars were parked along the road, and people were sitting at picnic tables, eating out of cardboard dishes.

"Best fish and chips around. Comes right off the wharf." She pointed to where a few fishing boats were tied up and bouncing on the waves. The air was cooler here than in the Valley, and the smell of creosote and sea water mixed with fried fish filled my nose. We ordered our lunch through a window cut out of the side of the lighthouse. A plaque told me that it was still a functioning lighthouse but also a takeout restaurant and a post office.

For just a moment, I thought of Mark and how he would have found this charming. We found a picnic table with an umbrella and sat down to eat.

"Tell me about my father. If it's okay."

"Oh, it's more than okay. I could talk about him forever." She took a bite of her fish and smiled at me. "Good, right?"

I had to admit it was delicious.

"I met your dad in town. He was visiting his sister Lindy before she married and moved down the line. He was on holiday from the Indian school, and I was with my father. He was a carpenter who got hired to build houses. Even though he was Indian, people hired him. His work spoke for itself. Lindy and my dad knew each other. I don't know how, but they did, so we went over for some deer stew, your aunt Lindy's specialty, and there was your father. He was so handsome and tall. I couldn't stop looking at him. I was fifteen years old and instantly in love. He told me later that the moment I walked into Lindy's kitchen, he knew he was going to marry me."

She had some tartar sauce on her chin, and I reached across the table and wiped it off. She smiled the way a mother smiles at a well-behaved child.

"He had to go back to that school for one more year, but we wrote letters. I tried to keep them, but the bugs got at them, and they turned to dust. But I remember some of the stuff he wrote. He was smart, too. He left the Indian school when he turned sixteen, and came and asked my dad if he could marry me. Got himself a job at the mill before he dared. Wanted to show that he was a man up to the task of being a husband."

My fish and chips were getting cold. I was too interested in the story to focus on my food. Behind us, the tide was going out.

"Lindy taught me to sew, and I did that for a while until Ben came along." She was happy telling me these stories, and I wanted to remember them.

When we finished our meal and had ice cream cones in our hands, we sat on a bench and watched the water retreat and the seagulls fight for discarded hot dog buns and potato chips.

"Were they good to you? This other family?" she asked, between licks of vanilla ice cream.

"Yes, they loved in their own way. I was taken care of."

"Good." She paused. "Maybe someday I can forgive them."

That night, back at my motel room, after I had scribbled everything she'd said down and my hand was aching, I called Aunt June. I had asked her to come on this trip with me, but she said it wasn't her place. She said she'd like to hear about it when I had the time.

"Hey, Aunt June."

"Hey, Norma, sweetheart." She waited for me to speak.

"They are so lovely, Aunt June." I started to cry again. "I'm just a messy ball of tears. I don't think I'm going to have many left if I keep this up." I sniffed into the phone.

"Let them flow, Norma—or—"

"Norma, Aunt June. Just call me Norma."

"Let those tears flow. Alice always said that holding in tears is like holding in pee—it's gonna hurt eventually, so you might as well let them go as soon as you feel them."

"Did Alice really say that?" I laughed.

"Well, she could have. You'd listen to wisdom if you thought it came from Alice."

"I listen to you, too, Aunt June."

"Tell me about them, then."

I told her everything, a complete playback of the last few days, complete with tears and laughs and the sadness of Joe's condition. I told her about the boots and the doll that now sat propped up against a pillow in my motel room, about my real birthday. I told her about the brown eyes of my mother, the wisdom of my sister, Mae, and the quiet strength of my brother Ben. I told her I was something called Mi'kmaw, and Ben and Mae promised to teach me what that meant. I told her that my brown skin and dark eyes were not an anomaly in that house. Aunt June hmmed and exclaimed at the right places, sighed and laughed when she was supposed to. It was almost midnight, and my body was worn out by the time I was ready to hang up the phone.

"I love you, Aunt June."

"I love you, too. Sweet dreams."

DESPITE THE LATE night, I got up with the sun. I made a cup of coffee in the little motel coffee maker and headed back to the house. Mae met me at the

door.

"Come on in. Want to help make breakfast?"

Only Mae was awake, and the house was quiet. She handed me a couple of potatoes.

"First words you need to know in Mi'kmaw are *tapatat* and *pitewey*. Potato and tea." She laughed and handed me a peeler.

I repeated the words until I was sure I would remember them.

"You speak . . ."

"Mi'kmaw? Nope. No one around here does anymore. Mom and Dad used to, but I think it faded from her the older she got. Never taught it to us. We used to know some of the swear words, but even those have been lost to me. Me and Ben are trying, but it's hard. But everyone knows *tapatat* and *pitewey*." She laughed again. "You can learn with us."

"I'd like that." I looked down at my hands, wet with potato starch, and continued to peel. "Mae . . ." I paused, trying to think of the right words. "Do you think it's weird I never knew, or even suspected, that I was Indian? Should it be something a person just knows?"

"Well, there's a loaded question for this early in the morning." We both laughed. "No. White folks been trying to take the Indian out of us for centuries. Makes sense you wouldn't remember. But now that you know, you gotta let people know. You gotta try to feel it. Can't let the bastards win. Gotta reclaim what was taken away. We all gotta. And it starts with knowing that *pitewey* means 'tea.'"

They laughed a lot, this family of mine. Even when the conversation was serious, they laughed. It was so new to me, all this emotion just out in the open.

Mae made tea while I peeled enough potatoes for all of us, cutting them small for hash browns. Homemade bread sat in the middle of the table, and Mae fried bacon. I made a plate and was about to take it down the hall to Joe, when Ben came around the corner carrying him.

"I want to eat at the table, like a family," Joe said.

Ben placed him beside me. When everyone was seated, my mother said grace. My other mother, despite her dedication to the church, had never made us say grace. This was new to me. It was a short verse, and then the clatter of a family eating together filled my ears. Ben helped Joe, who was having difficulty getting the food to stay on his fork. It was such a tender

thing to watch, a man feeding his brother, wiping his chin when bacon grease dripped.

"Hello?" The front door closed and a young woman, in her late twenties, if I were to guess, walked into the kitchen. She bent down and kissed Joe on the top of the head.

"Morning, Dad. Morning, Kiju." She kissed my mother on the head. "Aunt Mae, Uncle Ben." She looked quickly to me before taking a piece of bacon off Mae's plate and popping it in her mouth. "You must be my aunt Ruthie." She reached across the table to shake my hand.

"And you must be Leah."

"Guilty."

Ben moved over, and Leah sat by Joe, taking the fork and picking up where Ben left off, stabbing a hash brown and feeding her father. Joe swallowed hard and took a sip of tea.

"You and Leah are kinda in a similar situation. We just met a couple months ago. Lots of catching up to do and not a lot of time to do it." Joe tried to laugh, but it came out as a cough. When he got his breath back, he said, "No one finds my death funny except me, I guess."

ON A COOL and cloudy morning about a week and a half into my stay, Joe and Mom were napping, Ben and Mae had gone shopping, and I was alone for the first time in the house where I spent my first years. I examined the photo of the family. The little girl that was me was squinting into the sun, and handsome Charlie had a smile so big you couldn't help but feel joy in looking at it. I found the photo I had sent them, the one with the frown Aunt June thought was adorable. Someone had placed it in an album among the photos of Ben, Mae, Charlie and Joe. There I was, pasted in and behind plastic, like I had never been absent. I was on the verge of tears when the door opened, and Leah walked in. We hadn't been alone yet, the two of us. But we were both so new to Joe that both of us ached for more time.

"They abandon you?" She laid her jacket on the back of a chair.

"No, shopping and napping. Your dad is asleep, but I'm sure he would want you to wake him."

"No, let him sleep. I think it's the only time he gets relief from the pain."

Leah sat down beside me and started telling me about the photos. She told me all about her childhood weekends spent here with her grandparents. She told me about my father, who was quiet but strong, tall even in old age. He'd taken her hunting, taught her how to make rabbit snares out of twigs, how to play the fiddle. She missed him. I did as well, but not in the same way. She'd had more than two decades with him, and I only had photos. She told me about her mother, Cora.

"They're still married. Did you know that?"

"I didn't."

"Yup. He disappeared for so long, and when postcards came, they were from all over the place. They found him once when he was out West, but he wouldn't come home. Then by the time they found out he was in Maine, Kiju decided it was best to leave him be."

"Why wouldn't he come back for you?"

"He didn't know about me for a long time. And my mom wanted it that way, and Kiju said that he was a lost soul, and lost souls have to find their own way home."

I reached over and took her hand.

"I think he holds back sometimes when we talk. I think he's afraid he'll say something that will make me go away. I can't seem to convince him that I'm here for as long as he is."

I SEEMED TO fit in so quickly, almost like I'd never been lost to them and them to me. Soon, I was taking my shift with Joe, sleeping in the bed across from him, listening to his breathing, difficult and shallow, getting him water when his mouth was dry, making sure he had the right medications at the right time. He fought it, saying it wasn't my burden to bear, but helping him felt right to me.

The sun was coming up one morning and I was lying there, looking up at the ceiling, watching the dust dance on a sunbeam, when Joe cleared his throat.

"I think we should go for a drive," he said.

I sat up, leaning on my elbow and facing him. "I don't think that would be a good idea. Wouldn't it be painful for you?"

“I don’t care about that anymore. I’d rather be moving, be living in the short time I have left. I know my time is coming up any day now. So, let’s go for a drive.”

Later that morning, after much debate, Ben strapped Joe into the passenger seat of his car, with pillows all around him to keep him as comfortable as possible, and we set off. Mae and I sat in the back, and Ben drove. Leah stayed with her grandmother, waving to us from the front step as we made our way down the long gravel driveway.

“You good, Joe?” Mae asked, placing her hand on his shoulder.

Joe breathed hard. “I’m good.”

He was lying, but I’d come to understand that there was no arguing with a dying man.

We drove all day down some of the very same roads I had taken with Mark so many years before. Some looked familiar and others were new. After lunch, we stopped by the side of a dirt road where the ruins of a small house reached up out of its foundation. The tendrils of a lovely vine had wrapped themselves around empty door frames and broken glass. The lawn was overgrown with wildflowers and tall grass. It was sad but beautiful at the same time.

“This was Aunt Lindy’s place. She’s been gone a long time now, but she could make the best deer stew.” Joe pressed the button to roll down his window, taking a deep breath, almost like he could smell Aunt Lindy’s kitchen. “She was Dad’s sister. The trail to our grandfather’s hunting camp is not far, but we can’t find it anymore.”

They were all quiet, lost in memories I didn’t have. But I stayed quiet, too, and in my own way, grieved their loss.

“She was a big woman. My God, she was big,” Ben said.

“And full of love,” Joe chimed in.

“Full of stew and bread, more like it. But love, too, Joe. I agree.” Mae laughed a little.

“When she hugged, we were always afraid she was going to smother us. You were just a small thing, Ruthie. We were all scared that one day, her bosom just might swallow you whole.” Joe began to laugh, a raspy, deep laugh. Then Mae’s shoulders started to shake. Her mouth pursed, trying to hold in a laugh, but it burst open. Then Ben joined. Laughing, like yawning, is infectious, and I had no choice but to join in, too. Soon, we’d shed so

many tears that it was hard to see. Mae slumped over, holding on to her belly.

"Stoooop." She tried to stop laughing, but each time she caught her breath, she'd look at Ben and the laughing would start all over again.

"I gotta pee," I managed to say between gasping breaths.

I had to pee alongside the road while my sister held her jacket up to hide me from the boys, the laughter still echoing off the trees.

"I peed on my shoes," I yelled, which only made Mae laugh even more.

When we got back into the car, the boys had calmed down, but after one look from Joe to Ben, it started all over again. We sat in that car and laughed so long that we forgot exactly what we were laughing at. It wasn't until Joe began to cough that we were able to settle down.

"Thank you," I said.

"For what?" Mae looked over at me.

"I don't think I have ever laughed that hard in my life."

We drove home the long way, up over North Mountain and along the waters of the Bay of Fundy. The clouds turned pink and purple in the setting sun. A cotton candy sunset, Mae called it. We rolled down the windows and let the cool, salty air wash our faces until our cheeks turned pink. We drove until the sky turned dark blue and then black, until the stars shone brightly above us. Then we stopped in a field, and Ben helped Joe out of the car. In the middle of the field, in the place where I was from, with the people I'd somehow always loved but never knew, we lay on a blanket and watched the stars crawl across the sky.

SIXTEEN

JOE

 THERE IS PEACE THAT COMES THIS CLOSE TO THE END. I can't open my eyes, but I can feel Leah's hand in mine, and I want this to be the last thing I remember, the touch of my daughter. I know they're here, in this room. Even when death is this near, I'm not entirely convinced of heaven or my place in it. But I can feel Dad and Charlie standing in the corner, waiting on me. I don't feel pain anymore, and my body feels light, like a child's.

I don't want visions of my life to unreel; I want to stay in this moment with all the people I love, sisters and brothers, ghosts, and a daughter I never deserved, all in one place, with me. I think it might sound strange for anyone else, but this just might be the happiest I've been since the day the crow stole my bread in a berry field in Maine.

SEVENTEEN

RUTHIE

Joe died on a Sunday morning. He smiled at each of us before softly slipping into sleep and then into death. A quiet death for a quiet man. A man who had spent most of his life alone was surrounded by love when it was his time. Leah cried for him, held his hand and kissed it. Mae and I sat back, the way strong women do, and let him go. Ben stood at the door, as if ready to escort his ghost across the threshold. Mom refused to watch and cried softly from her chair in the living room as she watched the finches swoop in for food.

At his request, Joe was cremated. As he wished, we buried half of his ashes in Nova Scotia beside Charlie. Joe wanted the other half buried in Maine. Ten days and a funeral service later, with Leah in the front beside me, I pulled out of the driveway and headed back to the berry fields, the remaining ashes fastened in the back seat.

The small cabin looked the same as the last time I'd been there, the paint glistening in the soft evening light. Leah traced the stems of the flowers, the edges of the clouds and the crests of the blue waves with her fingers, admiring the work of her father.

Beside the steps that Joe built, we buried his ashes. As I stood hand in hand with my niece, who looked a little like me, I began to let go of my ghosts.

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