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## Red, Right, Returning

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RED, RIGHT, RETURNING

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
The Department of Drama and Communications

by

Peter Geye

B.A. University of Minnesota, 2000

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And special thanks to my parents, especially my father who answered more questions than he thought he had answers for, and to my wife, Dana Hofmann-Geye, for everything. This book is dedicated to her.

No broad breaker will fall  
Nor waves of blue,  
And you will come safe  
From the sea.

From *The Saga of the Volsungs*

## PROLOGUE

There were two photographs of his father in the maritime museum in Duluth. The first was an eighteen-by-twelve-inch, black-and-white of the crew of the *SS Ragnarok*, huddled dockside in front of the black-hulled freighter during a late winter snow squall. It was taken in March 1967, the day of her first cruise that shipping season. Most of the thirty faces were blurred in the snow or covered with the wool collars of the crew's standard issue pea coats, but the image of his father's face – the expressionless gaze peering back at Noah – was unblurred by the snow and unhidden by his collar.

Noah was last at the museum on a blustery December day six or seven years ago, while back in Duluth for the wedding of a childhood friend. He'd spent the couple of hours between the ceremony at the church and the reception at Fitger's in the museum, whimsically and unaffected, as if in a dream. For half an hour he'd stood still, shifting his eyes between the picture and the windows that looked out onto Lake Superior, reluctantly reliving moments of his childhood through the image of his father's middle-aged face. He remembered snowy afternoons at the ski jumps in Chester Bowl, mid-winter breakfasts of blueberry pancakes dripping with his mother's homemade rhubarb-butter in their house on High Street. His father used to sit across the kitchen table reading the newspaper, sneaking approving glances at him. Noah's tennis-shoed feet didn't even reach the black and white checked floor.

He remembered mid summer mornings, too, when he missed his father's face across the table with such an adolescent longing that to think of it now, to think of that longing through the filter of his memory, made a comedy of all the wasted emotions. That December day at the museum, looking at his father's face distinct among the blurry others, Noah was intent on absorbing all the memories as something outside of his experience – as someone who never knew his father might. The years had done their work.

The placard beside that first photo said: THE CREW OF THE ILL-FATED SUPERIOR STEEL SHIP *SS RAGNAROK*, MARCH 1967. THE SHIP IS AT BERTH AT THE SUPERIOR STEEL DOCKS IN DULUTH HARBOR, NEAR THE MOUTH OF THE ST. LOUIS RIVER. THE *RAG* WOULD FOUNDER OFF ISLE ROYALE EIGHT MONTHS LATER IN A GALE. TWENTY-SEVEN OF HER THIRTY HANDS WERE LOST. It also listed, in parentheses, each of the men, from left to right, front to back.

The second photograph was of the three survivors: Luke Lifthrasir, Bjorn Vifte, and Olaf Torr, Noah's father. Bjorn was little more than a lump of wet wool blanket being attended to by a couple of men in Coast Guard uniforms. Only his pained and exhausted face was visible. His beard was covered with white ice. Luke was being moved up the glazed boulder beach on a four-handled gurney, his gauze-covered arm raised triumphantly in a frostbitten fist. Olaf was sitting in the edge of the picture, alone, his shoulders slumped over his knees, the small of his back resting against an ancient cedar tree that grew inexplicably from a cleave in the bedrock. There was blood frozen in parallel lines on his cheek. In the background there was a photographer aiming his camera at the wrecked lifeboat, the same lifeboat that was on display in the museum, directly behind Noah as he stood looking at the photographs. The second placard said: THE THREE SURVIVORS OF THE WRECK OF THE *SS RAGNAROK*, ASHORE AT LAST, HAT POINT, WAUSWAUGONING BAY, LAKE SUPERIOR. NOVEMBER 6<sup>TH</sup>, 1967.

The rest of the museum, which was empty but for Noah and a freckle-faced kid sitting behind the information desk, might as well have been a memorial to his childhood reveries. There was an unending series of ship models and photo montages chronicling the nautical history of Lake Superior; there were glass cases of artifacts recovered from Great Lakes shipwrecks – forks, lanterns, life vests, hammers, a tea kettle, a sextant, a pair of black boots, an oil can, a coal shovel, a pocket watch; there was a row of small rooms replicating the cabins of different ships, a sort of timeline of living conditions aboard Great Lakes freighters; there was a steam turbine tugboat engine, circa 1925, twenty feet tall, that sat on the main floor and towered into the second floor of the museum; and finally, what must have



been considered the museum's centerpiece, a model pilot house complete with an antique wooden wheel, a chart room, and a brass Chadburn set to full steam.

From behind the wheel Noah looked out onto the channel running into Duluth harbor. On his right, beyond the canal and breakwaters, and through the bare boughs of an oak tree, the lake fell away. On his left, the hills stretched above town, shrouded in the chrysalis of early winter fog. Behind him, he knew, the aerial bridge was looming like a skeleton.

After a few minutes behind the wheel he decided to leave, but as he was walking out, he noticed the television monitor behind the information desk scrolling the schedule of ship arrivals and departures across its aqua blue screen.

'The ships are still running?' he asked the kid behind the desk.

The kid grunted and motioned to the monitor.

'So, yes?'

'Yes what?'

'Yes, the shipping season hasn't ended yet?'

'Nope, the shipping season hasn't ended.'

'And that's the schedule there? The *Er-in-dring*,' Noah sounded out the name of a Norwegian ship, 'she's leaving in forty-five minutes?'

'Yep,' the kid said looking over his shoulder to confirm what Noah was reading from the monitor. 'That's what it says.'

Noah turned and walked out without thanking him – only mildly bothered by the kid's rudeness – and headed for the canal. He checked the harbor to see if the *Erindring* was visible at any of the docks in view. When he saw that it wasn't, he decided to head up Lake Avenue a couple of blocks to a bookstore he'd noticed on the way in.

It was a quaint little place, brimming with Duluth guidebooks, paperback bestsellers, and coffee table books, but in the corner there were a few shelves of books about the lakes. Among them was a sun-bleached copy of a book titled, *Fire and Ice: The Story of the SS*

*Ragnarok*. Beneath the title, which was printed in a bold black font, was a third-rate artist's rendering of the *Ragnarok* plowing melodramatically through heavy seas. It always annoyed Noah that the wreck had become such a novelty act, that the tragedy his father survived had been capitalized on by a city desperate for excitement. It wasn't just the paint-by-numbers book covers either, but the t-shirts and hats with screen-printed images of the *Rag* pasted across them and the folksy banter of the East End denizens that bothered him. Noah knew what the loss of the *Rag* meant, and it had nothing to do with gift shops and tourism.

In 1967, following the wreck, the newspaper and local network TV affiliates searched for any clue, any quote that might shed light on a story that held the city in thrall. Over the years, as one investigation after another sought new theories about the disaster, the gossips of Duluth had embraced their findings. Overzealous reporters frequently phoned the Torr home to exploit some new, misguided angle on a story that had been pretty well explained within a month of its happening. A reporter from the *Toledo Blade* had contacted Olaf while Noah was in high school, ten years after the wreck, hoping to get an interview for a retrospective he was writing. Of course, Olaf never granted interviews, and books such as *Fire and Ice* were based mostly on speculation and facts culled from Coast Guard and Board of Inquiry reports that did little to capture the horror of the wreck. Nonetheless, Noah himself could never pass up a new version of the story.

So he bought the book, with a touch of guilt, and sauntered back up Lake Avenue to the breakwater where he braced the cold wind with clenched teeth and buttoned up his overcoat. He checked his watch, put his hands in his pockets, and peered over the edge of the breakwater, catching the distorted reflection of his face in the troughs of small waves as they lapped against the wall. I look a lot like him, he thought, recalling the picture in the museum.

Just as he turned his head, catching the nose of the *Erindring* as it slid from the fog, the ship blasted its horn giving notice to the bridge. One long blow, like a cello's moan,

followed by two short blows, were responded to in kind. The warning arms dropped on either side of the bridge, stopping what little Saturday evening traffic there was. A grinding of steel and cable set the contraption into motion. Five minutes later, as if on cue, the Norwegian freighter came into full view on the other side of the bridge, trudging through the pewter lake fog and intermittent flurries that had begun only just then. It moved slowly, almost imperceptibly, and Noah wondered, as he had a million times before, about the human mind that got itself around the original notion of a million pounds of floating steel.

There was a faint hum as the ship steamed under the raised bridge, easing its way through the channel, past Noah who had walked out to the end of the breakwater. The muted drone and eerie slapping of water against the hull accentuated a silence that seemed to grow as the ship inched its way nearer and nearer the end of the pier. As the first quarter of the bow passed him, it was quiet enough that he could hear two men standing on the superstructure, speaking in another language. They were leaning on the railing, wearing white hard hats and white jumpsuits, and from where Noah stood they looked to be smiling. As they passed, one of them tossed his cigarette into the canal and nodded at Noah. In another couple of minutes the stern was even with the end of the breakwater, and the hum was replaced with the gurgling water churning up from the prop. Five minutes later, it had dwindled in the still darkening sky to a toy-sized replica of itself creeping into the fog. Before he realized it, the fog had swallowed it whole. Noah rubbed his ears, checked his watch again, and went back to his car and headed to the hotel for the wedding reception.

The next morning he met his father for breakfast at a dive on Superior Street called The Freighter. When he got there at ten o'clock his father, who had driven down from Misquah for the occasion, was already sitting at the bar, smoking a cigarette and finishing his third Bloody Mary. The Freighter was a Superior Street landmark for the down and out, a bare-knuckle bar that had clearly lost its punch. Dark, greasy air thick with smoke and blue neon hung like the lake fog, which hadn't lifted overnight. In the back of the bar a red felt pool table sat neglected in the glow of a Hamm's beer lamp, and an unplugged jukebox

moldered under the dust and grime of half a decade. From the entrance to the half-wall that cordoned off the poolroom, the linoleum floor was gauzy with filth and curling up from the rotten floorboards along the entire wall opposite the bar. From the ceiling, a ridiculous, cobwebbed fish net hung limply. There were four porthole windows along the wall looking onto Superior Street, each of them coated with an earwax amber sludge that muffled the natural light. Behind the bar, above the bottles of cheap gin, rum, whiskey, and schnapps, there were dozens of photographs in teakwood frames of ships and sailors and ribbon cuttings and Coast Guard cutters reaming harbor ice. The history was everywhere, Noah thought, breathing through his mouth to avoid the stink of deep fryer and sour beer and spilled, stale rum.

On the mismatched barstools, half a dozen gray-haired men were sitting like barnacles, each of them looking as bored and near to death as breathing creatures could. When the door creaked shut behind Noah they turned in unison, first to look, and then to look away from the fresh-faced kid in the pressed khaki trousers standing glumly in the doorway. His father stood up, last in line and farthest from the door, looked down at him over the top of his glasses, and pulled out the barstool next to his own. ‘Hiya son, sitdown,’ he said as he pushed the two empty Bloody Mary glasses into the bar gutter and crushed out his cigarette. ‘Howareya?’

‘You’re not taking very good care of yourself,’ Noah said.

‘Ah, I’m fine.’

‘You look terrible,’ he said, maybe too soft for his father to hear.

‘What’llyahave?’

‘Just coffee – it’s ten o’clock in the morning,’ he said, checking his watch.

‘Cupofcoffee, Mel,’ he yelled to the bartender. ‘A cup of coffee for the boy.’

Their talk over the next hour could hardly have passed for conversation. Between bites of runny eggs and oily hash browns, Olaf asked Noah about his job and his fiancéé, and he told him about his little sister, whom Noah hadn’t seen in a while.

Once in a while his father's voice would surge commandingly, and all the other men in the bar would set their drinks down and look at him with smirks on their faces. His father was still a local celebrity despite the fact that he lived some hundred miles north of Duluth. But the men who frequented The Freighter were the same men who had frequented it twenty years earlier, when his father still lived in the old house up on High Street and went to The Freighter every night.

'The boy's getting married, Mel,' Olaf cackled. Mel's ruddy nose and bellicose lips were proof of a long life behind the bar.

'Congratulations!' Mel honked sarcastically. 'When's the big day?'

Noah looked at the dour old man disdainfully, and then looked at his father who was chuckling in support of Mel's sarcasm. His father's drunkenness had always struck Noah as a cumulative one. He'd rarely seen the old man drunk; there had never been any episodes of parked cars on the middle of the front lawn, no sleeping on the couch with a whiskey bottle uncorked and empty beside him, no resounding right hooks landed on his mother's or sister's cheeks. No, his father had not been a belligerent drunk. But all the years between the wreck and that morning in The Freighter had added up to *something*, to some soggy history that diminished him to half the man he'd been before. It would have been easy to call him a ghost, but that would have implied some spirit.

'Listen,' Noah said, 'I have to get back down to Minneapolis for my flight. I'll see you in October, for the wedding.'

Olaf looked away. 'Sure, sure. I'll be there.'

Noah took a few steps towards the door, stopped, and turned around to look back at his father, who was staring at him over the top of his bifocals again. He left without telling him to take it easy on the booze.

The next time he saw the old man was the evening before his wedding. Noah and Natalie had held the rehearsal dinner at her parent's Brookline home. It was a beautiful place, surprisingly un-suburban, with huge oak trees in the front yard, a deck overlooking a

pond in the back, and a red brick chimney set against the clapboard siding. It was the kind of place anyone would love. So when his father stepped out of the taxi, slung his duffle bag over his shoulder, and shrugged with disdain at the three-story house, Noah knew he would have to keep an eye on him.

From the window in the foyer, he could see his father looked presentable if a little bit rustic. His beard was longer than he remembered. His hair was too, tangled and gray, exploding into a halo. The corduroy pants and rumpled flannel shirt were on the informal side, but all things considered, his appearance could definitely have been worse.

When he met his father at the front door, he took the duffle bag off his shoulder and set it in a coat closet. 'How was your trip?' Noah asked.

'Goddamn airplanes,' Olaf said. 'And the traffic here... the cab from the airport cost twenty-five bucks, bumper to bumper back up in the tunnel, roads tore up around each corner. How can you people stand it?'

'I'm sorry we couldn't pick you up, and we'll get you for the cab ride. It's just that we've been so busy with all the wedding stuff.'

'Ah, don't worry about it, I'm fine. Is your sister here?'

'She should be here soon. We saw them last night. They stayed at our place.'

'Humph.'

He'd already botched it, telling his father that Solveig and her husband and new baby were staying with him. He hadn't invited his father to do the same. 'Let me introduce you to everybody,' Noah interjected quickly. 'Come on.'

And so they made the rounds. Natalie was delightful. Having been cautioned about the impending disaster over and over again, she graciously disregarded all of Noah's warnings and treated Olaf as if he were an old friend. When she introduced him to her own parents, Noah in tow like a prisoner, Olaf presented them with a bottle of Aquavit.

'What *is* it?' inquired Natalie's mother.

‘It’s a liqueur,’ Olaf said, rolling his eyes at Noah. ‘It’s a Scandinavian drink, made from caraway. I have a friend, a Norwegian sailor, who comes into Duluth a couple of times each year. He brings me a bottle or two each time he visits.’

‘Well thanks!’ Natalie’s father said, and again Olaf looked like he was restraining himself. He hated people like this, Noah knew, people who had no faults, no tragedy in their lives.

‘That’s really nice of you, Dad,’ Noah said.

‘This is good stuff,’ Olaf told Noah, then turned his attention to Natalie’s parents. ‘The best of it crosses the equator, on a ship, twice. It’s a potato liqueur, and in order to redistill the caraway properly, it requires the roll and pitch of the ocean waves. This bottle here,’ he said, looking down his nose at the bottle, ‘went from Norway to Madagascar and back up to Duluth, by way of the St. Lawrence. It ought to be good.’

Stunned by his father’s kindness and anxious not to let him ruin the first impression he’d made, Noah whisked him off into the den where the bar was set up. Olaf ordered a drink from a dull old man in a tuxedo and scanned the baseball memorabilia collection on Natalie’s father’s shelves.

‘What is all this crap?’ he asked.

‘These things are worth a ton of money. Mr. Maier is a huge Red Sox fan.’

‘It looks like a little kid’s bedroom in here.’

‘Don’t tell him that,’ Noah said. ‘He takes this very seriously. Listen, I have to mingle, but I’ll be right back.’

‘Sure, sure,’ Olaf said.

When Solveig arrived, Noah immediately took her by the arm and walked her into the kitchen where a crew of tuxedoed waiters and waitresses was folding linen napkins into swans. ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘will you keep an eye on him? He’s been fine so far, but he’s got that look about him, like he wants trouble. And he’s already had a couple drinks.’

‘Noah, don’t be silly. He’ll be fine.’ She was bouncing her three-month-old baby on her hip.

‘Just watch him, okay? For me?’

‘Of course. But *don’t* worry.’

Noah was looking intently at the blue-eyed kid who was trying to nuzzle up under his mother’s chin. ‘He’s the spitting image of Dad, isn’t he?’

‘I think he looks like Tom.’

‘Are you kidding?’ Noah asked. Solveig’s husband Tom was an unmistakably handsome man, but the adorable kid nestled in his mother’s arm in no way resembled him. There was something tragic in the kid’s blue eyes, something sage. ‘Just watch Dad, and don’t let him drink too much.’

To Noah’s relief, Olaf did behave himself that night. At the end of it, he asked Noah to give him a ride down to his waterfront hotel, suggesting it would give them a chance to catch up. Noah was surprised, but so pleased that nothing had gone wrong, he agreed without much consideration.

Noah kissed Natalie good night, and told her he couldn’t wait to see her the next day, in her much-ballyhooed wedding gown. She had had special lace imported from a shop in Paris and was both embarrassed and delighted at having granted herself such a lavish treat. It was a point of play between them, something to lighten the moments of anxiety that had grown more and more frequent as their wedding crept up on them. He kissed her again and wiped a tear from her eye.

‘I’m so lucky, Noah.’

‘I’m the lucky one,’ Noah said. ‘Just think, tomorrow at this time we’ll be married.’

She only sighed.

He kissed her again and went out to his car, where Olaf was waiting with his duffel at his feet. ‘Nice party, huh?’ Noah asked.



Olaf, though not drunk, at least not visibly drunk, looked annoyed. 'Where do these people come from?' he asked Noah.

'What do you mean? They're good people. They're gaga about their daughter and they treat me like a son already.'

'I just mean all that money.' The disdainful look on his face spoke volumes.

'They earn it, if you're trying to imply something. He's a doctor and she's a lawyer. Both of them went to Harvard.'

'Was I trying to imply something? I don't think I was implying anything.'

They drove back to Olaf's waterfront hotel in silence. When they got there, Noah kept his hands on the wheel and his eyes dead ahead.

'You're not mad about what I said,' Olaf declared.

'What did you say, Dad? I wasn't listening.'

'You weren't listening?'

'I wasn't.' Noah could feel his hackles going up, could feel the urge to light into the old man.

Olaf drummed his fingers on the dash. 'Listen, why don't you come in for a nightcap? The least I can do is buy my son a drink the night before his wedding.'

Noah looked at his watch, thought of six hundred reasons he didn't want to have a drink with the old man, and pulled up to the valet to have his Volkswagen parked.

In the bar, Olaf ordered a whiskey and water. Noah nodded for the same. The drinks came, and Olaf stirred his with a permanently bent, arthritic finger.

'We sure haven't spent much time together during the last few years, have we?' Olaf said.

'Dad, we've never spent much time together. I've been with Natalie for less than two years, and I know her better than I know you.'

Olaf looked like he was recharging as he gulped the whiskey down. 'She seems like a nice girl,' he said.

‘She’s a wonderful woman. I’m altogether lucky.’

‘Lucky, huh?’ Olaf said, and nodded his head and pursed his lips as if to console him. It was an expression that Noah remembered from his childhood, one that his father employed whenever Noah was caught in a lie. But, Noah thought, I’m not lying. *I am lucky*. So why is he mocking my luck? Why is he insinuating, on the night before my wedding, of all times, that I’m not lucky?

‘Yeah, Dad,’ he said. ‘I’m a lucky guy.’ Noah was amazed at how quickly he could summon all his resentment on such short notice.

‘What luck?’ Olaf said under his breath.

‘What does that mean?’

‘How the hell can you call it luck when you’re being rolled into marriage?’

‘What is *that* supposed to mean? You were married for twenty years!’ Noah was incensed. ‘To my mother, don’t forget! You were married to my mother. Ignore the fact that you’re my *father*, forget the implication in that, just consider *her*.’

Olaf finished the last third of his drink in a single swallow and signaled for another without saying a word. There was big band music coming from the nearby ballroom and the din of partying conventioners resonated in the bar. Noah thought: This is it; this is the last time I need to see the miserable bastard. He was trembling.

‘I’ve got a few years on you, Noah,’ his father said calmly. ‘I know what a lifetime of marriage can do to a man.’

‘What in the hell do you know about a lifetime of anything but coming and going, huh? You were always *gone*. You weren’t *married*, not like most people are, and you certainly weren’t enough of a father to be taking these liberties now. Do you honestly mean to sit here and give me advice? Do you honestly mean to lecture me on *marriage*? Give me a fucking break.’ He was still trembling. ‘What’s the catch? What’s the point of all this?’

‘There’s no catch,’ his father replied. ‘Just some honest advice I wish my father had given me.’

‘Don’t you get it? Don’t you understand what you’re saying? Not only are you insulting Natalie, you’re insulting my mother, *your wife*. And you’re insulting me too.’

‘I’m not trying to offend anyone...’

‘Oh bullshit! It’s the only thing you’re capable of!’ Noah interrupted. ‘You offend people every time you open your goddamn mouth.’ He shook his head violently for a minute, thought of the absurdity of it all, wanted to scream a thousand things but didn’t know where to begin again. ‘Are you seriously playing Dad now? I’m supposed to bite on all this bullshit? You ass.’

Olaf didn’t waver. ‘Someday you’ll...’

‘Oh for god’s sake, spare me the lesson on what I’ll regret. Save that nonsense for yourself, in the woods. Don’t try coming to terms with your life at the expense of my happiness. I don’t want to hear it.’

‘You will hear it!’ Olaf boomed, loud enough so that many of the people in the bar turned to look. ‘You’ll hear me tell you that marriage ruins a man. Your mother ruined me, and Natalie’s going to ruin you. I don’t give a *damn* about your luck. I’m telling you that marriage ruins a man!’

Noah looked at him, memorizing the disdain he felt and the look of drunken self-assurance on the old man’s face. When it was sufficiently burned in his mind, he dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the bar and walked out without a word.

The next afternoon Olaf showed up at the church in his rented tuxedo, his beard trimmed and the rim of gray hair combed down neatly. He sat there easily during the ceremony, kissed Natalie on the cheek while they danced at the reception, and behaved as if nothing had happened the night before.

At the end of the night, as everyone was leaving the hotel ballroom, Olaf took Noah by the shoulder and told him he hoped everything would work out, told him that he hoped he would be happy. Noah couldn’t tell if he was being disingenuous or sincere, and he

couldn't bring himself to respond. So he just looked at him, a long penetrating look that sought nothing.

Now, whenever he found himself out on Castle Island with a pair of binoculars, watching the parade of ships gliding surrealistically in and out of the tea-tinged waters of Boston Harbor, he would think back to the narrow canal going in and out of Duluth Harbor, to the *Erindring*, the last ship he saw leaving that December day, sailing silently past in the crystallized fog that only Superior could muster. He would think about the fecund stink of salt water on a hot summer day and how different it was from the water in Superior. He would watch the gulls and pigeons, all so desperate in their crying game, and remember that there was something almost epic, something so wild and honest about the gulls in Duluth Harbor, the way they fished first and begged only after the smelt had gone deep. Out on Castle Island, with industrial south Boston looming behind him like a bustling monument to hard work, he would sense some vague emptiness that grew exponentially with the passing of each ship. It wasn't a harkening back, a call for better days in better places. It was more like time running out, though he never would have admitted it to himself.

When those late afternoons were over and the horizon to the east grew darker, he would hop back on his bike and pedal up Northern Avenue, past all the docks on the Inner harbor. Then up through downtown and the Commons, and finally over the Charles and through Cambridge to their loft on Magazine Street.

After he showered and settled down in the den with a newspaper or book and a cold beer, Natalie would always come in to ask him how he was.

He'd shrug. 'Want to watch the Sox tonight?'

'They've been breaking my heart for too long,' she'd say.

'How can a baseball team break your heart?'

'Haven't we covered this before? Didn't we decide that because you're not from here you just don't get it?'

'Still, I want to figure it out.'

'I somehow doubt you ever will,' she'd conclude playfully. And with that they'd settle down for nine innings. Safe, so far away from the past.

**PART ONE: *Red, Right, Returning***

The aspens were white, like bones, and bony; the last of their pale yellow leaves were falling. On either side of the road the pattern of trees made an infinity of crude geometry that had begun to lull him. He'd been toying with the car radio, tuning the red line up and down the AM dial, when he heard a disc jockey from a station in Marquette, Michigan announce the time, seven twenty-five, and a forgotten song. The first few chords of a steel guitar number moaned before fading to static. He turned the radio off, cleared his throat after a sip of coffee, and settled into the white noise of the tires on the asphalt. It had been more than an hour since he'd seen another car.

He figured he'd be there soon, and looked out at the water wondering how many miles it was across the lake to Marquette. He thought, Dad would know, and he'd be embarrassed by my ignorance.

Occasionally the road would curve to the right, to the east, and the trees would disperse and the brown rocks and the brown water of the lake would come into view. The lake was unusually still, especially in contrast with his memories of it tonguing up onto the stone beaches and boulders. They were a child's memories though, the water all froth and fury.

He had been expecting the sun to rise over the lake but it was too late in the year, too far to fall, and it was rising over the land instead. Again he thought, Dad would have a mouthful on that blunder. Then he was watching the horizon over the lake to the north, trying to remember the adage about a red sky in morning. It was red, the sky over the lake, and it looked threatening. He remembered his childhood and the late season gales that were the curse of his mother, the curse of all the sailors' wives. He never knew what to think about the storms but that they *were* spectacular, and he suspected one in the spiraling clouds.

Minnesota highway 61 snakes about two hundred miles northeast from Duluth to the Canadian border. From Two Harbors, a small town twenty miles north of Duluth, to the border, the two-lane highway winds through the thick aspen, birch and fir woods of the Superior National Forest, over the countless creeks and rivers - the Encampment, Gooseberry, Temperance, Poplar and Cascade among the many, all with their glacial waters - gripping the western shore of Lake Superior. After Two Harbors, none of the half dozen small towns have more than a couple thousand people in them until you reach Grand Marais, still forty miles south of the border, which itself has fewer than a three thousand people. When Noah was a child the North Shore was a savage place. The highway had always been ratty with potholes and frost heaves, and deserted but for a few dilapidated wooden billboards and battered storefronts and the highway signs warning of deer and moose crossings. He and his little sister Solveig and his mother and father would make the drive to visit his grandpa Torr, his father's father, who lived just north and east of the town of Misquah on a little lake named Forsone, twice each year - once in the summer, when his father took a week vacation, and again at Christmas. His grandpa Torr died in 1969, which meant that he hadn't been to the house on Lake Forsone, nor on highway 61, in more than thirty years.

Not much had changed as he drove along the highway but that the two deadliest curves, curves that had once pinned cars between sheer three hundred foot cliffs on either side of the road, one dropping into Lake Superior, the other climbing up from it, had been replaced with two quarter-mile tunnels burrowed into the craggy bedrock. The weathered wooden signs were still there advertising places like the Poplar Lodge, the Manitou Motel and Ingrid's Wild Blueberry Pies. The signs warning of deer crossings were still there too.

Two days earlier, on a Sunday, he was watching the last Red Sox game of the season on the television at his house in Cambridge. The phone rang. 'Hello,' he answered.

'Noah?' the voice said. 'Noah's that you?'

'Dad?' he asked. 'Dad where are you calling from?'



‘Noah this is your father.’

‘I know Dad. Where are you calling from?’

‘I’m at the gas station in Misquah. There’s a pay phone here.’ Something about his father’s voice gave away his isolation; it was the voice of a silent man, a man who hadn’t spoken aloud for some time.

‘Is anything wrong?’

‘I don’t know. I think so.’ He sounded old, he was, but he had been for a long time, and during their infrequent conversations, Noah never thought of him as an old man. His voice was always that of Noah’s childhood – commanding and strong. ‘Noah, I think something’s wrong.’ He paused, the effect, though unintended, left Noah surprisingly anxious.

‘What is it?’

‘Something’s wrong, Noah,’ he repeated. ‘I shit a bunch of bloody tar this morning.’

‘What do you mean you shit a bunch of tar this morning? How could you tell?’

The old house on Lake Forsone didn’t have running water or a toilet inside. In order to go to the bathroom, Noah knew, his father had to walk thirty yards up a path through the woods to the privy. It was a burgundy painted box on a slight hill. From the seat, whatever fell dropped ten feet into an antique septic tank that was pumped out every spring. Just thinking of it made him cringe.

‘I shit a bunch of bloody tar, Noah.’

‘Dad, listen to me,’ Noah said both annoyed and surprisingly alarmed. ‘How could you it was bloody? You can’t see down into the toilet there.’

‘No, you can’t.’

‘Well then what in the hell are you talking about?’

‘Noah, I shit my pants. In bed. It happened this morning before I woke up.’

‘What?’ he asked, almost incredulously now. Noah still carried the same mental snap shot of his father that he had as a boy. It was a picture of him standing on the deck of his ship as it inched under the aerial bridge into Duluth harbor. It was an early August evening in his memory, and the dregs of a thunderstorm were still hanging over the hills behind the city. His father, First Mate on the *SS Ragnarok*, was instructing one of the young deckhands beside the railing, holding the thick stern line above his head. He was wearing his yellow slickers and a pair of red suspenders over his bare chest, the muscles in his back seemed fake in retrospect, they were so ropy and braided, and his hair flailed out from beneath his rain cap. Noah remembered being able to hear him as the ship steamed past he and his mother who were standing out on one of the piers that gave entrance to the harbor. He hollered for his father then, and between the ship’s horn blasts he remembered him turning, holding the line that was as big around as a man’s arm above his head, and waving his free hand, a hand as big as a tennis racket, while he shot his son’s name towards him.

‘Christ,’ Olaf said again. ‘I don’t know.’ There was something more than fear in his father’s voice, if there was any fear at all. He was as stoic and pensive a man as Noah had ever known. He never wavered in his confidence, never showed his cards as his mother used to say, but now the tremor of his voice gave away his confusion.

‘Tell me what happened. Be more specific,’ Noah said.

‘How in the hell can I be more specific? I woke up this morning and my pajama pants were a mess. It was all black and bloody.’

‘How did you get to the gas station?’

‘I drove the goddamn truck.’

‘How are you feeling? Can you get yourself to the hospital in Grand Marais? You’ve got to get to the hospital and see what’s going on.’

‘Like hell I’m going to the hospital,’ he interrupted.

‘Listen, you shit your pants. It was bloody; you’ve got to get to the hospital.’

'I'm eighty-two years old, Noah.'

'This is exactly my point, Dad.'

'For fucksake, I'm not going to the hospital.'

'Then I'm coming there. You can't be alone. Do you understand what a bloody stool usually means for a man your age? Do you know what this might mean?' Noah couldn't believe what he was proposing. 'If you're not going to the hospital on your own, then I'm coming to take you myself. I'll leave today,' he said, then translated the miles into hours. 'I can be there by Tuesday.'

'Oh hell, Noah. There's nothing for you to do here.'

'I'm going to take you to the hospital, Dad. I can get to Duluth but I don't remember how to get to the house.'

'Goddamnit Noah. I just thought I'd let you know in case something happens.'

'Nothing's going to happen. Tell me how, and I'll get there by Tuesday.'

The directions he gave Noah were those of a man who knew where he was, knew where he was going too, unconsciously. 'Past Misquah,' he said, 'past the gas station, it's called the Landing - there's a big red sign on the right - you'll see a county road going up into the hills. At the turn there's a cluster of tall firs, on the right, burnt red from this summer. Five or ten minutes into the hills you'll see Lake Forsone Road, a dirt road. Follow it east. There's a bunch of red milkweed in the ditch on the right, still in color. Follow the road around the lake. You should park up on the road 'cause the trail down to the lake is all goddamn rutted out. You'll remember when you get up here. Besides, it's simple now that I think about it. Just follow the red landmarks - like harbor buoys. Red, right, returning.'

I'm not returning, Noah thought. Returning would have been going back to the house on High Street or to the apartment he lived in while he went to the University of Minnesota, eight years there. No, he may have been going to see his father, but he was not returning, not like his father meant, not home.

A calmer son might have asked him to be more specific, might have asked for the mileage between the landmarks, or for actual addresses, or, at least, for mile markers. But Noah was such a sudden and inexplicable mess and he'd lost all reason. 'Fine Dad, I'll be there on Tuesday.'

As he passed through Misquah, finally, he didn't see anything to match the directions but the gas station - no tuft of firs, no county road, no wild flowers. Only after driving up to Cutface Creek and turning back, then driving back into Misquah and turning around yet again, was he able to spot the unmarked road heading into the hills. The firs his father mentioned were three short, barely distinct trees, amidst a forest of millions; the burnt red he described was an almost indiscernible rouge the trees wore among their green, green faces.

The clouds that Noah had been watching move steadily over the lake an hour earlier had disappeared to the east or north and been replaced with a hazy, summery sky. He was exhausted from the drive - some thirty-six hours including stops along the way and two short, fitful nights of sleep in hotels in Buffalo, New York and Hinckley, Minnesota - and his driving senses were dull and blunt. Perhaps that was why he didn't see the doe spring from the dense woods and tall grass on the unmarked county road. Had he been wide awake, had he drunk the entire cup of coffee he bought at the gas station when he filled up in Two Harbors, perhaps he would have seen the deer sooner or had the presence of mind to swerve to the left. Instead he pulled his hands instinctively from the wheel to cover his face and slammed on the brakes with both feet.

He hadn't been driving fast - not more than fifty miles per hour - but his slow and unswerving reaction caused him to hit the deer almost the instant he stepped on the breaks. The jolt was astounding, and the car stopped immediately. When he opened his eyes and lowered his hands from his face he saw the deer staggering back from the force of the impact and watched it collapse beneath its broken hind legs. Despite the clamour and commotion of the accident, Noah was already remembering the episode like a scene in slow

motion from a silent movie. It had all happened in seconds, blindly, but it was in his mind like an indelible childhood memory

The cup of coffee had spilled across the dash and windshield, and its smell filled the stalled car. He restarted it, and backed onto the grooved, gravel shoulder where he shut it off again and peered at the deer lying on the road. Everything was quiet and calm again, and happening in real time.

He opened the car door, stepped out, and looked at the deer. Even from the short distance between them he could see its legs, so lithe and slender, broken and tangled under its fallen body. Its neck was elongated and stretched unnaturally in the opposite direction of the car, and its front hooves clicking spasmodically on the pavement. Cautiously Noah walked towards it remembering adamant lectures from his boyhood, served up by his father or grandfather, on what to do if he ever hit an animal on the highway.

‘If it’s a small animal, a squirrel or raccoon, it’s best to just leave it, just keep driving,’ one of them might have said. ‘If it’s something bigger, a deer or a wolf, be careful approaching it. They’ve got an instinct to run that we can’t imagine. They like to die alone too, so if it’s possible, if it’s at all possible, they’ll get up and run. You have to be careful because they might charge you. They might be lying there dead, but they might be mustering strength too, strength for the last dash. And,’ they’d conclude, ‘if you hit something bigger than a deer, a moose or a bear, well, unless you’re driving a semi, you’ve probably got nothing to worry about. You’re probably dead yourself.’

Noah never suspected that the lectures would come in handy, nor could he believe as he walked towards the deer that he was able to recall them now. Twenty feet in front of the deer he stopped. He couldn’t believe it was going to get up and charge him or run into the woods to die alone, so he walked closer. A couple feet from it he stopped again. To his surprise it was still alive, its wet eyes blinking slowly, looking at him with the last of its life. The tawny, unbloodied belly was still heaving uneasily, but only for a few short minutes. Slowly, its eyes went motionless and closed dead while Noah stood there watching.

He noticed the warmth of the morning then, felt it in the wind and the hazy sun, and figured he'd better move the deer off of the road. He grabbed its two hind legs and pulled it across the pavement and onto the shoulder. His arms were shaking and he felt a huge surge of sadness swell inside him. The deer was so young and gangly, so unready to die. He looked into the tall grass from where the doe had sprung and saw a tuft of red wild flowers hanging withered on their stems.

Lake Forsone road was easy to find. One hundred yards past the deer, the crudely paved county road veered sharply to the left. In the middle of the curve, on the right, a dusty gravel road tunneled into the thick fir forest. There was a bleached red metal sign that marked the road, and he turned onto it.

After only a couple of minutes on the gravel road, Lake Forsone came into view through the trees. The road turned to the left, to the north, past a public access road on the right and another gravel road that went left, went west. None of it looked familiar.

As the road went on it continued away from the lake so that it was a surprise when he saw a mailbox, barely attached to a rotted post, with the name of his father faded to the edge of invisibility in white letters. It was the only sign of civilization around, a sad sign too. He stopped the car and opened the mailbox; there were several envelopes postmarked as far back as September 2nd, supermarket flyers, real estate offers, magazines, and four or five envelopes from the Superior Steel Company. He took it all with him.

He turned the car onto the overgrown trail despite his father's advice to leave it parked on the road. There was long grass growing on the trail and the overgrown trees brushed the top of his car. If not for the mailbox, he thought, I would never have seen the road. For a quarter mile he crept back towards the lake under the canopy of trees and over the bumpy road. Suddenly, the road widened and began to go down hill. There were rain run-off ruts a foot or more deep and what little gravel was left on the trail was loose and unpacked. After he'd made the last of three sharp turns, the house appeared before him, slower and larger than the deer, but just as unexpectedly.

He parked his car next to the same old, rusted Suburban that his father bought the year Noah went into the seventh grade. But for the truck, everything was awfully unfamiliar. The house, which he had known in his childhood as a sort of amber apparition sitting in the middle of the dark woods with its rough-sawn cedar siding, had taken on an almost green-gray, nauseous hue; the grainy, knotted siding had been weathered smooth. The roof was bowed slightly and had several spots of dead grass growing up between the shingles.

His grandpa Torr had been a persnickety old man and he kept the house in ship shape. The woodpiles, like bunkers along two sides of the house and in the middle of the yard, were so expertly stacked that his grandpa often boasted they could withstand a tornado. The trees were always trimmed too, and the small lawn always mowed. His grandpa Torr's fastidiousness was passed on to his father - who redoubled it - so the disrepair of the house was disconcerting, seemed to almost portend doom. Only time, time of the long variety, could have done this to the place, which meant either that his father had become a different man - not likely - or that he'd been unwell enough or unable to maintain the place for years. In either case the house, he realized, was not the same place it had been thirty years before. Noah decided it was time to quit looking for familiar things - time had taken care of them.

He wasn't sure if he should knock or just walk in. After a second of hesitation, he pushed the screen door open and stepped into the house. 'Dad?' he said into the grayish room. 'Dad?' he whispered again, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. There was no answer, and after looking in each of the two bedrooms, he realized his father was not inside the house. He stepped back outside and walked to the shed - which was in even worse repair than the main house - that sat nestled in a clearing. The door was locked though, and the curtains drawn. He stood for a minute watching the privy, and when his father didn't appear from inside, he started down the path to the lake.

As he tripped down the path, he remembered the summer days as a child when he'd followed his father, who carried a stringer of trout caught right off the dock, up this same path. His father was always shirtless, muscles tempered and taut, his long, graceful stride full of purpose. Noah could never keep up with him for running, and he was always out of breath when he reached the top of the hill where his father would already be at work on the tree stump behind the house filleting the fish with uncanny speed. Those days were pouring back to him sadly now, very sadly for some reason, as he got closer and closer to the lake. As he came out of the shade of the trees, he stopped dead in his haste.

Was that man, no longer lean but frail and muscle-less, sitting in that pittance of a rowboat, attached to that dock equally lame, really his father? He had a short rod in the water, fishing in the shallows along the shore for pan fish or perch, not trout. He was shirtless, his back taking the muted sun, and hunched over painfully. His spine was arched and could be seen through his papery skin. His hair was stark white, bushy and bald both.

'Dad?' he said, but must have said too softly because the old man simply sat there. 'Dad?' again, louder this time, but still the old man did not hear. 'Dad?' raising a hand this time, louder and with a step in his father's direction.

Olaf turned and looked up. 'Ah, he's here,' he said, his voice sandy and soft.

'Hello.'

Olaf reeled in his line and set the rod in the bottom of the boat. With a seaman's steadiness he stepped out of the boat and onto the dock. It was as ramshackle a thing as he'd ever seen, that boat. The dock too, with its missing planks and rusted posts, had obviously endured many winters in the water. It bent unnaturally - like the old man's spine - over the lake. When he stepped on it, the whole thing moved with his weight. It looked to be un-anchored. His father's seaman's grace was lost on it, too. The confident steps in the boat became palsied and tentative on the dock, and were even worse as he stepped onto the beach.

'How was the trip?' Olaf asked.



‘The trip was okay. It was fine.’

‘Alright.’

Noah had planned on being calm and collected, but as his father stepped near him and put his hand on his shoulder, he felt himself losing his composure. The old man had become so slight and diminished that Noah was able to look squarely into his eyes. The two men stood motionless, looking at each other for a few awkward seconds. ‘How are you feeling?’ Noah managed to say.

‘Fine.’

‘Good. That’s good,’ he said.

‘How about a cup of coffee?’

‘Sure.’

‘You look beat,’ Olaf said as they started up the hill.

‘I am,’ Noah said. ‘It was a long drive.’

‘You drive straightaway here?’

‘I stopped a couple times. I got here as soon as I could.’

‘Did you eat breakfast?’ Olaf asked, out of breath at the top of the hill.

‘No, no. I stopped for coffee in Two Harbors but it spilled all over the dashboard when I hit a deer.’

‘You hit a deer? Where?’

‘Just on the county road, right before the turn off for the lake,’ Noah gestured indiscriminately towards the road.

‘Did you kill it?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘There are so many goddamn deer up here.’

‘I remember that.’

‘Now more than ever I mean. Just last night I counted twenty-nine of them in the yard.’

‘Is that right?’

‘They’re all over the goddamn place. How about some oatmeal?’ he said.

‘Yeah, some oatmeal would be good.’ And Noah watched his father make breakfast.

The cylindrical box of oats was on a shelf behind him. The coffee too. Atop the potbellied stove, which sat along the wall between the two bedroom doors, a kettle was steaming. Olaf walked from the kitchen to the stove without any grace or sureness of step.

‘Can I help?’ Noah asked.

‘No.’ He picked the kettle up with a grubby mitt, walked back to the counter and poured the hot water over the coffee grounds. Then he rationed out two bowls of oats and poured water over each.

‘You want some nuts or raisins with your oats?’ he asked.

‘Sure. Whatever you’re having will be good.’ The nuts and raisins were both in mason jars. The almonds were sitting on top of one of the bookcases, and he went into his bedroom for the raisins. He mixed both bowls of oatmeal as if they were filled with cement, and carried them one at a time to the table. Then he brought two ceramic mugs over, wiping each of them out with a dry dishrag.

‘Sugar for your coffee?’

‘No thanks,’ Noah said.

Olaf pulled it out anyway. It was in the refrigerator. ‘Well then, come on and get while everything’s still warm.’

They ate silently at first, his father’s elbows flared wide. Territorially, Noah thought. There was no flavor whatsoever to the oatmeal, and the raisins and nuts were both hard as stones. The coffee was strong though, too strong even, and terrible.

Olaf was concentrating, it seemed to Noah, determined to show that whatever was eating him alive from inside hadn’t gotten too far along yet. Noah couldn’t bring it up – not then. So instead he said, ‘You’ve been doing your reading.’ There were two bookcases

in the dark corner of the cabin, each of them teeming with books and magazines. In the middle of the kitchen table there was a *Wisconsin Lawyer* magazine with splotches of butter or grease on its cover. 'What's this?' Noah asked, pointing at it.

'Oh, Luke sent me that stuff to me last year. Said it might interest me. I can't make heads or tails of it though.' His jaw quivered as he spoke. 'You remember Luke?'

'Who could forget Luke?'

'Yeah, Luke was a good man.'

'What about all that stuff? Since when are you such a book worm?'

'Tell me what the hell else I've got to do up here. I can hardly make it up and down the hill to the lake anymore.'

'Well you look good,' Noah lied.

'Shit, I look like I'm already dead. You want some more coffee?'

'Sure.' He topped off Noah's mug.

'I'd better take a little rest. Just an hour or so.'

'I could use a rest myself.'

'Make yourself at home,' Olaf said. He was walking back to his room. Each step seemed to bring him nearer a collapse. Noah wondered if his father hadn't been putting himself out, exaggerating his wellness and pushing himself too hard. 'I'll just be an hour or so,' Olaf said and walked into his room.

Noah got up from the table and brought his coffee to the overstuffed chair next to the bookcases. There was an afghan draped over the back of it, one that sent him reeling through a catalog of memories. He stopped on his grandma Dahlie, his mother's mother and, he thought almost certainly, the knitter of the afghan. He hadn't thought of her for years, but as soon as he pulled it over his knees and the buried scents came lingering up from it, scents that had been trapped in it for ages he presumed, it was as if he'd never thought of anything else. The dime store perfume, the banana bread, the powder and Oil of

Olay, her peppermint candy breath, it was all locked in that lamb's wool throw, either truly or in his fairy tale imagination of that morning.

He sat there looking at the spines of the books on the shelves – Louis L'amour, popular mysteries, ham radio and Chevy Suburban manuals, maps of constellations and the Great Lakes. He settled back and replayed the morning. It hadn't been nearly as painful as he'd expected.

When his father called four days earlier and Natalie saw Noah sitting dumb on the couch and asked him what was wrong, he could hardly begin to tell her. Years of making half-hearted excuses for why he never saw his father had left him tricked, unable to recall the twists of his subterfuge.

‘Noah, who was that? What’s wrong?’ she’d asked. The ballgame was over and a beer commercial was half-blocked by the closed captioning on the television

‘My father,’ he said.

‘What is it?’

‘He’s sick.’

‘What do you mean he’s sick? How sick?’

‘I don’t know, pretty sick I think,’ he said.

‘Is he in the hospital?’

‘He won’t go to the hospital. The fool.’

‘Why won’t he go to the hospital?’

‘He thinks he’s too old.’

‘Jesus,’ she said. ‘What’s wrong with him? What did he say?’ There was a real urgency in the tone of her voice, an urgency that wanted an explanation without pressing his emotions. That quality of voice was one of the first things Noah had come to love about his wife. He loved the way it always sounded so reasonable, the way the arc of it could envelope any awkward or tense situation and tame it, the way, when they kissed each other good night and she told him she loved him it made him feel like he was in a warm bath.

‘Black, bloody stool,’ he said, and face went white. ‘He shit his pants.’

‘Noah,’ she said, putting her head on his shoulder and rocking him gently in her arms. ‘Oh Noah,’ she said.

‘I have to go see him,’ he said after a moment. ‘I’ve got to go see him.’

‘Really?’ She untangled herself from him and sat up on the edge of the couch.

‘I think so.’ The color was flushing back into his cheeks.

‘I can’t believe it. Did he ask you to come?’

‘No.’

‘You haven’t seen him in years, Noah.’

‘I know,’ he said, and the weight of this simple fact, brought to light in her sweet voice, crushed the last of his stoic reserves. He sobbed freely in her arms and the tick-tock of her gentle rocking.

‘Is it best that you go, Noah? Maybe you should think about it, maybe you should call Solveig.’

‘I have to go,’ he said, weighing her sound advice against an impulse he never expected to feel again, one he thought long dead. ‘He could be dying. I mean, what if he’s dying?’

She didn’t say anything, only held him tight in her arms.

‘I have to,’ he mumbled again, more to himself than to her, trying to convince himself that despite the years of drifting apart, there was still some hint of family order that governed the situation. He looked up at her, wiping the tears from his eyes with the bulbous knuckles he inherited from the very man in question, and marveled at his luck.

Although Natalie knew of the gap between Noah and his father— she would have had to be blind not to — knew that it started when Noah was a young boy, in 1967, the year that his father’s ship sank, knew that it worsened when Noah’s mother died right before he went away to college, and knew that there had been some kind of finality since she and he had married, she did not know how it all added up. She did not know whether the two had become strangers by way of Olaf’s history alone, a history she only knew preliminarily and through the cloudy lens of Noah’s memory, or by some unintelligible and mutual, more general falling out.

Noah had spent countless midnights tangled up with his wife's naked arms and legs in their Chelsea apartment – their first place together, a place filled with the clutter of starting out – working through, for her benefit he thought then, the rumors of his memories. Their bedroom was lit by the neon sign that shone in from the door above the Chinese restaurant on the floor below them. Even the things he remembered vividly about his boyhood - both the good things and the bad - managed to find themselves flummoxed in the twists of his forgetting.

During the hundred or so nights of their first winter together, Natalie had managed to whittle from Noah only the silhouette of his childhood, one that she understood to be split between the first seven years of his life, seven years of unconventional but happy times, and the eleven years after them before his mother died. Almost every night they would lie in bed with the stereo on, listening to John Prine or Bob Dylan tapes clicking in the cassette player, while Natalie listened to Noah tell the roundabout stories of his growing up.

The earliest memory he had of his father was also the most enduring. Their house on High Street up near Chester Park gave a full view of the ships entering Duluth harbor, at least when the fog permitted. As a boy, Noah would sit by the big bay window in the living room watching for the unmistakable silhouette of the black-hulled *SS Ragnarok*. Its distinguishing feature, other than the black, not red, hull, was the serpentine wave of its coal black stack. By the age of four or five Noah could spot the ship in the early morning light and point it out to his mom.

‘Daddy!’ he would say. ‘There’s the *Rag*.’

‘You’re right, Noah. That’s daddy’s ship.’

‘Daddy’s home!’ he’d shriek.

‘Daddy will be home soon. They’ve still got to dock her,’ she’d say, messing his bangs as the two of them stood at the window watching the ship slink through the canal.

‘Daddy’s home!’ Noah would sing again, and then wait with unbridled excitement for the gray Chevy pick-up to park in the ally behind the garage.

When he'd finally arrive, his father would get out of the truck, his massive body uncoiling from the front seat, dinosaursque to Noah's child's eyes, and walk into the yard. No matter what the weather, he'd sit on the wrought-iron bench next to the fence near the alley and smoke his last cigarette.

From his bedroom window Noah would watch these last moments of his father's getting home. He must have seen the same routine forty or more times before he finished grade school, so many times that despite the dramatic changes in seasons or his father's appearance or Noah's own coming of age, they had all melted into one composite memory. All of them that is but one: On thanksgiving morning, 1966, when Noah was six years old, he watched his father return home as the same man who left for the last time in his life.

The truck stopped in the ally and the idling engine choked off. His mother shouted at Noah to get a comb through his hair. 'Hurry, Noah, before your father comes in,' she said. But he could not hurry, and since she was busy in the kitchen preparing the turkey and stuffing and pumpkin pie, he did not. Instead, as usual, he sat in his window admiring the man.

Earlier in the week, on the last unseasonably warm day, the third day of warm weather that had melted most of the first snow, Noah had watched his mother try to loosen a hinge on their fence with a pair of pliers.

'What you doing, mommy?' he asked, bundled in his snowmobile suit, scarf, hat, boots and mittens despite the forty-degree temperatures.

'I'm trying to fix the fence so daddy won't have to.'

'Why's it broken?'

'Sometimes things just break, they get old.'

'How come?' he insisted.

'They just do, Noah.'

So he watched her with all of her slight body and deceptive strength strain to loosen the bolt on the fence hinge. But she couldn't, and it went unfixed.



On Thanksgiving morning 1966, his father reached into the backyard and unhinged the gate. Noticing that it was broken, he took off his leather glove and squatted to have a look. He fidgeted with it for a minute before gripping it tightly in his bare hand, as one might to open a bottle of ketchup, and loosened the bolt that his mother could not with her pliers.

He was wearing his weather worn pea jacket and the gray wool trousers that his mother had made for him. He had a wild head of hair, hair Noah inherited, and a Walt Whitman beard. His wire-rimmed glasses gave him an intellectual look that not even his Sorrel boots could diminish. He was lean, with titanic shoulders and pillar-like legs that seemed to make up most of his six feet six inches, even in the longish pea jacket. Setting the bolt on the bench next to him, he combed his beard with long, crooked fingers. The temperature had dropped below zero again, but he wore no hat. The sun was blinding, scintillating off of the crusted patches of snow, and he looked tired. He always looked tired.

From a pocket inside his coat, he pulled a crumpled package of Drum Tobacco; from the pocket of his pants he withdrew his cigarette papers. Then with the ease of habit, he rolled a thin cigarette and set it between his lips. Noah was watching deliriously from his bedroom window, wanting nothing but to climb his father's legs and set his face in his beard, to smell the sick cigarette and the pea coat ripe with the fresh smell of the lake breezes. But first his father had to smoke. In the summer or spring, with the bedroom window open, Noah could smell the butane first. The mellow flame would materialize from the silver lighter and set the cigarette glowing. The smell would sit on a breeze and carry up to his window and he would take it in. Then the first blown smoke would follow, and he'd take that in too. That Thanksgiving morning though, with the window sealed shut, he was made to imagine the smells through the frosted glass. But it was never difficult to imagine.

When his father finally came inside, Noah ran down the carpeted steps two at a time. Within seconds his face was in his fathers beard, just like he had imagined it. 'Hello boy,'

his father whispered gruffly in his ear. 'Where are your mama and little Solveig? Did you take good care of them?'

'Mommy's in the kitchen. Solveig's still asleep.'

'I brought you this from Charlevoix,' he said pulling a tiny model of a wooden ship from the inside pocket of his coat. 'And these too,' he continued, this time pulling five taconite pellets from the same pocket. He brought the taconite each time he returned. 'Don't tell your mama,' he concluded and rumbled Noah's hair.

'No way, Daddy! No way will I tell her.' And he ran back upstairs to inspect the toy ship and put the taconite pellets in the wooden barrel buried deep in his closet.

In the hallway downstairs he heard his mother say, 'How was the run?' And his father, easy and gently to his wife, hugging her Noah imagined, said, 'It was a long getting home.'

Just less than a year later, sometime before it was light on November sixth, 1967, Olaf and two of his crew washed ashore near Grand Portage, Minnesota in one of the thirty-person lifeboats that belonged to the *Ragnarok*. The gunwale was caved on the starboard side, and coated with ice twenty inches thick to port. It was the starboard side that absorbed the brunt of the hellacious landing on the rocks north of Grand Portage. The three men had somehow managed to stay alive for more than eight hours on the boat; this despite the hyperboreal water of Lake Superior regularly washing over them and freezing almost instantly in the sub zero weather.

Unbeknownst to them, they'd been towing a fourth member of the crew too, presumably for some thirty nautical miles. Red Farvann, their anchor, was a twenty-three year old porter on the *Rag*. When the lifeboat crashed onto shore, Olaf, Luke Lifthrasir and Bjorn Vifte struggled to help each other onto the beach. They sat huddled and hypothermic and so near to death, each of them, that when they saw a sort of ice buoy attached to an aft line and realized that encased in the block of ice was one of their mates, none of them could summon the strength to brave the killing shore water and haul the line in. After a few

violent breakers finished splitting the lifeboat in half, the human anchor came free, crashing onto the rocks itself. The first pounding shattered the ice that had built up on his torso and head, the second separated one side of Red Farvann's face from the other.

The Coast Guard station in Grand Marais launched two rescue boats hours after the *Ragnarok* made her mayday. They also launched a search plane as soon as daylight broke. Taking into account the awesome northeasterly winds - the same winds that brought the storm and cold front spiraling down from Hudson Bay - the Coast Guard searched a grid starting at the Canoe Rocks on the northeastern tip of Isle Royale, the approximate location Captain Jan Vat gave in his mayday, and heading west, southwest. The search plane identified the wreckage of the lifeboat and dispatched a highway patrol car and ambulance in the nick of time.

Harold Claessens, the vice president of the Superior Steel Company in charge of its fleet, had notified Noah's mother of the mayday and subsequent loss of radio contact with the *Ragnarok* sometime in the middle of the night. Noah could still remember his mother waking him to tell him that something had happened to daddy's ship. He could remember his confusion and a vague sense of fear. Because the ship scared him, he assumed it scared his father too. On the winter nights during the off season when he and his father sat huddled on the sofa in front of the roaring fire place, he would ply his father with questions about his life out on the lake, paying special attention to questions regarding catastrophes. His father would always assure him that it was safer to be on the ship than it was to be in their truck and driving up to see grandpa. He also assured him that the crew he and the captain had assembled was as seaworthy and seasoned as any crew had ever been. So what was his mother telling him in the middle of that night? He'd wondered. How could it be true?

But it was true, he knew even as a boy, because his mother was crazy with grief. All night she made phone calls to the wives of his father's crewmates, and all night she was unable to learn anything of their fate. At dawn, the weather became visible and Noah felt all

of the uneasiness solidify and settle like a rock in his gut. From the window they watched as the snow muffled the view of the harbor.

By mid-morning she had been informed of Olaf's fragile survival. All three men had been airlifted to the Duluth Medical Center. Luke Lifthrasir had two toes and his left hand amputated; Bjorn Vifte went into cardiac arrest and then shock, but survived whole. Olaf unofficially identified Red Farvann by the boots he was wearing. Later, officially, they used dental records. He had been dead, it was estimated in his autopsy, from the moment he'd gotten tangled up in the line that towed him to the beach at Hat Point. Olaf himself was treated for hypothermia and frostbite and massive contusions to his head, but was otherwise unscathed. Physically unscathed in any case.

'You must have been so scared,' Natalie said the night Noah told her the story.

'I was scared. Seven year old boys aren't made to understand things like that, believe me.'

'So just like that everything changed?'

'I guess it did.'

But then he'd back track, filling in earlier details to heighten the later tragedy. Despite the gulf between he and his father, Noah had always managed to mythologize the sinking of the *Rag*. All of the other details of his childhood became fuel for the great big story of the wreck.

So he told her about his mother and the wild, almost incomprehensible patience of the woman whose only source of companionship for the better part of nine months each year were her young son and daughter. He told her about the ski jumping competitions at Chester Bowl in Duluth, and the trip each year down to Cloquet where he invariably won the biggest trophy on the table in the chalet. He told her about the swelling pride he felt, about the runny nose he always wiped on his hand just before shaking the judge's hand to accept the trophy, and about the scolding his father would give him walking to the car for the drive

back up home. He told her how, later on those same nights, his mother would come into his room and tuck him into bed, and how she'd whisper in her magnificent voice how proud she was of him and how he ought to listen to his father about wiping his nose; and about how his father would come in after her, and tell him he did good, and, with a wink, that the only reason he scolded him was for his mother's sake, that although it might be true gentlemen didn't wipe their noses on the backs of their hands, how could a six year old boy be expected to be a gentlemen? He told her about Solveig, and how she wanted to ski jump too, but neither his mother nor his father thought very highly of that idea, and encouraged her to play the piano instead; how he would take her himself, when he was twelve or thirteen and she was six or seven, out into the backyard to teach her, if not how to ski jump, at least how to ride down the hill on his old skis.

He told her less sentimental stories too, about how after his father's ship sank the ski jumping tournaments in Duluth and Cloquet, and by then in Michigan, Wisconsin, and the Twin Cities too, became a lesson in how to handle embarrassment. He told her about how his father, standing on the side of the jump one awfully cold morning in Ironwood, Michigan, told him, in no uncertain terms, that at the age of twelve it was time to quit being a pussy, that it was time to quit behaving like his little sister and start winning the goddamn competition like he should. By that time, everything his father said was tinged with the brassy whiskey breath that made Noah sick.

He told her about how his mother - during the shipping season when his father was gone nearly every day for nine months - had taken up an affair with Mr. Lovelace, the insurance agent who lived across the street, and about how her discretion left nothing to his teenage imagination. He would come home from school in the afternoon and see his mother pouring a cup of coffee over Mr. Lovelace's shoulder, and he would see the hand of that same man kneading the inside of his mother's thigh. He told her about the Friday night in early November when he was seventeen and on his way to Ely, where they had just received a foot of fresh snow. He was on his way to get some early season jumps in over

the weekend, but had to turn around because he forgot his jumping boots. When he got back home, and walked upstairs to get his boots out of his closet, he saw his mother naked for the only time he could ever remember. She was lying on her bed, trying desperately to get the blanket over her, but it was tucked so tightly between the mattress and box spring that she finally gave up and settle instead on attempting to cover her breasts with her arms. He and his mother both blushed, and as Noah turned away, he saw Mr. Lovelace on the other side of the bedroom hurrying to put his pants back on. He told her how it seemed not only fair, but the obvious thing for his mother to do in light of the drunken lout his father had become. He didn't think his father ever knew, not until later any way, and he never confronted his mother.

And he told her about how his mother got sick during the summer after his senior year in high school, about how the adoring, meticulous woman – the woman who made him dinner every night that he was ever home, square meals too, of chicken or fish or pork chops with fresh vegetables from their garden and baked potatoes and tall ice cold glasses of milk and bread baked in their house – changed from a beautiful and angelic Norwegian doll, a doll who loved her children as though they were the only creatures who ever existed, into a sickly, pained, old woman who died from an explosion in her chest. He told her about how his father became even further removed from the life of his children then, and how he decided that once he went away to college, once he started his new life in the alluring prospect of the big city, that he would never be bothered with his father again.

Olaf was prodding the ashes in the stove when Noah awoke. The dark corner was now lit by a dusty daylight. The old man had managed to refill the wood-box and clear the breakfast dishes from the table. Noah dipped his thumb into the coffee mug still on his lap. It was cold.

Olaf set the log he'd been stirring the ashes with in the stove and fastened the steel and ceramic handle shut. 'Sorry I woke you,' he whispered, seeing Noah was awake.

'Don't worry. Sorry I fell asleep. What time is it anyway? How long have I been sleeping?'

'Don't know,' he said. 'My watch hasn't worked in years.'

'So you never know what time it is?' Noah asked, sitting up.

'Only when they tell me on the radio.'

'Really?'

'What use have I got for a watch?'

Noah shook his head.

'We'll go fishing,' Olaf said. 'They ought to be jumping out of the lake about this time. There hasn't been another boat on the lake since July or August.'

'Jesus, I haven't been fishing in forever.' The idea struck him as romantic.

'It's like riding a goddamn bike,' Olaf said.

Noah thought for a minute. 'Alright,' he said, but regretted it as soon as he'd said it.

Along the south and west walls of the house, a porch running the length and width of the place served as a combination storage area and three season porch. Along the southern side, the side that faced the lake, there was a picnic table and wood stash, along the western side were the refrigerator, some shelving, and a mountain of the tools and clutter.

Noah never understood the design of the house. In all his time there, he never once remembered sitting at the picnic table or being in the porch for any reason at all other than to fetch or stack wood, pull a beer out of the fridge for grandpa Torr, or return his fishing rod and tackle box to its space in one of the cupboards. It had always seemed to him a waste of space.

‘The rods are in the same old spot,’ Olaf said. ‘Just grab one for yourself. Mine’s already down in the boat.’

Noah opened the cupboard and saw five or six rods hung carefully on the inside of the door. Among the collection were his fly-fishing rod – the one he used as a high school kid almost every summer day – and his favorite lake rod with the closed face, mallard green Johnson reel and rod painted to resemble bamboo. He seldom used the conventional rod and reel after he discovered stream and river fishing with his ski jumping pal Sal Padgett. By the time they were fifteen, Sal would sneak his old man’s conversion van and a couple cans of Schmidt beer and they’d drive across the bridge into Superior to fish on the Amnicon River. After a couple hours of quiet casting - almost always with luck - they’d sip lukewarm beer and pretend to be men.

‘My god,’ Noah said as he stepped out of the house. ‘This is the same rod and reel I had when I was a kid.’

The old man was hunched down in one of the steel lawn chairs that sat around an ancient fire pit outside the door. He looked stronger seated, but there was still no mistaking the toll his body and health were paying whatever it was eating him alive.

‘That’s a good set-up. I just changed the line and WD-40d the reel. It ought to be all ready.’

Noah imagined his father’s huge, bumbling hands putting new line on the reel, imagined them shaking and pained. He imagined he’d spent a full afternoon on it.

‘So we’re all set then?’ Noah asked.



‘And we better get moving. By sundown it’ll be raining like piss. We’ll drop our lines over by the creek, it’s still the best spot,’ Olaf said, as he was tying a hook onto Noah’s line with his sausagey fingers. Noah noticed his father’s thumbnails had all but disappeared into his hard, dirt-stained cuticles.

They rowed across the lake, where creek water was slithering down the face of the cliff. The deepest spot in the lake, Noah remembered, was fifty feet out from the cliff face. They might have been sitting on it.

‘The water’s still enough we won’t drift much,’ Olaf said handing Noah the rod, hook baited and line weighted. ‘Drop that line about a hundred feet and sit quiet.’

You’re dying, Noah thought. You’re dying but you’re still baiting my hook? *I know how to bait a hook.* I remember. I do. I’m forty-one years old. I could carry you up the hill, that’s how strong I am. I could kick a hole through the floor of this boat. So why do I feel like I’m seven years old again? He had his father fixed in his stare. The rod in his hand felt like it weighed fifty pounds.

Olaf set his line in the water. Silently it unreeled. He appeared to be counting and stopped the line after a half minute. He rubbed his nose and combed his beard with his hand. He looked past Noah and out over the still, black water. It was so quiet Noah could hear the old man swallow.

‘Won’t be long,’ Olaf said softly.

‘What won’t be long?’ Noah said.

Olaf shifted his weight, picked something from his teeth, and shrugged his shoulders. ‘We won’t catch anything with all this chatter.’

‘Chatter?’

‘These fish aren’t goddamn stupid.’

‘The fish aren’t what?’

‘Goddamn stupid I said. You have to be quiet to catch them.’

Noah lowered his voice to a whisper and leaned towards his father. 'Who cares about the fish?'

Olaf looked squarely at him. 'If you don't catch fish, you don't have dinner.'

'Dinner is easy enough to come by,' Noah said. He was getting agitated by his father's cat and mouse bullshit. 'I can get in the car and be back in forty-five minutes with dinner.'

'For fucksake, if you want potatoe chips and bologna sandwiches, why'd you come all the way up here?'

'Why'd I come up here?' Noah said, his whisper getting louder. 'I came up here because you're a sick old man. I cam up here to give you a fucking hand.'

'Well right now the best thing you could do for me would be to quiet down so I can catch some of the fish swimming around at the bottom of this lake and be spared your bologna goddamn sandwich. What do you say?'

Noah sat back and tried to make sense of what had just been said. Unable to, he whipped his rod over his shoulder and cast the line out into the placid water. The thunk of the splash and the ripples widening in perfect circles distracted him for a second before he heard the his of his father's drag and saw the old man's rod arcing from his hands. His face looked serene.

Olaf caught four lake trout and filleted each before re-baiting his hook. It was enough fish for dinner that night and three meals the next day. Noah didn't catch anything.

'That's just rotten luck,' his father said as Noah rowed them back towards the house.

Noah just pulled harder on the oars and felt the skin on his hands toughen.

After their four o'clock dinner of flour-breaded lake trout, instant mashed potatoes and canned corn, they sat at the table and talked for an hour about the things Noah could help him do around the house. Noah insisted, despite his misgivings and his certainty that

he would be *unable* to do any of it, that anything Olaf needed him to do he would do. Noah was spellbound, and couldn't find the crux of his feelings.

Olaf excused himself, disappeared into his bedroom for a few minutes, and reappeared in an oversized union suit buttoned to the neck.

'Time for bed,' Olaf said. The sun was still an hour from setting.

'Really?'

'I'm an old man, I get tired.' There was no irony in his voice.

'Then I'll see you in the morning.'

'Fine.'

'By the way, I'm going to run back into town to call Natalie, let her know I'm here.'

'How is she?'

'She's fine, great.'

'Good,' Olaf said again with a decided nod of his head. 'The other bed is all made up.'

'Alright...' Noah said and watched his father duck back into his bedroom.

On the way back into town Noah saw the deer, splayed and eviscerated, lying in a pool of shadowy blood. The ravens, with their marble eyes and stiletto, gut speckled beaks, stared keenly at him as he got out of the car for a closer look. Hadn't the deer been whole? he wondered. It had laid there as if asleep. But now, as the ravens cawed their displeasure, and as they lifted heavily off the ground – three of them – Noah was struck to find the deer so violently ripped open. There were fresh, still wet-looking paw prints and thin pools of blood. He looked anxiously into the woods and up and down the road half expecting to find a tribe of savages. Only wind though, and the raspy quaking of the trees. Then it dawned on him, and he was tempted to howl, to raise his chin into the air and call the wolves out. They must have witnessed it all, he thought. They must have been waiting. Wolves are hunters though, he reasoned, not scavengers. About that he was only half right.

‘Solveig, hi – it’s Noah.’ The phone at The Landing was outside on the wall. Across from it, two gas pumps sat stuck in the 1970s. Inside there was a bakery, a few breakfast tables, a deli counter, a selection of videos for rent and sale – older videos, a year or two behind those available at the Blockbuster in Boston – a rack full of t-shirts and sweatshirts with embroidered moose, bear, wolf, and deer designs, and several shelves of groceries filled with the necessities: flour, raisin bran, cans of tuna fish, baked beans, tomato soup, coke, chips, crackers, several varieties of Folgers Coffee and a small shelf of delicacies, pickles, pickled herring, black olives, cheese spread.

‘Hey Noah,’ Solveig said in her relaxed voice.

‘Listen, have you heard from dad lately?’

‘I was going to call you,’ she said. ‘He’s sick.’

‘I know, I’m here in Misquah.’

‘*What?*’

‘Yeah, I got here this morning.’ Noah looked at his watch, which he’d made a point of putting on the moment he got back in his car. It was almost six o’clock.

‘Why are you there?’

‘Good question.’

‘Is everything okay?’

‘You wouldn’t recognize him.’

‘It hasn’t been that long since I’ve seen him. He was just here for Nick’s birthday in June.’

‘How did he look then?’

‘Old. Skinny. But *normal* for someone his age.’ Solveig had managed, through her own adult years, to forgive Olaf most of his disgraces. Although her childhood had been just as fatherless as his own, Noah had been the brunt of most of Olaf’s brutishness. There had always been some trigger of compassion reserved in his father that the little girl in his life naturally provoked. Noah had always been glad of this.

Noah said, 'He's a different man now, Solveig. He's at least two inches shorter than he used to be, maybe three. He ran out of breath cooking *oatmeal* this morning. He had food stashed all over the house, rotten food in the same mason jars mom used to fill with rhubarb jam. He looks like a scarecrow in his flannel shirt and jeans. And the house looks like it should be condemned. He can't do anything around the place. There's nothing left of him.'

'Noah,' she said again, patiently, 'why are you there?'

'Where should I be? He's dying.'

'What do you mean *he's dying*?' she said. It was clear that she had no idea of the severity of the situation.

'Solveig, what did he tell you?' Noah asked, putting the pieces together.

'That he was having some trouble digesting his food; having some trouble going to the bathroom.'

'Jesus,' Noah said under his breath.

'What?' she asked impatiently now.

'Solveig, I suspect he's got cancer, colon cancer. You can practically smell it coming off of him. Natalie and I went through the same thing with her father just a couple of years ago. I don't think there's any doubt about it. I think it's bad.'

'Has he been to the doctor?'

'He won't go.'

'Can't you *make* him?'

'Solveig, I haven't seen him since my wedding. How can I make him do anything?'

'He didn't insinuate any of this. He didn't tell me any of this. Put him on the phone.' Her voice gave way to tears.

'He's not here. I'm at The Landing, on the payphone.'

'Where is he? What's he doing?'

‘He already went to bed.’ Noah thought about how strange it was, six o’clock and already in bed for the night? ‘Listen, I’m going to try and get him to the hospital tomorrow. I’ll call you and let you know what’s happening. Okay?’

‘Make sure you do. Let me know right away.’

‘I will. I’ll talk to you soon.’

‘Noah,’ she said, as he was about to hang up.

‘Yes?’

‘Thanks for calling.’

‘Of course. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.’

‘One more thing,’ she interrupted. ‘Should I plan on coming?’

He didn’t know what the right answer was, so he said what he thought she’d want to hear. ‘Certainly you could – I’m sure he’d love to see you, but I don’t think it’s urgent yet. I mean, how would I know if it’s urgent or not, but I don’t think it is.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘Do.’

Solveig lived in Fargo with her husband Tom, a linebacker of a man with the good looks of a Hollywood action hero, and their three kids, each of whom defied all categories of adorability. Nick, the oldest, had been the spitting image of his Grandpa Torr year after year until he reached five, when all of a sudden, in his kindergarten picture, he was transmogrified into an intellectual looking version of his own father. As a first grader he was already reading at a sixth grade level and doing long division. Tom Jr., or Little Tommy, was only eleven months younger than his brother but already taller and heavier. He was less of a brain but more of a daredevil. His father had taught him to do back flips on the trampoline they had in their three-acre back yard, the edge of which was rimmed with Red River Valley wetlands. Julia, their two-year-old daughter, was as sweet and innocent as any lamb, and she was afraid of everyone but her mother, around whose leg she was

constantly attached. It had all worked out for Solveig, Noah thought without sarcasm or envy, that much was certain.

After she graduated from the state university in Duluth, she took a job teaching eighth grade biology at one of Fargo's middle schools. In less than a year, she'd met Tom at a bar and they'd married. Tom was a real estate attorney at one of the most prestigious law firms in North Dakota, and as far as Noah could tell, never wore a suit that cost less than five hundred dollars. They bought a gigantic house in one of the new Fargo developments, a four thousand square foot place with five bathrooms. Their kitchen alone was as big as Noah's townhouse in Cambridge. Tom was a fanatic about college hockey - which he had played at the University of North Dakota - and republican politics. He had a fetish for Trans-Ams too.

He was also the kind of guy that loved the way he looked, loved to look at his square jaw and muscular arms in the reflection of his wardrobe mirror, loved to smile at himself in the bathroom mirror while he shaved meticulously around his moustache, loved the ignorant, charming winks he allowed his reflection - as if the man in the mirror and the man who was the source of the reflection were two different, equally magnificent creatures.

Yes, Solveig had done it right. She was as happy as could be, held no grudges, and *never, ever* - as she always insisted - had anything to complain about.

'The deficiencies of our father?' Noah had once asked her, insinuating everything *he* had to complain about.

'You find me perfection in this world and I'll bow to it,' she replied.

'Bow to yourself,' he told her in all sincerity.

'Stop,' she said demurely, but must have known it was true. They never talked about their father in anything but passing moments.

After Noah talked to Solveig he called his wife, first at work and then at home. She must be on her way home, he thought as he left a message on their answering machine: 'Hey, it's me. Sorry I'm missing you. I tried you at the office too, but you weren't there

either. Anyway, I'm in Misquah, I got here this morning. Oh-ho, I'm beat. I had a strange day with my father. I think it's bad. I talked to Solveig too, she had no idea how bad things are even though he called her. Listen, I can't call from the house – he doesn't have a phone – and I don't know when I'll be back here in town. I'm going to try and get him to the hospital tomorrow, so I'll call you from there I guess. It's really pretty up here right now; I wish you could see it. I miss you, and I love you. Talk to you soon.'

In The Landing he bought a box of Ritz crackers, a block of white cheese, a jar of pickled herring and some olives. When he asked the woman behind the counter if they sold the newspaper, she said, fishing one from under the counter, 'No, but I can give you my own. I already finished reading it.'

It was a typical gesture of the hardened, hearty sorts who were everywhere north of Duluth; a gesture that begged a smile and five more minutes of idle chat. But Noah didn't get it, and he left smiling in thanks.

After a full day of stewing, the sky finally looked ready to burst. It had the biley green look of a summer storm in the east and the wintry gray look of a gale in the west and north. He remembered both skies from his boyhood, vaguely anyway, but couldn't match them with any particular rain or snow. It would be dark soon, and he drove back towards the house as it started to drizzle.

He was thinking about Natalie, and about his first trip to the Mirendorf Clinic for Reproductive Health a couple years earlier. The place had impressive, intimidating mahogany doors with brass hinges and handles and an embossed brass placard. His appointment had been for 7:15 in the morning and he got there right on time. The receptionist's desk was also mahogany, and better fit, Noah remembered thinking, for an airline CEO than the overweight, pimply-faced receptionist who greeted him. She was not at all what Noah had had in mind.

'You're Noah?' she asked indifferently as he approached her.

'Yes.'



‘Here,’ she said in a phlegmatic voice handing Noah a clipboard. ‘You can do this in there.’ She pointed to a glassed-in waiting room. His gut went empty for a minute before he realized that she meant he could fill the form out in the waiting room.

Name, address, date of birth, insurance provider, the form quarried – *time elapsed since last ejaculation?* Noah looked up, embarrassed, and wrote forty-eight hours. It was the right answer both in truth and by doctor’s orders. He finished filling out the form and sat cross-legged regarding the girl behind the desk. Why would they have *her* greeting people *here?* he wondered. It was the morning of their third anniversary, and he thought it laughable to be there at all.

The nurse didn’t call him until nearly quarter of eight. ‘This way Mr. Torr,’ she said, and for as wrong as the receptionist was for his state of mind, the nurse was right. A model of the pornographically idealized candy-striper, she had big breasts in a tight white nurses uniform, hair styled with artificial blond highlights that only called more attention to the deep brunette roots, a short, tight skirt that accentuated her curvaceous ass, nylons, eye shadow, really strong perfume – the whole package. He wondered if there was some intentional psychology at work here, some subliminal plan that was meant to make the next half-hour’s anxiety easier or more difficult. He wasn’t sure which.

The nurse, who even had the runway walk of a Chinatown prostitute, was asking him blasé questions and snapping a big red wad of gum. How was the weather outside? Was he a baseball fan? What a pity about the Red Sox slide, huh? And finally, at the door of the little clinic room, batting her painted eyes, taking a pen from her conspicuous breast pocket, ‘Are you nervous about all this?’

‘Yes,’ he said frankly. ‘As a matter of fact I am a bit nervous.’

‘Don’t be,’ she said patting the lapel of his tweed jacket with red painted nails. ‘Don’t be at all.’ For a second he felt ready.

The problems though, were growing exponentially worse with each passing minute. Not only was the clinic staff absurd in their sexual or nonsexual ways, but they were poor

schedule keepers too, and their inefficiency was on the verge of setting his whole morning off kilter. He had made the appointment early so that he'd be able to keep a nine o'clock meeting with a New York map dealer. He had already missed one meeting thanks to a traffic jam in the tunnel from Logan, and thought missing a second would wipe out any possibility of his getting his hands on what his New York associate had. The dealer's name was Saul Hammerstein and he was bringing, among other things, the manuscript of a treaty on celestial navigation written by Tycho Braha, a seventeenth century astronomer. Noah was thinking about the book and the easy three or four thousand dollars it would eventually mean to him when the nurse handed him a four-ounce plastic jar and an adhesive label.

'Fill this out,' she said batting her eyes again. 'When you're done, put it on the jar and put the jar in there.' She pointed to a little door in the wall that looked like a laundry chute. There was a light switch next to it, and she told him to turn it on after he placed the jar in the door.

Ten days earlier, Natalie had had a laparoscopy. When the doctor called Noah into one of the hospital conference rooms to tell him that everything had gone well, that there was only a bit of endometriosis, which she'd removed, and which most likely hadn't been restricting their ability to conceive anyway, Noah figured that the onus was on him. Together, he and Natalie had read countless books and articles for couples that were having trouble conceiving, and he was well educated in the causes and corrections of infertility.

'I'd like to have you checked,' the doctor said. He knew it was coming. 'Here's a number you can call to make an appointment. The sooner you can get in, the sooner we can isolate the problem; the sooner the two of you can have a baby.'

'Great,' was all he could say.

The next thing he knew, he was standing in the small room at the Mirendorf Clinic with the plastic jar in his hand. There was a sink and a chair along one wall, and a small cupboard with a television along another. He sat down, realizing how tired he was, and looked about the sterile room. He had figured there would be a small selection of

magazines, but saw none. So he turned the television on, and pressed the play button of the built in VCR. Instead of pornography though, there was a middle-aged couple, circa 1984, talking about the merits of trust in a healthy, sexual relationship. He turned it off, confident that he and Nat already had a healthy sexual relationship, and wondered what in the hell he was going to do.

First he rifled through his seldom checked mental files of lascivious content: the woman at the coffee shop next to his store, the one with the downy nape and voluptuous lips, who greeted him every morning by name; the woman who worked in the architect's office next to his shop and parked beside him every morning, the one with the perfectly sculpted lips and the silk scarves that accentuated them; Natalie's friend, Mary, who'd only half teasingly come on to him last New Year's eve when she cornered him in the bathroom and asked, with champagne breath, for a kiss. But these women all inspired a flirtatious impulse, not the kind that sent you reaching for your cock in a spasm of ejaculatory urgency.

What am I supposed to do? he thought. He looked around the room, perplexed, hoping for something to spark an erotic image. But the place could not have been less sexual. He could hear his watch ticking, looked down at it, and realized with a flush of despondency he had to get going. So he took off his pants and jacket and hung them on the back of the door. It had been months since he'd jerked off, and his awareness of this fact made him even more self-conscious. He thought of the nurse who'd brought him back to the room, hoping to find some erotic impulse in his recollection of her, but she came with the receptionist, and the image of her fat wrists quelled whatever stirring there was. He thought of Natalie, but she was too much a part of all this clinical lovemaking. Besides, since her surgery he'd felt unbelievably warm towards her, and to use the image of her for the sake of getting off into a cup felt disgraceful, even though she would have begged him to think of her.

I can't do this, he thought, not without some help. He heard women laughing in the room behind the cupboard that looked like a laundry chute. They were talking about a soap opera, one he'd never heard of, and he wondered what it would be like to spend your middle-aged years in such close proximity to a parade of men who all came to do the same thing. He looked at his watch again. It was after eight.

He looked in the drawer of the table with the television and VCR – nothing. He looked in the cupboard above the sink – nothing. He looked in the cupboard below the sink – nothing but paper towels and, what was that? The glossy edge of a magazine? It was. The November 1995 Playboy, the special college basketball preview issue. He opened it directly to the centerfold. Brandi, a sophomore cheerleader at Michigan State, was standing on the gym floor, holding a basketball between her legs. She had airbrushed, silicon breasts - size 36D according to the statistics that were meant to resemble a basketball box score set apart from the photograph - and they were pressed together between what he thought were awfully adolescent looking arms. He imagined she had a throaty come-get-me voice and felt a twinge in his groin.

When he was finished he looked down into the plastic jar at the snotty sample he'd managed. He felt strangely adulterous as he affixed the label and set it in the wall. His meeting with Saul Hammerstein was in a half hour.

At ten minutes after nine Noah tumbled into the back door of his antiquarian map store. Saul Hammerstein, a gangly, middle-aged man dressed to the nines but bald and shiny faced, was unpacking a valise on the round table in Noah's office. He looked at his watch and smirked. Noah felt hung over and perverted, and he thought he could smell the antiseptic hospital soap on his hands.

'Sorry again, Saul. Looks like I'm making a habit of keeping you waiting.'

'Oh, not at all Noah. Traffic is terrible in this city. I know that.'

'Can I get you some coffee?'

'Thank you,' he said raising a mug, 'Ed's taken care of that.'

Ed was Noah's only employee. He was a retired army corporal who had a genuine interest in the maps. Although more than eighty percent of his sales were Internet based, Noah kept Ed on because he could afford to and he liked having him around.

His shop was on the first and second floors of a renovated brick warehouse on Landstowne Street. Five years earlier, at the height of his teaching despair, he had finally caved into Natalie's insistence that he quit making the terrible commute to the terrible prep school in Brookline to teach the terrible kids, and find something else to do. Thumbing through the classified section in the back of a Harper's magazine one morning, he saw an advertisement that said: FOR SALE – BOSTON AREA ANTIQUARIAN MAP DEALER FOR SALE. TERMS INCLUDE ASSUMPTION OF LEASE & INVENTORY. STEADY CLIENTELE. POISED FOR GROWTH. CONTACT GREGOR STACKNIK PO BOX 3406 BOSTON, MASS. \$100,000.00 – FIRM.

Although Noah had no experience in owning a small business or the business of antiquarian maps, the advertisement compelled him to write a letter of inquiry that same day.

A week later he ambushed Natalie in their den. 'Come on,' he said.

'Come on what?' she asked without looking up from the Sunday paper that was spread across her lap. The television was muted, but the moderator and guests of The McLaughlin Hour were all gesticulating wildly with their hands.

'I've got something to show you.'

'What is it?' she said in a mock whine, stretching her arms above her head and yawning. 'I'm really cozy right now.'

'Just come on.'

So she unfolded herself from the couch, feigned agony, and went with him to the car. The air outside was sticky and still, and he could feel his sweat settling into the folds of his pants as they drove through the mostly empty streets.

'Where are we going?'

'A little place over by Fenway.'

He stopped the car in an alley parking spot behind a row of low buildings. They got out and walked around to the front. There was a man waiting on the sidewalk in a fedora.

‘Natalie,’ Noah said by way of introduction. ‘This is Gregor Stacknik. Mr. Stacknik, my wife, Natalie Maier-Torr.’

‘Charmed,’ said Mr. Stacknik.

‘Natalie, Mr. Stacknik owns an antiquarian map business that I’m interested in buying.’

‘Are you serious?’ she asked, a broad grin concealing her skepticism. ‘What are you talking about?’

Noah smiled and took her by the arm.

As they toured the store, a split level shop with glass cases on virtually every square inch of wall space, each of them holding beautiful antique maps from all over the world, Noah explained how in the last week he had done more research on antiquarian maps than he had done on the history of the Battle of the Bulge in World War II - the subject of his thesis - in four years of graduate school.

Although it was her style to allow him to pursue his whims, he never expected her to fall for his scam. A new pair of skis was one thing, but a six figure investment in something that, until now, she’d never heard him mention was altogether another. He was also sure, given her Dartmouth MBA and his University of Minnesota History MA, that she’d assume he had no chance of making a go of it in the business world; a thought that had occurred to him every fifteen minutes since he’d seen the advertisement in the back of *Harper’s*. He was so sure of this, that he’d actually taken the time to type up a point-by-point proposal anticipating an inquisition of fantastic proportions.

After a couple hours with Mr. Stacknick going over his ledger and tax returns from the last ten years, and thumbing through the higher end items in his inventory – of which,

despite his research, Noah recognized none – Noah and Nat shook hands with the eccentric old man and got back into their car.

‘Before you say anything, I want you to know I’ve thought about this good and hard,’ Noah began, his eyes fixed on the road in front of him. He pulled the bullet pointed list from his shirt pocket and handed it to her.

‘I’m sure you have,’ Nat said.

‘And I know it’s a gamble.’

‘I wasn’t expecting that admission.’

‘And I won’t even ask if you’re dead set against it, so tell me if you are.’

‘I’m not.’

‘It’s risky.’

‘Most things are.’

‘But it’s a chance to get out of that goddamn prep school. A chance to be my own boss.’

‘I think you’d do well at it.’

‘But I don’t want it to be a point of contention. So say no if that’s what you’re thinking.’

They had pulled up to a stoplight and Noah took off his sunglasses to rub his eyes.

Nat reached over and put her hand on his shoulder. ‘Noah, you’re not listening. It won’t be a point of contention. I think it’s a good idea, I think you’ll do well with it.’

‘A hundred thousand bucks,’ he said, expecting to break the deal.

‘We’ll take out a small business loan, put some of our mutual funds against it.’

The light changed. ‘I could make it work. I’ve looked into it,’ Noah said, his eyes back on the road in front of them.

‘Then make it work.’

Impossible as it seemed to him at the time of the transaction, the business grew with the internet and now Noah was making in the mid-six figures just by brokering for the real experts like Saul Hammerstein.

‘Look – at – this,’ Saul said, pausing between each word for effect. He handed Noah the Braha manuscript that he’d been thinking of just an hour earlier at the clinic. It was wrapped in a plastic sheath. Noah wiped his hands on his pants thinking, I shouldn’t touch this.

‘Saul, this is gorgeous,’ he said unwrapping it.

‘I found it in Genoa of all places.’ He was looking through a leather ledger to quote Noah a price. Whatever that price was, Noah would be able to turn it around for another twenty-five percent.

Saul showed him another twenty or so manuscripts and maps, none of which, despite their value, could distract Noah from the pervasive image of himself jerking off into a plastic jar.

His crotch itched and stung all day, and when he got home at seven he showered for half an hour paying special attention to his groin. At dinner with Natalie that night, all he could think about was jerking off and the plastic jar and the nurse with the blond highlights and the Playboy centerfold. He joked his way through the episode with Nat, exaggerating everything so that each absurdity seemed doubly so. She laughed with him, and was thrilled that they were finally doing something about having a baby after two years of trying.

I’ll never be the same, he thought when he went to the men’s room at the restaurant to pee. He ended up staring down at his cock in the urinal, objectifying it, for five minutes in a panic of self-consciousness the likes of which he hadn’t known since the first time he made love to a woman.

He was smiling to himself about all of this as he drove from The Landing back to the house, back to his father. He *was* the same. Of course he was. The anxiety that was so



total for the whole evening after his trip to the clinic gave way to the easiness of his life with one simple night's sleep. The next morning, in fact, the incident didn't even cross his mind until he was on his way downtown to his shop. He may have even chuckled to himself then, though he couldn't remember.

It was almost night as he drove past the deer for the second time since he'd killed it. In the twilight he could only discern what looked like a heavier darkness around the carcass, a shadow perhaps, though a shadow would have required moon or starlight. The drizzle had stiffened and was falling more like rain, and the wind was moving the darkness around like a plaything. Lost in memories as he was, Noah almost missed the road for Lake Forsone, but at the last second he saw it and turned sharply.

The house looked lonesome in the dark. Noah hurried from his car into the unlighted porch, shook the rain from his hair, and took off his shoes. Inside he could smell the wood fire and felt the warmth of it like an embrace. He stood for a minute looking out the screen door. Outside, the rain and storm were ratcheting up.

That night Noah dreamt of dogs.

There was a Siberia of ice, and barefooted he walked across it. Although it wasn't snowing, everything was pitch-white anyway, and the cold was such that it actually made the wind visible, made it a faint diamond-blue. He was carrying a baby boy who he thought was dead. He did not know the boy, but he suspected it was his son. His feet would have been bleeding but they were frozen. He could hear the dogs barking and panting, and he could hear their handlers laughing and swearing. They were in front of him. The men looked mythical in their black cloaks and fur boots. It had been a long journey.

They had reached something like a weather station and one of the men said, 'You'll stay here until it's time to go. Then take the boy and leave. The dogs will follow soon after. They will catch you, it's inevitable, and they are vicious.'

'Why run if they're going to catch me?'

'Because you can't help it. You'll run because people always do.'

Time passed and he left into the same crystallized, blue wind – the same cold and ice. He had taken a blanket from the bed and was wearing it over his shoulders hoping to stay warm. But he could barely move.

It was only a few minutes before he heard the randy barking of the dogs. He curled up with the boy in the crook of his stomach, hoping to keep him safe, and waited. Their barking was closer and closer and he could hear a hundred pattering paws on the icepack. Then he could hear their panting again, then their slapping tongues.

The first dog was wolf-like, all white with amethyst blue eyes that matched the wind. He looks so gentle, Noah thought as the dog lunged for his frozen foot.

'Spare the boy!' he hollered. 'Spare the boy!' There was no feeling in his foot.

The dogs were joyous in their savagery; they growled lowly and reared their black lips back in shows of dominance. One of them had ripped the back of the blanket from Noah's body and torn his coat too. He couldn't see, but he felt its teeth going into the small of his back. It was the most painful of the many bites, and he could feel the viscous blood running down his back into the cleft of his buttocks.

'Spare the boy,' he said again, this time in a whisper. 'Please, spare the boy.'

As he said this, the boy was suddenly flying, on a pair of skis. He could feel the boy's experience. Though safely gone now, the boy could not land. He was fixed in flight.

Noah looked up then, raising his face to the wind, and saw the bloody snow around him and the tangle of dog's legs. Of course, he thought. It's so simple. He blinked long, shook his head knowingly, and looked up again. Now the white dog had his jaws clenched open and was diving for Noah's neck. He thought he heard the dog's bloodstained teeth clicking on his spine.

What he dreamt were the dog's teeth clicking on his spine was actually a piece of very dry oak crackling in the stove; what he thought was blood trickling down his lower back was actually sweat. The bedroom was still dark, but it was a morning darkness. He could smell fresh coffee and hear his father's throat clearing. Angling his watch towards the window, he saw that it was only 5:45.

The wood-burning stove was more than enough heat for the entire house. It would have been enough for a house twice the size. When Noah pulled open his bedroom door, the warmth of the living room almost took his breath away.

'Jesus is it hot in here,' he said to his father who was standing over the stove pouring a cup of coffee.

'Is it?'

'I woke up dripping with sweat.'

'Doesn't feel too hot to me. You want a cup of coffee?'

‘Sure,’ Noah said, resigned to the fact that he’d never get back to sleep. ‘Do you always get up this early?’

‘I’ve been up for a couple hours.’

‘It’s not even six yet.’

‘Yeah?’

‘You get up at four o’clock?’

‘Most days. Sometimes a little earlier, sometimes a little later.’

‘I’m never up this early. Natalie usually gets up by six so she can take a run before she goes to work. Not me though, it’s terrible, this time of day.’

‘Early bird gets the worm.’

‘I suppose,’ Noah said.

‘Got to hit the privy.’

‘Okay.’

Noah got up and walked to the window. He watched his father’s slow tread across the yard. The woods were still shadowy enough that he lost sight of him as he walked up the path to the outhouse. In the middle of the yard there was a woodpile and three giant oak stumps that were used as splitting blocks. A maul was stuck in one of them, and there was a wheelbarrow almost full with pieces of split oak and birch. Most of the trees in the immediate forest were pine and aspen, so there wasn’t much in the way of fallen leaves, but the grass was a dull yellow that gave everything a somber tinge. In all his life, Noah had never been here in the fall, and it struck him how seasonal the place was, how beautiful. He sat in the big chair with his coffee and almost dozed off again, but it was too warm.

When his father came back in, Noah said, ‘What do you think about going to the hospital today?’

‘I’m not going to go to the hospital. I told you that on the phone.’

‘Listen Dad, I want you to understand how serious this is. Two years ago Natalie’s father went through the same thing I suspect you’re going through. He waited too long and there was nothing the doctors could do when he finally went in.’

‘Fucksakes Noah,’ he said, ‘I’m not going to the hospital. I know things are bad, but I’m an eighty-two year old man. *I’m an old man.* And I’m happy winding things up on my own terms.’

‘What possible disadvantage is there to going to the doctor and having yourself looked at?’ There was an irritated, impetuous tone to Noah’s voice. ‘Will you answer that? We can go and have a few tests done, maybe they can prescribe something for the pain, or the irritation. Maybe they’ll tell you nothing’s wrong at all, that you just had a virus or ate some rotten cottage cheese.’

‘For christsakes, it’s not a virus or rotten cottage cheese. I know that. I’ve been to the library. I’ve looked at books, and I know what’s going on.’

‘Then go to the doctor!’ he was fairly seething as he spoke.

‘I want you to listen to me,’ Olaf said, patiently now. ‘I know what I’m doing. I know what I want. I’m not going to go to the doctor and the reasons are simple: I’m going to die, whether it’s tomorrow or six months from now hardly seems important. What is important is that I don’t prolong the pain and misery, that I don’t hold on with arthritic hands and end up in a nursing home or hospice with a bunch of derelict old fucks who all reek like Listerine and play bingo every hour of the goddamn day. This is going to happen naturally, without a freighter full of radiation therapy that’ll leave me bald and glowing. Understand?’

Although it *did* make perfect sense, on the one hand, Noah was unwilling to acknowledge it. ‘Who said anything about hospice or a nursing home or radiation anything? Not me. Maybe, like I said, the news won’t be so bad. I don’t care how many books you’ve read, I doubt you’re qualified to diagnose yourself. Don’t be so pig headed about this. Just let me take you to the doctor.’

Olaf had what Noah mistook for a smirk on his face. ‘I will say it one more time – I am not going to the doctor. It’s final. I’d like nothing better than for you to stay here for a few days and help me get the place ready for winter, but. I’m not going to sit hear and listen to you treat me like a goddamn child. I will not go to the doctor. Period.’

Noah stood up from the edge of the chair, walked across the room, set the empty coffee mug down on the counter, and went to the door. He knew there was no convincing the old man, but he felt vigilant nonetheless. He could see through the woods now, up the trail to the outhouse, and it crossed his mind to go investigate it. But what good would that do? he wondered. The screen on the door was slack, and lightly rusted, the color of iodine. The fresh air was a relief from the suffocating heat of the main room. It started to rain again, as it had all night, and to Noah’s dismay, he saw that most of the dirt road had washed away.

The last downpour was short. When it stopped, Noah walked out to have a look at the road. It was impassable, certainly, for any car without four wheel drive. This meant he would have to borrow his father’s truck in order to get back into Misquah. He shook his head as he headed up the path to the outhouse.

As a child he’d detested the cedar-built box. There were numerous late evenings and early mornings when the prospect of walking through the dark, into the woods, numbed him with fear. Unless his father or grandfather went with him, he would not go, which meant that countless hours were spent clenching his bowels or bladder. As he grew older though, especially into his teens, the fear dissipated and became something like will instead. He remembered the surge of vanity he’d felt the first summer midnight he’d challenged the darkness to intimidate him and won.

As he unhitched the makeshift knob, Noah was somewhere between that fear and will now. The toilet seat was splintered and so contrary to the smooth, cold porcelain of his toilet at home that Noah began, but immediately stopped, noting the contrast – it was simply

too great. Everything was soggy too, which exacerbated the stink, and the toilet paper, which sat in a covered coffee can, was moist and useless. He finished his business and stepped out into the damp air, taking a deep breath to clear the stink and congestion of the outhouse from his limp lungs. He headed down towards the lake.

The path to the lake was overgrown with sagging aspens and jack pines, all of which were dripping rainwater as their branches flailed in the northerly wind. The forest floor and shrubbery was overgrown too, and the giant bedrock boulders that lined the path were all covered with dried feathermoss and skirted with bunchberry bushes. Among the fallen leaves and smaller rocks, both of which were everywhere, mushrooms and reindeer lichen still grew, and would, until the first frost.

At the lake Noah turned left and walked along the water's edge. About a hundred feet up the beach he came to the clearing in the woods, a clearing he'd all but forgotten in the many years since he'd last seen it, but one which was, in many ways, the impetus of his first fifteen years after kindergarten when his entire life was consumed by ski jumping.

When Noah was five years old his father and grandfather built a ski jump on the top of the hill just east of the house, and cleared a landing hill on the slope that flattened at the beach. In Norway, Noah's grandpa Torr had been a promising young skier, competing in tournaments at the Holmenkollen in Oslo, then Christiania. When he emigrated to the States in 1926, he became a Duluth ski club booster and helped to build the jumping complex at Chester Bowl, where Olaf himself was junior champion in 1935.

Each Christmas Eve morning, Noah's grandpa and father would boot pack the snow on the landing hill and scaffold before preening it with garden rakes. On Christmas morning they would side step the landing hill with their own skis and set tracks for Noah. Olaf would stick pine boughs in the landing hill every ten feet after eighty, and by the time Noah was eight or nine he was jumping beyond the last of them, 120 or 125 feet.

Looking up at the jump, he felt the transcendental rush of memories. He remembered the physicality of it all; the cold on his cheeks, his fingers forever numb, his

toes too, the exultation of the speed and flight; and his skis too, the navy blue Konsbergs that were his father's before his, their bow and their yellow bases and the bindings his grandfather mail ordered from a friend still in Bergen. He remembered the way his sweater smelled when it was wet, and the way it itched his wrists in that inch of flesh between the end of his mittens and the turtleneck he wore underneath it. He remembered his complete understanding of the physics of it all too – this is what separated him from most of his peers when he was winning all the junior tournaments in Duluth – the way that everything depended on that crucial millisecond when you either maintained or lost all of your speed on the take off; the way in flight, it was imperative you kept your head up and tried to simulate an airplane wing, building the low pressure beneath you to create lift.

But most of all, he was remembering the lessons, and the pride that was felt by each of them, son, father, and grandfather, in the knowledge of a lesson well learned. Even after his father washed up on the rocks the morning after the wreck, there was often haven and a sort of reversal of his father's scorn in that isolated week between Christmas and the new year when it was uncommon that a day went by without Noah leaping one hundred or more times from the backyard ski jump.

Now the landing hill was growing trees again, and the bramble and deadfall made it almost indistinguishable from the rest of the hillside. Even so, at the top of the hill he could still see the scaffold; still see the deck standing on the side of the takeoff where his father or grandfather would stand for hours at a time coaching him. He was lost in his memory.

‘You remember this thing?’ his father asked, out of breath.

Noah turned, a little startled, ‘Of course I do.’

‘You can hardly see it up there.’

‘I can see it.’

‘For a long time this place, this ski jump, was the only thing that seemed normal to me,’ Olaf said. They were both looking up the landing hill, and both had their hands in their pockets. The temperature was dropping by the minute, but the sky was clearing. ‘I



used to wonder about you when it came to this thing,' he gestured up at the jump. 'You were so talented but you had the concentration of a dumb dog. You could have been an Olympian I think. If you'd have stuck with it.'

Noah couldn't tell if the old man was being confrontational or finally softening up in some round about way. 'I wanted to go to college I guess. I wanted to get the hell out of Duluth.'

Olaf looked at him askance. 'Come here, I want to show you something.'

**PART TWO: *By Andromeda's Light***

The truck smelled like dampened cigars, and the inside of the windows were wet with fog. The plastic upholstery covering the enormous front seat was split and cracked from corner to corner, and mustard colored foam padding was bursting through each tear. On the dashboard, a speedometer, fuel gauge, and heater control were the only accessories. There was a void beneath the dash, a place for a radio, where three wires, one red, one green, one white, dangled, clipped, with copper frizz flowering out sharply from each.

Olaf put the key in the ignition, pumped the gas pedal four times, and turned the key. The truck made a retching motion as it started to turn over, but failed. Olaf pumped the gas pedal a couple more times and tried again. This time it made a choking sound, a groaning, muffled, nearly dead sound, but finally started. He tapped the accelerator a couple of times and billows of white smoke blossomed from the tailpipe; the inside of the car filled with the smell of old, stale gasoline.

Olaf looked at Noah with a grin on his face. 'Carburetor,' he said.

'We can take my car,' Noah said, pointing out his window at the dust covered Volvo sedan with the dented front bumper and passenger side quarter panel.

'Your car couldn't make it up the road.'

'How long has it been since you drove this thing anyway?'

'Not more than a week. I still have to get into town to buy groceries and what not.'

'You bought this in 1970, when I was ten years old.'

'It's got almost four hundred thousand miles on it,' he peeked under his forearm at the odometer. 'Three hundred ninety eight thousand to be exact.'

'That is truly one of the most amazing things I've ever heard,' Noah said. 'I've had four new cars in the last eight years. All of them two year leases.'

'Whoever leased a goddamn car?'

‘I never have to worry about repairs this way. I haven’t had a car in the shop since I started leasing.’

‘Except for the new transmissions, the rebuilt engine, and the new axels, this thing has never been in the garage either.’

Noah could only shake his head.

Olaf pulled a stiff rag out from under his seat and wiped the slick fog from his side of the windshield and rolled his side window down halfway. ‘Crack your window, would you? Needs to dry out in here.’

‘Where are we headed?’ Noah asked.

‘Thought it might be nice to get down to the lake, see the waves.’

‘Is that what you wanted to show me? The lake?’

‘No, no,’ Olaf said as he navigated the gargantuan Suburban up through the low hanging trees and onto the county road that led back to the lake and to town. It was getting towards noon, and the temperature, as far as Noah could tell with it fanning through the open window, was still falling.

‘It’s getting colder, isn’t it?’ Noah asked.

‘It is, but the pressure is rising, which means it’ll be clearing up. This wind though, it’s going to blow the high pressure through here in no time.’ The tall pine trees were swaying drunkenly, even the empty boughs of the aspen and birch trees were moving as if to a song. Olaf drove the truck slowly and steadily down the middle of the two-lane road.

‘That your deer?’ Olaf said.

‘That’s her,’ Noah said, sitting up to get a better view through his father’s side of the windshield. ‘Doesn’t take long for the scavengers to get at it, huh?’ It was already half devoured.

‘Seldom does,’ Olaf said.

When they got to highway 61, Olaf turned left, away from town, and drove slowly still. After a few miles the road wound down, through the heavy forest, to the lake.

‘Look at that water,’ Olaf said.

‘Those waves are huge. It’s like the ocean,’ Noah answered. ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve seen this.’ He sat there, transfixed but thinking of nothing, for a few quiet minutes before he remembered his father sitting next to him. He was watching him from the corner of his eye. There was a constant look of discomfort on the old man’s face. The deep creases around his eyes and in the slack of his chin and neck seemed to be flexed all the time; his lips and nose crinkled in a constant grimace; his mouth parted for the laborious task of taking long, slow, willful breaths between his puffs on the acrid cigar. Noah watched his father’s hands, too, one on the steering wheel with quivering white haired knuckles, the other sitting on his leg, as if helping to keep the accelerator constant. They were going thirty miles per hour.

In half an hour they’d made it to the Cutface Creek wayside where Olaf pulled the truck into one of the dozen parking spots. It was Wednesday, just after noon. Noah thought, I bet that the next nearest person, aside from the truck drivers steering their rigs along the highway, is either fifteen miles behind us, in Misquah, or fifteen miles ahead of us, in Grand Marais.

Olaf turned the truck off. ‘I never come down here anymore,’ he said.

‘On my way here yesterday, I missed the county road back in Misquah and ended up driving all the way up here before turning around.’

‘You missed the county road and the red trees?’

Noah smiled. ‘Yes, I missed them. But anyone would have.’

They sat uneasily for a few seconds. ‘How far is it from say, Silver Bay across the lake to Marquette?’ Noah asked, adjusting his weight to his right elbow on the door’s armrest.

‘How far across the water?’

‘Yeah. I mean how far in a straight line?’

‘Well, I reckon it’s about 175 miles as the gull flies. But it isn’t straight across the lake, of course. It’s about eighty nautical miles from Silver Bay to the middle of the Keweenaw Peninsula, which makes it what, ninety miles or so. Beyond that, my best guess is another eighty or eighty-five miles, most of that across the Keweenaw, then the Huron Mountains, and only another ten or twenty nautical miles across the Keweenaw Bay. Farther, of course, if you were getting there by ship.’ He paused, as if to check his math. ‘Why?’

‘When I was driving here yesterday, I picked up a radio station from Marquette for a little while. It surprised me, that’s all.’

By now they had gotten out, moved around to the front of the truck, and were leaning against the rusty bumper. Six foot waves were curling up onto the rocky shore in firework-like explosions of blue and white. The sky, though less threatening than it had been the day before, was still swollen with cumulous clouds.

They were both facing the wind, a sharp wind that brought a delicate spray of lake water with it. Olaf said, ‘I wonder if it’s anything like this on the coast in Norway.’

‘I never thought much about you being born there.’

‘I don’t think about it much either, to tell you the truth. And I haven’t ever been back. I don’t remember much about the place.’

‘What do you remember?’

‘Our house in Bergen, little two room place on the edge of the city,’ he said. ‘My father coming home from work, surly as hell; almost everything about my mother; the miscarriage she had before we came here; stuff like that.’

‘How hard did they have it?’

‘Who knows? Whatever trouble there was, was too well hidden behind their goddamn stoicism for me to see it.’

‘What did he do? I mean, what did grandpa Torr do for a living when he got here?’

‘He worked as a lumberjack at first. He was gone all the time, down around Cloquet, up along the shore. Great big man who was strong as an elephant. Later he worked on a tug over in Superior.’

‘What about grandma?’

‘What do you mean, what about grandma?’

‘What did grandma do?’

‘She raised me, of course.’

‘I wish I could remember her better.’

‘My mother was the kindest person I ever knew. She was a saint, truly. Never hit me once, hell, never even *yelled* at me.’

‘That’s how mom was, too.’

Olaf glared ahead, out at the water, towards a horizon that rested somewhere in the middle of the lake. ‘My mother, she was faithful. She loved my father, God knows why. She was forgiving.’ Noah thought he understood, for the first time in his life, what his own mother’s affair had meant to his father, knew that his father knew. He had always accepted it as her due, as the solace in her long, lonely days. And whatever pain it had caused his father, if he knew about it at all, well, Noah had always thought that *his* due. But now the perverse pleasure he had always taken in his mother’s infidelity was replaced with the shameful recognition that there was another side of the story.

‘Solveig tells me you’ve got a map shop out in Boston.’

Caught off guard by the change in topics, Noah stammered, ‘Yes, yeah I do. It’s an antiquarian shop. Old maps. Maps from all over the world.’

‘What about teaching?’

‘I wasn’t a very good teacher. I was a terrible teacher, in fact.’

‘How are you at selling maps?’

‘My maps sell themselves. The people who buy them are the same kind of people who collect stamps or coins or rare books; they’re the kind of people who know ten times more about the business than the people who run the businesses.’

‘That doesn’t make a whole lot of goddamn sense, does it? You’re at a disadvantage aren’t you?’

‘I would be at a disadvantage if they didn’t consider overspending an integral part of their passion.’ Noah smiled to himself. ‘It’s simple larceny.’

‘You make good money?’

Noah looked at him, considering the question as though a perfect stranger had asked it. ‘I do okay.’

‘By the looks of that car of yours, a little better than okay.’

‘Yeah, I do okay, sometimes a little better than okay,’ Noah said feeling strangely boyish, glad of what he took to be his father’s approval, but suspicious of it, too.

‘You got anyone working for you?’

‘One full time employee. A guy named Ed. Nice guy, loves the business. Honest. Retired from the army.’

‘How much do people pay for these maps?’

‘Well,’ Noah said, amazed that his father was taking an interest and anxious to impress him. ‘It depends on the map. Two weeks ago I bought a hand written diary by Tycho Braha. In the diary, there were twenty or twenty-five illustrated maps of the seas and constellations. It cost me eight thousand dollars. If I get the right person at the right time to buy it, which I almost always do, I’ll sell it for a profit of twenty-five or thirty percent.’ Olaf was looking at him with one raised eyebrow and Noah couldn’t tell if it was skepticism or the wind that made it peak. ‘Now, that’s a very valuable, very high-end manuscript. At the same time I bought the Braha, I also bought five maps, each cost between four hundred and twelve hundred dollars. That’s average, I’d say.’

‘Where the hell do you get them?’



‘I have a network of about ten dealers that I do business with. I also research my own purchases when nothing is happening with them. I do almost all of it over the internet.’

‘Why don’t the collectors just buy directly from your dealers?’

‘I don’t know the answer to that, but it’s why I call it larceny.’ Both men smiled, and looked out at the lake again.

‘And what about Natalie? When are you two having kids?’

‘Those are two different questions.’

‘Take them in order.’

‘Natalie is doing well,’ Noah said without having to think. ‘She works for a consulting firm. She spends a lot of time traveling.’

‘What the hell is a consulting firm? What the hell does she consult?’

‘She works for a company called, McGreary & Wynn, their clients run the gamut. She works mostly in the computer sector. I don’t understand a lot of it myself, but her clients pay her to be told how they could be running more efficiently, either with their products or their people or their plants, anything really.’

‘And what about kids?’

Noah paused, closed his eyes and bowed his head for a second. ‘That’s the million dollar question,’ he said, picking his head back up and looking squarely at his father. ‘We’ve been trying for more than two years now. We’ve had a couple of miscarriages, lots of tough luck. But we’re still plugging away.’

‘Plugging away, huh?’ Olaf said and winked.

They stopped for lunch at the Manitou Lodge, a place just a few miles beyond the wayside in the opposite direction of Misquah. The dining room was a moderately sized room with grand ambitions. The walls were paneled with dark, stained wood, and the vaulted ceiling supported four chandeliers that aspired to some kind of elegance, but failed

badly. The floor was a rippling, knotted pine thing polished to a shoeshine brown. Along one wall there was a colossal fireplace with a mantel as big as a canoe. Hanging over the mantel there was a moose head with antlers that spanned six feet or more. On either side of the fireplace, black bearskins hung like paintings. Above the wall of windows that faced the highway, a dozen or more fish hung mounted on elaborately carved and lacquered pieces of wood. They were Chinook and brown salmon, lake trout, northern pike, walleye, even a few pan fish. The tables were sturdy and unvarnished and covered with paper placemats and lusterless silverware. Salt and pepper shakers, sugar bowls, pats of butter, foils of jam, packets of cream, all sat huddled on the edge of each table. The three waitresses on duty all wore black skirts and white blouses and aprons bursting with pens and order pads. One of them, a young, pretty if not plump, girl of about eighteen directed them to a table by the window in the corner and gave them menus.

‘Our soup of the day is walleye chowder,’ she said as she filled their water glasses from a brown, plastic pitcher meant to look like a barrel.

‘Thanks,’ Noah said.

‘I’ll be back to take your order when you’re ready,’ she said, and sulked off.

Noah smiled at her.

‘I bet I haven’t been to eat in a restaurant in a year or more,’ Olaf mused.

‘We eat out three or four times a week.’

‘Your wife doesn’t cook?’

‘When we eat at home, I usually cook. Natalie’s not often home until eight or nine at night.’

‘What’s she doing until eight or nine o’clock?’

‘She’s busy at work almost all the time.’

‘Are you kidding me?’ Olaf asked.

Noah ignored his question. ‘What looks good? Anything?’

‘I’m having the chowder,’ Olaf said.

When the waitress came back she was sucking childishly on a spearmint candy, her bright blue eyes still sleepy. Before she could ask, Olaf said, 'The chowder. That's what I want. And some hot coffee.'

'Okay,' she said, rolling her eyes towards Noah and switching the candy from one cheek to the other. 'And you?'

Noah smiled again, compensating for his father's rudeness he hoped, and asked for the chowder himself. She smiled, put her pen behind her ear, and walked towards the kitchen. The two men were still the only customers in the dining room.

'How does a place like this stay in business?' Noah thought out loud.

'Tourists.'

'Hard to believe,' Noah said.

'Listen, wait here a minute,' Olaf said, steadying himself by gripping the edge of the table as he stood up. 'I'll be right back.'

Noah, who had his back to the fireplace, watched his father shuffle across the dining room and out the glass door. From his seat he could see the old man trudge across the gravel parking lot. Noah watched him open the back door of the truck and take out a wooden box the size of a desk drawer. Balancing it on his left shoulder, he somehow managed to get the truck door closed and back into the restaurant without falling over dead, but his tentative steps and the labor it took to hoist the box up onto his shoulder startled Noah into the reason he was there in the first place. His father looked like the man Noah expected to see, the man he kept conjuring up as he drove across the country to get here, and it depressed the hell out of him.

The hostess opened the door for Olaf and offered to take the box from him but was rebuffed with a wave of the old man's furry hand. He stumbled through the dining room and set the box, which was branded with the insignia of an Irish whiskey distillery named Tullamore Dew, on the placemat for what would have been a third or fourth guest.

Noah realized, for the first time since he'd been back, that his father hadn't had a drink since he'd been there. 'What's in the box?' he asked, half expecting his father to open it, pull a brown bottle from paper hay, and mix them both a drink.

'Just a second,' Olaf said as he slid the slotted lid from the box. It was carefully packed with a half dozen photo albums, a spiral bound book of Lake Superior charts, and a pine cigar box with the broken seal of a Cuban plantation and a tiny brass hinge. Olaf took a sip of his coffee, which was still breathing steam, and set the cup back on the saucer before sliding it to the edge of the table on the window side.

'What is all this stuff?' Noah asked again.

Olaf cleared his throat and took an album from the box. He set it down on the placemat, wiped an invisible layer of dust from it with the palms of his doddering hands, and looked at it from the under-half of his bifocals - big, thick, black-rimmed things that he had pulled from the breast pocket of his red flannel shirt. Olaf turned to look out the window, to look at the lake Noah thought, and said, as if to himself, 'shit, I don't even know where to start. I guess, hell, I think I know what it was like for the two of you kids growing up.'

Noah sat up. He had an impulse to protest, to tell the old man, as he had so many times in his imagination, that he had no idea how it had been for he and his sister, that he couldn't possibly know. It was an impulse more than twenty years in the making, one Noah had thought dreamily about whenever the subject of his father crossed his mind. He had rehearsed his part in this conversation a thousand times, but on cue, his lines were lost, and all he could say was, 'Listen, we probably don't want to cover all this ground.'

Olaf looked out the window again and wiped at his nose. 'Cover what? I just want to show you some pictures.'

Noah sat dumb as his father opened the album and took two photographs from their plastic sheaths.

The first was a black and white snapshot of five men standing on the main deck of the *Ragnarok*, and two others suspended over the side, one in a bosun's chair, the other on a

rope ladder. It was printed on heavy Kodak paper, and for its sepia hue, looked more like a daguerreotype than a simple black and white photo. It was well preserved, but seemed to be disintegrating, too, from the bold white edges inward

The seven men - of whom Noah could recognize three, his father, Jan Vat, and Luke Lifthrasir - were all dressed similarly in black wool caps, three quarter length pea coats unbuttoned to the waist, gray, cuffed pants and thick soled black boots. The railing was coated with a visible layer of ice, as was the mooring line. It was attached to one of the cleats, and sagged heavily under the weight of icicles. The ship was, as the unmistakable block letters of his father's handwriting on the back of the photo said, wintering up.

On the deck, behind the men, the riveted hatch coamings and covers were also glazed with ice, as was the hatch crane - which sat on parallel rails running the length of the main deck on either side of the hatch covers - the one with the Superior Steel Company's logo barely discernable through the magnifying ice. The two men hanging over the side of the ship, both of them young men, probably deckhands, were looking over their shoulders and smiling stupidly at whoever was taking the picture. Noah presumed they were measuring some hull side damage. The men on deck, the other five, all wore that expression so fixed in Noah's memory. It was a look caught between humor and dead seriousness; a look, *the* look, worn constantly by these men, by the officers and career lakers, by his father, a look that seemed to say they were elated to be home, but craved leaving again, too.

In the steely background of the picture, a million shades of gray blended into the harborscape: The cone shaped piles of taconite and limestone, the enormous cranes and rail tracks, the rail cars; fences, warehouses, trucks; the crisscrossing power lines and twenty-story-tall grain and cement silos; a squat tug tied up in a cross harbor quay; ice; and, enveloping all of it, smoke from a thousand stacks and steam whistles.

Noah looked up from the picture and saw his father staring out the window, breathing into his empty coffee mug. Noah thought of saying something, but looked back down at the picture instead. In the background he recognized a big part of his boyhood,

recognized it for the second time in as many days. Just the morning before, as he drove down the interstate, above and along the St. Louis River, past the seedy houses on his left, and the orangy decay of the dockside industries on the right, he had had a similar sensation. In his exhaustion of the morning before he had chalked it up to the depressive autumn mood that seemed to have settled on the entire state like fatigue. But now, seeing the same thing, the same place, in a different time and in different hues, he knew that yesterday's fatigue was the fatigue of a rotting history, not autumn's coming on.

He thought back to the time of the picture, thought specifically about the ships, and most specifically his father's ship, his third ship actually, the storied *Ragnarok*. The Superior Steel Company had a fleet of fourteen ore boats, and though there were many distinctions in their size and capacity, in their age and angles, each of the ships was distinctly *Superior*, as they were known across the lakes, as well. Just as each of the Pittsburgh Steamships wore their tin or silver stacks, so the Superiors wore their black hulls and white decking. Emblazoned on the stern and port side of each ship's nose was the diamond and S.S.C. logo of the fleet, a three-dimensional design that looked almost like an opened serpent's mouth. Though any ship, from any fleet or port of call, stirred something of the awe-struck in Noah, even now, but especially as a boy, the ominous, serpentine Superiors were his childhood Gods.

And the *Ragnarok* was, of course, the most revered of them all, both in Noah's boyish imagination and in the collective imagination of the people of Duluth. Although the *Rag* was not the flagship of her fleet, that honor fell on the newer, bigger, *SS Odin Asgard*, she did possess a crew of officers every one of whom was from Duluth. The *Rag* was a furious ship too, thanks to her bold officers but also to some special, audacious quality she had, some super strength that was rumored about in the sailor's bars down on Lake Avenue in Canal Park and in church basements up on the hill. Though it was exaggerated, naturally, there was an element of truth to her reputation. She was tenacious in wicked seas, as she had proved over and over again in the November gales. She had withstood the ice, the

shoals, the concrete piers jutting out into the lakes from Duluth to Ashtabula, and even, it was alleged, a tornado in the middle of Lake Huron, all of which she had experienced first hand at one time or another.

It was said that she had the belly of a whale, too, that she was capable of exceeding her load limit from one trip to the next. This last, though never explained, was what kept her the secret darling of the executives at Superior Steel. Though the *Odin* was almost one hundred feet longer and made to carry three thousand tons more than the *Rag*, though the *Odin* and her type were meant to – and indeed eventually did – replace the ships in the *Rag*'s class, during the last few years of her life, the *Rag* performed, categorically, on an almost equal annual footing with the flagship. She was her majesty of the Superiors, even if she wasn't the mother.

Noah knew all of this because when the subjects of ski jumping, dinner, or the arrogance of Christians weren't being discussed at home, the *Ragnarok* was. He knew her statistics like some kids knew the batting averages of their favorite ball players. He could still remember most of them, too.

His father's voice seemed to whistle at him. 'That's the *Ragnarok*,' he said.

Noah twitched, looked up from the picture, and saw his father's nub of a pinky, the one that had been amputated at the second knuckle because of frostbite, pointing generally at the picture. 'I know,' Noah said.

'And those are the Bulldogs there, the Bulldogs and a couple of sailors working on the hull.' The Bulldogs were the moniker given to the all-Duluth officer's crew of the *Rag*, in honor of their tenacity, but also to the namesake of the local state college. 'That kid in the chair is Bjorn Vifte. You know Bjorn. He was seventeen there.' Noah set the picture down on the table so they could both see it clearly. 'That's me, of course, that's Jan, that's Joe, that's Luke, you know him, too, and that's Danny Oppvaskkum, he was the engineer. This picture was taken a few days after Thanksgiving, the year before she went down.'

'Who's this?' Noah asked pointing to the kid on the ladder.

‘That’s Ed Krebs. He was another one of the deckhands. Smart kid.’

‘And who’s Joe?’ Noah asked.

‘Joe was Second Mate. Joe Schlichtenberg. Tremendous guy.’

‘I never knew him.’

‘Sure you did, when you were a kid he was around all the time.’

‘I don’t remember him.’

‘I watched Joe drown. He was so close I could almost reach him. I could see his eyes.’

‘My god,’ Noah rasped.

‘Yeah.’

Noah cringed, shook his head as if to get the idea out of his mind. ‘And Dan, he was what?’

‘Danny was the Chief Engineer. He probably burned to death.’

Again Noah shook his head. He couldn’t look at his father just then, and he couldn’t believe the barefaced tone the old man took in dealing out these heartbreaking snippets of death. ‘The ship here, she’s at Fraser?’ Fraser was one of the shipyards in Duluth, a place for repairs and modifications.

‘Yeah. Usually four or five ships from our fleet wintered up here. In the winter of ’66 and ’67 the *Rag* was given a new engine, a diesel. They did it here at Fraser.’

‘You guys all look the same,’ Noah said.

‘We were.’

They sat in the dining room of the Manitou Lodge for a couple of hours paging through the photo albums. The waitress came by every half hour or so and refilled their coffee cups. On one of her stops, she brought each of them a complimentary piece of rhubarb pie smothered in ice cream, the house specialty, she said. Olaf pushed his piece of pie away, and Noah wondered if it was because it reminded him of Tove, Noah’s mother, or because his stomach could no longer tame such treats.



There were pictures going as far back as the spring of 1938, Olaf's first year on the lakes, when he shipped as a deckhand on the 253 foot *Harold Loki*, a ship named for the original Chief Executive of Superior Steel. Olaf was a thin, baby-faced kid in the picture, his shirt sleeves rolled to the elbows, a cigarette dangling from his lip while a fellow deckhand stuck him with a fake jab to the ribs. Along both sides of the main deck of the ship, a procession of fresh air vents loomed like a marching band of Tuba players, and the smoke stack in the stern coughed up its coal smoke in pitch-black plumes.

Olaf couldn't remember the other deckhand's name, but he told Noah about a whole crew's worth of sixteen and eighteen year old kids shipping out in order to avoid abusive fathers, or college, or an economy that was still mending. He told him about Tony Ragu, a kid from Muskegon, Michigan, who worked on the *Harold Loki* for the first three months of the shipping season that year before being picked up by the Duluth Lumberjacks, a minor league baseball team who wanted his hundred mile per hour fastball. He told him about Clifford Gornick, a Chicago Jew who put himself through Northwestern Law School by working Superior Steel boats in the summer, and who eventually became a famous Chicago newscaster. He told him about Russ Jackson, the first black guy he saw on the boats, second cook on the *Loki*. He was a potbellied, middle-aged man with a receding hairline and a wife and seven kids in Detroit. He told him about the Cejka brothers – one of whose sons was later a Watchman on the *Ragnarok* – thick-shouldered shovelers who worked in the engine room of the *Loki* moving coal. In the picture, their faces were barely discernable in the dimly lit coal closet. If not for the whites of their eyes and their ungloved, white hands, Noah might not have known there were any people in the picture at all.

Noah was looking up and down between the pictures and his father. The same thing kept happening to him, it had happened when he saw him sitting in the boat down at the dock, it had happened over oatmeal, in the truck as his father lit his cigar, as his father crossed the parking lot just hours earlier here at the restaurant – he couldn't believe that he was there with his father, nor could he believe how much his father had changed, and what

struck him time after time was how much he had become like his father – at least how much he resembled the man in the photos. And he couldn't believe that the man sitting across from him, a man who three days earlier he might have overlooked in a crowd, was the same man he remembered, the same man in all of these photos. Noah wondered, as his father reconstructed more than thirty years of his life with the help of his photographic history, how it felt to *be* him then, in the spring of 1938, and how it felt to be him now, with the burden of all that he knew, of all that he was now, in the cancerous present, having lunch with his son. He wondered if the men in the photographs still meant something to his father, still mattered in light of all that had happened and all the years that had passed.

There were hundreds of pictures; pictures of the aerial bridge at the entrance to Duluth harbor, cloaked in fog, a cat's cradle of steel; pictures of the *Loki*, the *Valkyrie*, his father's second ship, and the *Ragnarok* all scuttling through the locks at Sault Ste Marie; pictures of the Mackinac bridge spanning the straits between lakes Huron and Michigan; pictures of the loading and unloading complexes in Chicago, Gary, Detroit, Erie, Cleveland, Ashtabula, Conneaut, and a dozen other Great Lakes ports; pictures of hundreds of men, some anonymous or forgotten, others so well remembered it seemed as if Olaf expected them to walk into the dining room any minute and join them for coffee; and pictures of Olaf himself, too, standing in front of the offices of Superior Steel in the LaCroix Building on East Second Street in downtown Duluth, an ear to ear grin on his twenty-eight year old face the afternoon he passed his coast guard test to become a mate; behind the wheel in the pilothouse of the *Valkyrie*, the chadburn in the foreground like a mirror reflecting the blurred image of the photographer. The pictures turned like a movie, like the motion picture of his Olaf's life.

The two men looked through the first five albums before the waitress told them the lodge was closing for the afternoon. 'You can stay for a little while,' she said. 'But I'll have to clear the table so the dishwasher can wash your dishes.'

‘Thanks,’ Noah said, stretching his arms above his head as if he had just awoken.  
‘Listen dad, I have to call Natalie before we leave. Why don’t you pack this stuff up and we can finish looking at it back at the house.’

Olaf’s said, ‘Sure, sure. We can finish looking at them later.’

It was the first thing he could remember fearing, the corner of Second and Superior Street. As a child, he and his mother, and eventually his sister, would pile into their Impala and head downtown on the first day of every summer month. They would drive down Kenwood Avenue past Skyline Parkway, catch Twelfth Avenue down to Third Street, and take Third downtown. They'd park at a meter on Second Street and Noah would plug it with a couple of nickels. Walking towards the glowering façade of the Lacroix building, they'd pass the street corner newspaper kiosk and the patch-eyed man who hawked the Herald there, and Noah would wince, every time, because it all seemed so eerie – the concrete gargoyles, the barred basement windows, the mewling gulls, the pirate newspaper man, the morning steam issuing from beneath the manhole covers – it all conspired against his boyish imagination.

The inside of the Lacroix building though, was how he imagined heaven must be. The revolving doors turned into the marbled rotunda where braided, white columns in the style of the Roman coliseum towered out of the perfectly shined cipolin floor and supported a painted domed ceiling that chronicled the history of Duluth in eight triangular panels of Indians, fur traders, wolves, railroad cars, steamships, statesmen, children, and a bonneted woman holding a Lutheran cross. Just beneath the bottom ring of the dome, a circle of leaded glass windows let the sunlight fall in rainbow prisms on the walls and floor of the rotunda at any hour of the day. A ballroomesque stairway started on either side of the room and met thirty feet above the main floor to form a balcony that overlooked the entrance. It was the perfect perch for a king.

In the bustle of the workaday crowd, Noah and his mother would climb the brass-railed stairway, hand in hand, to the bank of elevators in the lobby beyond the balcony. There was always a coveralled man mopping the glassy floor, and a couple of balding executive types in Brooks Brother's suits smoking the ends of their cigarettes around the

black, steel ashtrays. Noah could still remember their gravelly, hushed voices as they speculated on the cadre of secretaries heading up to the offices of American Family Insurance, the local Teamsters Union, Houle Title Abstract, or the ninth and tenth story offices of Superior Steel.

The receptionist at the human resources office on the ninth floor was a frizzy-haired red head who smelled, Noah had always thought, like the perfume counter at Woolworth's, and who had always greeted mother and son familiarly, playfully, as 'Mr. and Mrs. Torr.' The windows behind her desk let onto the downtown rooftops and the eastern edge of the harbor, which was always congested with ship traffic, tug boats and coast guard cutters.

Ethel Gurlaski, the receptionist, would hand Noah's mother a clipboard with a sheet of paper attached. It would already be half covered with the prudent, cursive signatures of a dozen other sailor's wives, and Noah's mother was to sign it herself in order that Olaf's paycheck could be handed over. His mother would fold the check in half, ceremoniously it struck Noah thirty-five years later, and put it in the zippered pocket of her purse. They would retrace their steps back onto Second Street and walk two blocks west to the credit union, where his mother would deposit the check, withdraw one hundred dollars, and let the teller - a woman who worked there until Noah graduated from high-school - give the boy a sour-apple sucker that would pacify him until they got home and he could play with his toy ships and GI Joe doll.

Sometimes they would stop at Wahl's department store to buy Noah a new pair of jeans or white canvass sneakers or Solveig a new sundress or saddle shoes, any of which would eventually send their father into an irrational fit of financial anxiety. Olaf was, of course, always away, either adrift in the middle of the lake or moored in some ship's berth in Charlevoix, Conneaut, or Cleveland, and so it was his mother's job to manage the mortgage, the insurance bills, the heating bill and the thousand other expenditures Olaf considered extravagances. And primary among the extravagances were the four-dollar sneakers Noah needed replaced every six months for four straight years.

During any number of mid-summer stopovers - when the *Ragnarok* might have needed her pumps or prop repaired - Olaf would sit behind his oak desk for hours pouring over the receipts and checkbook and savings account statement. His desk was in the den, a small room with empty, built-in bookcases that was right off the living room. It was a dark, one window room that shunned the rest of the family but welcomed Olaf.

‘New shoes again?’ he would yell in the general direction of the kitchen, where Tove would be peeling potatoes or rinsing gooey lutefisk in the sink.

‘He’s a growing boy.’

‘He’s breaking us!’

‘The shoes cost four dollars, Olaf honey. They aren’t breaking us.’

‘The electric bill is six dollars this month!’ he’d boom again from the thirty-watt glow of his desktop banker’s lamp.

‘Olaf, it’s been warm - we’ve been running the window fan.’

‘And the phone bill, Tove?’

‘Olaf, my sister lives in Minneapolis.’

And on and on.

Noah would sit in the crossfire watching Bozo the clown on the Zenith television and wonder were they fighting. Sometimes he’d get up and walk into the kitchen and whisper to his mother that he didn’t need shoes if it was going to make papa so mad. His mother would reply, messing his hair, ‘He’s not mad, sugar. That’s just how he is - he worries about money.’

Leaning against the pay phone behind the counter at the Manitou Lodge, Noah had managed to replay those days right up to the moment when the grumbling from the den - when his father’s garrulous presence - made his usual absence tangible; made it something that was there - all the time - for not being there at all.

‘I’ll just be a minute,’ he assured the waitress who was sitting on a bar stool behind the cash register. ‘We’ll be out of your hair in a minute.’

She flashed him a no-big-deal smile and turned her attention back to the paint she was putting on her fingernails.

‘Hey,’ Noah said. ‘I didn’t think I’d catch you.’ The phone at Natalie’s office rang five times before she picked up.

‘Oh! It’s so nice to hear your voice. Where *are* you?’

‘Right in the middle of the weirdest place on earth.’

‘Is it bad? Are things going badly?’

‘No, no, it’s just this restaurant. There are more dead animals on the wall than there are left in the woods. And the walleye chowder’s got nothing on the soup at the Pomodoro.’

‘Oh God!’ she laughed. ‘What’s it *like*?’

‘I’ll show you someday. I’m sure you’d love it.’

‘I’m sure I would.’

‘Hey, I tried to call you yesterday. I left a message.’

‘I know, I got the message this morning. I was actually in New York last night. Last minute thing with the people at Hewlett Packard, they’re so *helpless*.’ Hewlett Packard was her latest client, and the last minute urgencies were her number one job hazard.

‘I wish they had offices in Grand Marais – I’d love it if you were here. I miss you already.’

‘Noah, that’s so sweet. I miss you too.’ She sighed like a schoolgirl.

‘So, any news? I haven’t stopped wondering.’

‘No,’ she answered soberly. ‘No good news anyway.’

Since their third failure, an ectopic pregnancy that took Natalie months to recover from, they had been to the Mirendorf Clinic only once, their last visit three weeks earlier. Natalie had insisted that the reason nothing was working - the reason that three tries had yielded nothing but endless fretting, thousands of dollars in fertility clinic bills, and a terminal, defeatist attitude - was because they hadn’t been doing everything *together*. ‘You

go to the clinic at eight in the morning to drop off your sample as you're headed to the store, and I go at noon between a tuna fish sandwich and a conference call to be shot full of it like a heroin junkie – I mean, my God, how *could* we expect anything? It's just unnatural,' she had said, forgetting that it couldn't be anything but unnatural. So they put their busy days aside and decided to make their clinic visits together, even if it meant they would both have to miss half a day of work.

'What do you mean?' Noah asked, knowing perfectly well what she meant. He was keeping an eye on his father.

'I mean our luck is still dry.'

It had been a stunningly clear autumn day on their last visit, and the sun shinning into the little clinic room put a glare on its sterility. Natalie had taken off her blouse in a heartbreaking gesture of impossible eroticism, and begun the ridiculous task of getting Noah off into the plastic jar. For as difficult as the first couple of picklings - as Noah referred to the semen samples in lighter moods - had been, they were nothing compared to the labor of that morning with Nat. Had they been, as was the case on their third date eight years earlier, sitting in the front seat of his car after a night at the bar, groping each other in the dark, getting off into her hand would have been, actually *was*, an embarrassingly easy thing to do. But in the isopropyl whiteness of the clinic room, with the unbelievable weight and seriousness of what they were doing suspended there like a baby's mobile, the chance of getting off at all seemed as remote as anything ever had.

For reasons unclear to him, the nurse had told them no intercourse or felatio was advised, so Natalie worked tirelessly stroking him, her bare breasts pressed coolly on his stomach, while he thought of ten thousand reasons he was never going to get off. When he finally did, he was so far lost in the clinicality of it all, so far removed from *any* sense of sexuality, that he literally could not believe it had just happened.

And although they had caught it all in the plastic jar and been assured by the nurse that it was an 'excellent sample' and perfectly motile, Noah knew, from the instant they



stepped into the room that morning, that they would be unlucky again. He had developed a sense about it, and there was simply no way they could conceive a child in that clinic room, on a Wednesday morning, with bulldozers working in the parking lot right outside the window. 'So we just keep trying, Nat. We just keep trying and it'll work out,' he assured her now.

'I know,' she said, trying, without much luck, to sound like she believed him.

'Sweetie, we will. I mean, we'll keep trying and it *will* work out. Somehow.'

'I know,' she said, exactly as she had a second before. 'Anyway, how's it going there? What are you guys up to? How's your father?'

Noah looked across the dining room at the hunched shoulders and folded neck and ring of gray hair. 'Jesus Christ,' he said. 'Where to begin?'

'Start with his health,' Natalie said in that tone of authority that must have consoled so many of her clients.

'I have no idea. He's completely cognizant, he sounds like himself, but he looks... well, he looks like he's been dead for five weeks already. I told you he won't go to the doctor, didn't I?'

'You did.'

'I mean, he's bad. I can tell. I remember your father.'

'It's that bad?'

'Shit,' Noah admitted. 'I don't know how bad it is.' He had been wondering this very thing from the moment he first heard his father's voice on the phone. Four days later, he was no closer to an answer. 'I guess it's just hard enough to be here without feeling like I'm with a ghost. You know?'

'What are you guys doing?'

'We went fishing, *fishing* you understand? yesterday. Today we were down at the lake, Lake Superior, and had lunch at this place. We're on our way out of here in just a minute. I suppose we'll go back to the house now.'

‘And you’re not fighting? You’re getting along?’

‘I guess. I mean, he’s doing most of the talking, I’m just doing my best to... I don’t know, keep quiet, be nice, help out.’

‘And?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I *am* listening. He’s telling interesting stories. And I am being nice. At least I think I am.’

‘That’s a start.’

‘I suppose.’

‘And what happens next? How long are you going to stay? What are you going to do?’

‘I can’t imagine what happens next and I don’t know how long I should stay,’ Noah said. He paused, took a deep, frustrated breath, ‘There’s no way I’ll get him to the hospital, that much I do know. I’m sure he could use some help getting the house ready for winter, but you know how handy I am. He seems able enough to get around now, but once it snows, who knows? Maybe Solveig will have some ideas – maybe he can go stay with her.’

‘Noah,’ she said, sensing the strain in his voice. ‘Are you really expecting to figure this all out yourself? Like today?’

‘Is that what I’m doing?’

‘It sounds like you are.’

‘I guess five years is a long time, that’s all.’ They were silent for a minute. ‘How long can you get by without me?’

‘You know you can have as much time as you need.’

‘Have you talked to Ed? How are things at the shop?’

‘Ed left a message yesterday and said everything was fine. He said business is still slow. What do you want me to tell him?’

‘Maybe I should call him.’

‘That’s a good idea. Have you talked to your sister?’

‘I talked to her yesterday, but I have to call her again today.’

‘Make sure that you do. I’m sure this is driving her crazy.’

‘I will. Listen Nat, the hostess is starting to give me that look. I better go.’

‘I’m on my way to a meeting anyway. Call me again tomorrow, okay?’

‘I will. And I’m going to tell Ed that if he needs anything, to call you, okay?’

‘Of course.’

‘And about us, Nat, about the baby...’

‘I know,’ she interrupted. ‘Everything’s going to be fine. I know.’

‘I love you.’

‘I love you, too.’

He called Ed next and his Corporal’s voice assured Noah that the store would be fine. There was a list of messages, none of them urgent, that Ed read over. He told Noah about a couple of serious inquires regarding the Braha manuscript, and Noah told him to use his discretion. When Ed asked, ‘Can I email you there?’ Noah replied, ‘Ed, you couldn’t even send me a telegram here. Just call Nat if anything comes up, okay?’

Ed said he would.

Solveig’s voice was not nearly as reassuring. She rattled off her husband’s trial schedule, the kids school schedule, and her own appointments like an auctioneer, and told Noah that the earliest she could be there wasn’t until the weekend before Thanksgiving.

‘Solveig, listen, don’t get so worked up about this,’ Noah said. ‘He’s okay for the moment and I can stay for a while anyway. It’ll be okay, okay?’

‘I’m sorry, Noah. It’s just that this whole thing has me so upset.’

‘Me too.’

‘I want to be there with him. I want to help him.’

‘You’ll see him soon enough, okay?’

‘God I hope so.’

‘You will.’ He paused. ‘Solveig, listen, I was wondering what you might think about me bringing him to you.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean I can’t stay here forever and neither could you if you came. I don’t think he should be left alone, either, not at the house anyway, and certainly not for the winter. It gets cold up here, he could find himself in trouble without looking for it.’

‘I don’t know. I’d have to ask Tom, of course. We’d have to make arrangements. Would he even be willing?’ Noah could tell the idea appealed to her.

‘I don’t know. I guess I’d better find that out, huh?’

‘I guess.’

He filled her in on everything else and told her that he’d be back in touch when he could. ‘In the meantime, try not to worry too much. I’ll take care of him here.’

‘Oh Jesus, Noah. How are *you* going to take care of him?’

The question was fair enough, and though his first instinct was to be stung by it, he gathered himself before the sting set in. ‘I’ll figure it out, okay sis?’

The blunt head of the splitting maul, still stuck in the oak stump, looked like it was made out of clay. Noah had his hand on the smooth, ash handle, and was trying to remember the sound a piece of wood made when it was struck with the maul.

‘I’m falling behind,’ Olaf said, sweeping the back of his hand lazily towards a haphazard pile of sawn oak. He had just reappeared from the outhouse trail where he had gone straightaway after lunch. Noah had made a point of going to the bathroom in the restaurant himself.

‘How much more do you need?’ Noah asked, looking around at what seemed an unending supply of wood.

‘It needs time to dry. That pile there,’ Olaf pointed at a four-foot-tall, four-foot-deep pile of split wood that was as long as Noah’s car sitting beside the shed, ‘It won’t be ready until next year.’

‘It won’t burn?’

‘Of course it’d burn, just not very well.’

‘How long has it been sitting there?’

‘’Bout a year.’

‘Huh,’ Noah grunted as he jerked the maul free of the oak stump. It was heavier than he remembered.

‘I could use a little help with this.’

‘Well, this is something I can help with,’ Noah said, balancing a piece of wood on the oak block.

‘There’re a couple of trees down in the gulch. They blew over this spring. One of ‘em’s an oak, the last on the whole lot I think. I’d like to get ‘em up here before it snows.’

‘Sure,’ Noah said.

‘We’ll get started on that soon then.’

‘Okay.’

Noah measured the distance between the balanced log and the head of the maul in his extended arms, swung the handle over his right shoulder, and let the steel head fall right on the center of the balanced piece in one fluid motion. The wood split with a clap, and the two pieces landed four feet on either side of the stump.

‘We’ll get the city boy out of you yet,’ Olaf said.

‘That felt good,’ Noah said. ‘*Really* good.’

‘Should we get at that oak?’

‘Let’s.’

The wheelbarrow was under a canvas tarp behind the house, and Olaf set a chainsaw, a red metal gas can, and two pairs of gloves in it. They started toward the gulch, Noah pushing the wheelbarrow.

‘I talked to Solveig today,’ Noah said over his shoulder. He was already short of breath as he pushed the wheelbarrow along the path that was overrun with yellow grass and pine saplings ten inches tall.

‘How is she?’

‘She’s worried sick about you actually. Why didn’t you tell her what was going on?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean you weren’t exactly honest with her.’

‘Aaah,’ Olaf grumbled, ‘What does she need to hear about it for?’

‘Maybe,’ Noah said, setting the wheelbarrow down and turning to face him, ‘She just deserves to know. Maybe she wants to know because you’re her *father*, after all, and people tend to worry when their fathers are sick.’

Olaf flinched and grabbed his side and moaned an unintelligible string of expletives. It looked like it could have been an act, but the grimace on the old man’s face convinced Noah it wasn’t.

‘Are you okay?’ Noah said. He was close enough to touch the old man’s arm, but didn’t.

Olaf looked up from his pain, jack-knifed at the waist, with a grimace on his face. ‘As effortless as you might imagine this whole business is for me,’ Olaf said, bending reflexively in another spasm of pain, ‘It’s not.’ He shook his head, prodded himself in the stomach, and took a deep breath. His teeth were clenched and there was a white thread of spittle dangling between his dry lips. ‘Maybe I should have told her, maybe you’re right,’ he conceded.

Noah thought, even his eyes are diminishing. ‘She just deserves to know what’s going on, don’t you think?’ His tone softened. ‘Anyway, she wants to come see you but she can’t right now, not for a couple weeks.’

‘Just as well, she doesn’t need to see me like this anyway.’

Noah sighed and rolled his neck back over his shoulders. ‘Why don’t we head back to the house? We can take care of the trees in the gulch tomorrow. Maybe you should take it easy right now.’

‘Hell, I’m okay,’ Olaf said, not at all convincingly. ‘Let’s get started on it this afternoon.’

Noah turned back for the wheelbarrow knowing it would be impossible to dissuade him.

They followed the path slowly for another five minutes before they reached the first tree, the oak, which had fallen across the whole width of the gulch so that it formed a kind of bridge between the two sides. It had been uprooted, and the sinewy roots hung like dead willow branches on the other side of the ravine.

‘Jesus,’ Noah said, shifting his gaze between the tree and his father.

Olaf nodded in agreement and explained how the chain saw worked, said that it was best to work on the branches first, that he should approach the job as if he were whittling a stick. He warned him about how, when cutting off a particularly large branch – and he pointed out half a dozen examples – he had to be careful because the balance might shift and he could lose his footing. Noah listened.

Finally Olaf pulled the cord and the saw fired up. He handed it to Noah who took it cautiously with stiff, outstretched arms. Olaf sat down with his long legs hanging over the edge of the gulch and pointed at Noah to get going.

The first pull of the trigger sent the saw’s engine into a terrible whine. It also pulled, magnetically Noah thought, towards the tree. The first branches were the finer, treetop ones still thick with dried leaves. The saw ripped through them violently. Noah let it

tear, moving quickly from thin branch to thin branch, each falling into the gulch, until he had moved halfway down the trunk and was working on the thicker limbs. After fifteen minutes he looked back over his work, at the pile of branches lying on the bank of the gulch. The air smelled like sawdust, and his ears and arms were ringing from the noise and vibration of the saw.

He worked for another half hour until all that was left was the spotted trunk of the tree spanning the two sides of the gulch. Olaf was still sitting there, his shoulders draped over his chest, his hands folded on his lap, like a child. Noah flipped the power switch and it choked off. There were so many muscles stinging and twitching in his back and arms and shoulders that he felt like he always imagined he would were he ever struck by lightning. The sun was out of sight now, down beneath the tree line, and the sky was clear and tin gray.

‘Oh-hoh!’ Noah hollered as if he were listening to a Walkman. The air had gone silent when he turned the saw off, but his ears were still buzzing. ‘*That* is work. Beats looking at musty old maps all day.’

Olaf smiled. ‘You’re talking loud.’

‘Huh?’

‘You’re talking loud.’

Noah laughed. ‘Am I?’

‘The saw’s been in your ears too long.’

‘Huh?’

‘Never mind.’

‘Now what, do I just start sawing the trunk?’

‘Let’s leave that for tomorrow. It’s getting dark already.’

Noah shrugged, set the saw down, and sat next to his father. ‘Are you feeling okay?’ He could hear himself again.

‘I’m fine; fine as I get anyway.’



‘And you’re not going to let me take you to the hospital?’

‘We’ve covered that.’

‘I have to keep trying though.’

‘No you don’t.’

‘Yes, I do.’

Both of them sighed, simultaneously.

‘The days are so goddamn short this time of year,’ Olaf said.

They left the wheelbarrow and the gas can sitting there and started back for the house. The empty tree boughs formed a black web against the pewter sky, and within a couple of minutes, the moon popped up above the tree line across the lake.

They walked back to the house under the darkening sky; Olaf on his son’s heels, Noah carrying the saw.

‘You’re up late tonight,’ Noah said, remembering how early they had gone to bed the night before. He meant it as a joke. Olaf, short of breath and unsteady on his feet, smiled but said nothing.

‘Straight to bed,’ Noah continued. ‘When we get back.’

‘Straight to bed, straight to bed,’ Olaf replied. ‘I’m never up past dark anymore.’

‘And I’m never home before dark.’ Noah looked over his shoulder; he couldn’t see his father’s face.

They were almost back to the house – Noah could see it through the last of the black trees – when Noah saw something moving close to the ground in the yard, it had crawled out from under the truck. He flinched, dropped the saw on a path side rock, and froze. ‘What in the hell is that?’ he whispered.

‘What?’ Olaf said, startled himself by the thud of the saw on the stone.

‘That,’ Noah whispered again, pointing at the bushy outline of whatever it was. ‘Is that a fucking wolf?’ he asked. He was terrified. He bent down and picked up the saw, the

handle was cracked. *'Is that a goddamn wolf?'* he asked again, this time in a louder whisper, turning his head but not taking his eyes off the shadow in the yard.

*'What are you talking about?'* Olaf said.

*'There! Sitting right there, by the fire pit.'* His heart was beating against his ribs. He was clutching the saw, prepared to use it as a weapon if he had to.

*'That's not a wolf,'* Olaf said, elbowing Noah aside, walking past him. *'That's my dog. That's Sancho – come here Sancho!'* and he whistled. The dog came bounding around the truck and ran a circle around them.

*'Jesus Christ!'* Noah said, all of his held breath coming out in one relieved rasp. His hands were wet with cold sweat. *'Jesus,'* again, watching the huge dog roll on his back as Olaf scratched its stomach. *'Where has this thing been?'*

*'He just wanders around in the woods. Comes home when he wants. Must've heard the saw or something.'*

In the dusk, Noah couldn't see the dog's face clearly, but he knew it was a spitz – a malamute or a husky. It was giant, bigger than a wolf, Noah thought, with long, coarse hair and ears and forepaws the size of his hands. *'He scared the shit out of me,'* Noah said. He was still catching his breath. *'I thought it was a wolf.'*

*'That's what you said,'* Olaf quipped. *'But it's just my dog.'* They were back at the house.

*'Sancho?'* Noah asked, and the dog knocked playfully into his legs upon hearing his name.

*'Yep.'*

*'Why Sancho?'*

*'I got him at the humane society. He already had a name.'*

*'Huh.'*

*'That's a good dent in the saw.'*

*'I'm sorry about that.'*

‘Ah, don’t worry, the saw can handle worse than that.’

‘How long have you had the dog?’ They were standing in front of the house now, and the dog was jumping and twirling under Olaf’s snapping fingers.

‘Couple years.’

‘And he just wanders around? Nothing happens to him?’

‘He comes home four or five days each week. Otherwise yeah, he’s got the run of the woods.’

Noah sat on the step and the dog came up to him, eye level, ears submissively fallen, to be petted. ‘Any more surprises?’ he asked, scratching the dog behind its ears.

‘None to speak of,’ Olaf replied. He stepped behind Noah, into the porch, took the top off a tin garbage can and filled an empty ice cream bucket half full of dog food. He set it down beside the steps and the dog ate it like a machine.

‘Why don’t you put some water on for coffee, I’ll be right back,’ Olaf said and walked towards the privy sitting ramshackle and invisible in the dimming woods.

‘Do you remember your mother playing the piano?’ It was dark now, and they were sitting in the rusted steel lawn chairs on the grassy beach, within spitting distance of the lapping water. Sancho was lying at Olaf’s feet, his four legs outstretched and muscular, a constant stream of groans and flaps muttering from his black lips.

‘Of course I do.’

‘She played beautifully. I have to give her that.’

‘It drove me nuts when I was a kid.’

‘Why?’ Olaf asked, his chin on his shoulder, his long gray beard pointing out towards the lake.

‘I always wanted to listen to my records but never could.’ Noah could see his father nod absently, affirmatively.

There was a long moment of silence.

‘She never aspired to anything, your mother. She could have been a *real* pianist, she could have played in the symphony,’ Olaf said.

‘What shit,’ Noah said softly. ‘She was a “real” pianist and she aspired to plenty.’

The wind was blowing and stopping and when it stopped, and the trees settled, the silence became willowy and cool.

‘You know,’ Olaf cleared his throat, ‘I was on my way home when she died.’

‘I remember when she died,’ Noah said and felt a rush of hatred. There was no use trying to disguise it, no use trying to pretend this was just another of the many conversations to catch up. He could tolerate, he had now firmly established, ‘the catching-up,’ he could handle the curiosities about his job, his marriage even, but he could not tolerate the defamation of his mother. *She* was the one who suffered, not his father, there was never any doubt about that.

‘That is the only time I’ve ever been on a plane. I had to leave my ship in Charlevoix. I had to take a cab to Traverse City to get the plane, it cost thirty bucks,’ Olaf continued. He seemed oblivious to the scorn in Noah’s voice, oblivious, perhaps, to his being there at all for the faraway look in his eyes, which were turned up and, Noah could see, reflected the blossoming stars, millions of them.

‘She was *dying*. You shouldn’t have been away in the first place, you should have been home. It’s not like she fell out of the sky and landed on her head. You knew how sick she was.’

Olaf turned away, took a sip of his coffee. The moon was in front of them, just over the tree line across the lake, half hidden by a rolling black cloud. There was a rim of clouds on the horizon, each one distinctly surreal. The rest of the sky was clear though, starry; lightening and darkening simultaneously as it got later and the moon rose.

‘Did you ever play the piano?’ Olaf asked.

‘Solveig did.’

‘But you didn’t?’

‘Nope.’

‘Your mother wanted you to.’

‘She never said so.’

‘She did,’ Olaf said, and Noah realized that his father must have had a thousand other pieces of inside information like this. He hated it, hated that his father, despite his absence and the years of his crumbling marriage, was still privy to the intimate details; still privy to thoughts of his mother’s he would never possess himself – unless his father told him.

‘What difference does it make, who played the piano?’ There were important things to talk about and whether or not he had played the piano was not one of them.

‘It doesn’t,’ Olaf said. ‘I’m just trying to remember.’

She would play for hours at a time, in summer especially, when her long evenings alone went on endlessly. Mendelssohn, Beethoven, and Chopin were always drifting through the house on High Street and out the window screens. It was all very beautiful in Noah's memory, but as a child, as a teenager especially, he'd wanted it to stop so that he could play his records.

Solveig played too, when she was old enough, in her mother's style but without any of her elegance. Noah could remember slumping in the alley, pitching pennies against the garage door with Sal Padgett and the other neighborhood kids, while Solveig's rendition of one of Vivaldi's seasons humped and hammered its way out of the Acrosonic upright, into the yard, and onto their ears in the alley.

'*Beautiful*,' his mother would say and clap her hands inside the house. 'Carnegie Hall watch out!'

'You're the man of the house, Noah,' Sal would say, half sarcastically. 'Can't you make them stop? My ears are bleeding.'

'She's just a kid, Padgett – leave her alone,' Noah would say and punch him playfully, but hard, on the shoulder. He had always defended his sister gallantly.

'Your sister never quite got it, did she?' Olaf said.

'Got what?'

'The piano.'

'She wasn't mom, no.'

'She's a wonderful girl. She's got beautiful kids.'

The incongruity of the conversation was bothering Noah. He was fixed on his anger but kept getting sidetracked by the memories of his childhood. 'I don't want to pick a fight, but why were you gone? Why didn't you come home while mom was sick, before she died?' 'Don't pull any punches,' Olaf said, sounding very much like he'd been socked in the gut.

'I'm your son, Dad, I learned it from you.'

When, one night early in their love affair, Natalie asked Noah how his mother had died – they were eating oysters at a place out on Marblehead Beach, which Noah did only to impress, he was from Duluth after all – he said drunkenly, but with conviction, ‘Of a broken heart.’

His mother had, in fact, died of heart *failure*; of a heart attack brought on, Noah always thought later, by an excess of longing. During the week between Christmas and New Years, home from their family vacation here, at Lake Forstone, back in the house on High Street, she had complained constantly of a pain in her chest. Noah had never seen her ill before, never seen so much as a cough or runny nose, so it terrified him when, for three days, his mother could hardly get out of bed.

On New Years Eve day, an agonizingly cold morning, Tove convinced Noah to take her to the hospital. At St. Mary’s, they admitted her after running a few tests and she lay there for a week, diagnosed, wrongly, with angina. She was told to change her lifestyle: to change her diet – no more macaroni and cheese, no more coffee, no more bacon or banana bread; to quit doing anything, for the time being at least, that excited her too much. This meant no more bike rides with Solveig along Skyline Parkway (Noah was too old for that then, a senior in high school, already bound for Minneapolis in the fall, already half way there); no more playing the piano, she was that emphatic and enthusiastic a player; and, of course, though this was never said explicitly, no more Mr. Lovelace; no more afternoons while the kids were at school and Olaf a thousand miles away, screwing after coffee and shortbread.

She obeyed the doctor’s orders to the finest detail. All through winter and into the next spring, right up to Noah’s graduation, everything seemed fine. Occasionally she would sneak a clandestine cup of coffee or nibble on a piece of buttered toast and suffer for a minute or a day, but by and large she was an excellent patient. Mr. Lovelace, who still lived across the street, was getting fatter while Tove was getting skinnier, and though he was still around, as evidenced by the coffee cups sometimes left sitting on the end table, or the

extra salad fork dirty in the sink, he was no longer, Noah was sure, his mother's lover – she had changed in aspect that much.

It was June, 1978. Noah had graduated high school and would be going to college in Minneapolis in less than three months. There were still details to be worked out – where to live (he was on a waiting list for a dormitory room), whether or not he would continue to ski, what classes he'd enroll in, but he didn't give much of a damn about the details. Freedom was so close he could already feel himself falling over its edge.

Then one day, while he was sitting in the car in front of the house waiting for his mom – they were going to see one of Solveig's summer league softball games – his mother fainted and fell down the front steps. When Noah ran up to help her, she was pale, ghostly pale, and looked twenty years older than she ever had. She said nothing; neither did Noah.

At the hospital the doctor told Noah, as if he were his mother's husband, not her son, that the diagnosis they had made earlier that year, the diagnosis of angina, was a mistake, and that it looked now as though his mother had a rare congenital heart disease called Marfan's Syndrome. He told him that her aorta and the major valves connecting the heart with the rest of her body were badly damaged, that they had always been but that they were worse now. He told him that it looked as if she'd had an aneurysm. If this was true, he said, and they were still running tests to confirm it, then it was amazing that she was still alive at all.

'Contact your father, son, as quickly as you can.'

Solveig wept piteously, prophetically, from the instant she saw Noah alone in the car. At thirteen she was already smarter than Noah, who wasn't dumb at all, but still a boy. Through her sobs she somehow reasoned that they had to get to the Superior Steel offices downtown and instructed Noah to go there. Neither of them, in all the years of their childhood, ever had reason to contact their father during the shipping season so there was no automatic course of action for informing your father that his wife, your mother, was sick, maybe dying, in the hospital.



Noah remembered telling the receptionist at Superior Steel that they needed to reach their father. By this time, despite the wreck of the *Ragnarok*, Olaf was captain of the *Siegfried Gimble*, his last ship in his last position with Superior Steel. Solveig's tears and sobbing must have conveyed the urgency Noah felt because the receptionist wasted no time contacting the ship. She assured Noah that his father would be notified immediately, that the *Gimble* was in transit, someone in dispatch had told her, on Lake Michigan, and that they were calling him now. She would call Noah herself, at the hospital, once she knew that Olaf had been reached.

Back at the hospital, his mother was propped up in bed, her hair suddenly gray, matted; her eyes wrinkled and dry. It was obviously bad. Solveig wept at her bedside all day. When the receptionist from Superior Steel finally got back in touch with Noah at the hospital, she told him that his father had been unable to tell her definitely when he'd be back. Sitting in the hospital lobby, Noah and Solveig and their aunt Lena assumed it would only be a matter of a day or two. It wasn't.

'They called you on Saturday. You got to port on Sunday morning. You didn't get back to Duluth until *Thursday*.' Noah's scorn was sharper than ever. 'For four days you knew how sick she was, knew she was laid up in the hospital, and still you didn't get home?' He shook his head in disgust. 'And somehow, and this is the part that just boggles my mind, absolutely confuses me, somehow you were a hero for leaving your fucking *ship*? Jesus Christ,' Noah concluded under his breath. 'Jesus fucking Christ.'

'It's not that simple,' Olaf replied, dumping the dregs of his coffee cup onto a rock beneath his chair. Sancho burst awake, sat up, sniffed the coffee, then curled up again with his nose under his tail.

'What's not simple about it? She was *dying* for god's sake.'

'We didn't know that then.'

‘Are you kidding me?’ Noah asked, gripping both arms of the lawn chair with his big hands and sitting up.

‘We didn’t.’

‘We had a pretty good goddamn idea!’ he said, and settled back into his chair.

For three days, while they waited for Olaf to come home, his mother worsened. By Wednesday she was nearly unconscious for reasons the doctor didn’t or couldn’t fully explain. He said that, although things looked bad – indeed, Noah thought, she already looks dead, her cheeks sucked in, her lips cracked, the I.V. dug into her arm – she would be fine until his father got there and they could discuss their options.

She died on Thursday morning, probably, if Noah’s calculations were correct, while his father was in mid-flight.

‘I thought it was like the time before, the time I came home. I didn’t expect her to die,’ Olaf’s voice cracked. ‘The doctor told me nothing was imminent.’

‘And *I* told you that she was very sick. *I* told you that she wanted you there. *I* told you to hurry!’ Noah was spitting as he spoke.

Olaf said nothing, not for a long time.

‘So?’ Noah demanded.

‘Sooo...’ Olaf said, the long vowelly *O* fading into silence. ‘So, I did you all wrong.’

Noah was stunned. He thought, wouldn’t this be a good time for you to apologize? Isn’t it about time you apologize for *something*? As many as half of the twenty plus years could have been wiped away with a simple, *I’m sorry*, he thought. Twenty-two, almost twenty-three years. ‘Jesus Christ,’ he said, or thought, he couldn’t tell which, and looked at his father whose chin was still on his chest.

‘It was a long time ago, Noah,’ he said, not defensively, but helplessly. ‘It was a long time ago.’

‘Why weren’t you *there*?’ Noah asked, the tone of his voice softened. The apology, if it had actually been an apology, had not been enough after all.

‘It’s very hard to explain,’ Olaf answered. ‘Your mother and I, we... we had a bad time of it after the *Rag* went down. Things weren’t easy.’

‘But she was dying,’ Noah said again, more to himself this time than to his father. ‘What about us? What about Solveig and me?’

There was no response. Noah hadn’t really expected one.

Olaf, after an evening of brooding in his den on the day his wife died, decided to have her cremated. Both of her parents, Noah’s grandma and grandpa Dahlie, had been dead for years. And Noah’s aunt Lena, who had been in Duluth for four days, beside her sister’s hospital bed the entire time - who Solveig went to live with in Minneapolis until she came back to Duluth for college five years later - thought it Olaf’s decision to make.

Noah never knew what became of the ashes, his mother’s ashes, and until now had never thought to ask. ‘What about her ashes? What did you do with them?’

Olaf looked squarely at Noah, a face full of regret if Noah judged right – watery eyes gleaming in the dark, quivering jaw, head tilted – ‘I still have them,’ he said in a child’s voice and looked away quickly.

‘You still have them?’

Olaf shook his head yes.

‘Where?’ Noah could not get his mind around the idea.

‘They’re in the shed. They’re stowed away.’

Noah said nothing. It wasn’t anger keeping him quiet, but amazement. His mother was, after all, buried, if not literally then practically, in the boarded-up, nearly falling down shed.

‘Does it seem cruel?’ Olaf asked.

Noah’s mind had gone momentarily blank. ‘Cruel?’

Olaf shook his head yes again. Cruel?

‘It seems,’ Noah said, ‘it seems unfathomable.’

‘Everything’s fathomable, Noah. I want to know if it’s cruel? To have her up there in that shack.’ He pointed up the hill.

It was dark, and when Noah turned to look, all he could see were the first few moonlit steps. ‘Cruel? No. Well, maybe.’

‘I never knew what to do with them. What are you supposed to do with your wife’s ashes?’

Noah had no idea.

They sat there quietly for a long time. The night was beautiful, cooling, getting cold; the sky still awesome for all its stars. He had almost forgotten about his father sitting there, and when he looked over, he saw the old man was asleep, his chin still on his chest, his hands folded across his lap. Noah thought to wake him, but didn’t.

It had never occurred to him until these quiet minutes now, in the shadow, as it were, of his mother’s grave, that Natalie might someday die herself. He simply never thought about such things. It never dawned on him either, that Natalie could be having an affair with another man, someone like Ed, perhaps, or some Boston variety Mr. Lovelace. Maybe all those late nights at the office and last minute flights to New York and Denver and Seattle were actually secret infidelities. How could he be sure?

There was no reason that he had ever been able to think of to be suspicious, so he had never been. Even now, thinking about it seriously for the first time, the possibility of Natalie being unfaithful, to say nothing of dying, seemed as far fetched and unlikely as anything possibly could. True, most of his friends had been divorced or separated at one time or another because of a cheating spouse – it was the woman as often as the man – and, true, a good friend of his had died, six or seven years ago, a woman he went to graduate school with, but *Natalie*, unfaithful or dead?

Noah must have looked puzzled or worried because his father said suddenly, in a conciliatory voice that was clearly meant to ease Noah's mind. 'I chose the life that I had. For better or worse, and I think the jury is in on that one, I chose it. You've made better choices than me. I can see that.'

'What?' Noah said. The dog stirred again, uncoiled, and stretched his neck towards Noah, resting his chin on the top of his shoe.

'I mean, I chose to work on a ship; I chose it ahead of working in the mines or selling insurance or anything like that. I decided when I was eighteen, I actually decided when I was a kid but couldn't do anything about it until I was eighteen, to get a job on a ship. I decided this knowing what it might mean.'

'What did it mean?' Noah asked. He was trying to keep everything in perspective and having a hard time keeping track of what he was thinking and what he was actually saying.

'I suppose, like just about everything, there were advantages and disadvantages to choosing what I did. And I knew that when I started. If I didn't know it right away, I sure came to know it.'

'To know *what*?'

'Know that I'd be gone a lot; know that it would be hard on a family, if I ever had a family.'

'You just didn't know *how* hard,' Noah said, referring to his mother's infidelity, to he and his father's own estrangement, to the general idea that they'd never, ever had a conversation like this.

'Hell, no one knows *how* hard it's gonna be; least of all eighteen-year-old kids; least of all eighteen-year-old kids with parents like mine.'

'Or mine,' Noah added, not sure if it was a joke or a jab.

'You've done good.' There was a tone of genuine approval.

'I never wanted to do what you did. I knew that from the time I was ten.'

‘You had a better reason than most kids to not want to do what I did.’

‘You mean the *Rag*?’

‘Among other things, yes.’

‘Why did you want to do what you did?’ he asked, more than a little surprised to be wondering.

‘When we came over here, to America I mean, we crossed the North Atlantic in a passenger ship, a steamship. It was huge, hundreds of people on board – I have a picture of it, a post card, somewhere, it was called the *Anledning* – and it really made an impression on me. It’s one of the first things I remember. I loved it. There was an officer aboard that ship who took a liking to me and he showed me around, explained how everything worked. Of course, I didn’t understand any of it, but the whole thing knocked me out. The impression stayed with me for a long time.

‘I suppose I got it into my head way back then that a life at sea would suit me just fine. It seemed so adventurous – certainly it was the first sense of adventure I ever had – and so it stuck in my craw. For my birthday I’d beg for toy ships, sailor suits, and spyglasses. I’m sure I told anyone who’d listen that I wanted to be a Captain or a pirate. I know this, in fact, come to think of it, because my mother would remind me of it whenever someone asked me what I wanted to do. I’d start to say, “I want to be a ski jumper” and she’d correct me, she’d say, “I thought you wanted to be the captain of a big ship,” Not that I needed the reminders, I really just wanted to be a sailor.

‘When I turned eighteen, there was no doubt about what I’d do. My old man worked on the tugs by then. He would take me out once or twice a year and let me sit behind the wheel while we tugged a barge or ship across the harbor and out the channel. It was exciting, sure, but I never understood, even as a kid, why someone would choose to work on a tug when working on one of the freighters was just as easy. I didn’t understand why someone would settle for the same old harbor routine when they could just as easily

work on a ship that sailed a thousand miles away. I still don't understand.' He paused reflectively.

'Anyway, when I told him I was getting ready to apply at Superior Steel, he tried to persuade me to work on the tug with him, to work on any tug would have been good enough I guess. But I had my mind made up and sailed out right after I finished high school.'

Olaf paused, adjusted in his chair, and pointed up at the sky. 'My first year, on the *Loki*, I used to sit watch from midnight until four. This meant, ninety percent of the time anyway, that I just had to stay awake, sometimes I would be up in the pilothouse, sometimes down on deck, depending on the weather and where we were. It was a boring job, boring as hell to tell truth, but my captain that first year was a guy named Wolfgang, a German guy, a hell of a guy, smart as anyone I ever met, and he introduced me to the stars, so to speak.

Olaf pointed up at the sky, 'He taught me some things about navigating. Just basic stuff, but it fascinated me. He said that a true sailor could sail around the world without more than a watch and a sextant and the sky to guide him. He gave me some books to read,' here he chuckled, 'which I didn't read, not right away in any case, and told me that if I wanted to learn, he'd be happy to teach me.

'I didn't even know what the hell a sextant was. I'd always figured you just knew where to go if you were in charge of one of those ships, never reckoned that there was any kind of science to navigating. In the harbor you could see where you wanted to go, you could see your destination from your place of taking leave. But out on the lake, where the water usually meets the horizon, you obviously can't *see* where you're going, where you're going to end up in any case. Wolfgang – we called him Wolf for short – taught me how to take sun sights, how to chart our course, how to estimate our position using dead reckoning when the sky was cloudy and the shore and its landmarks were out of sight. Back then we still depended on all that stuff. Unlike now, when you've got satellites all over the goddamn sky, telling you where you are. Back then it was still something beautiful to steer a ship.'

Olaf stopped talking. He was looking up at the sky, pointing silently to different clusters of stars, marking the air with fingertip dots. Noah, in all his life, had never heard his father say so much at one time, had never heard him say half as much.

‘What are you pointing at?’ Noah asked.

Olaf looked down and shook his head. ‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘There was a lot of down time on the ship, especially as a kid when I didn’t have any responsibilities outside of my watch. On clear nights I used to stand on the stern deck looking out at the wake. There are a lot of beautiful things to see in the night sky, especially on Superior.’ He paused, sighed almost girlishly, and chuckled. ‘Of course, I wasn’t usually thinking about how beautiful the sky was but how much I needed to get laid. There are a lot of reasons to be lonely out there, especially if you’re the new kid onboard. When you’re aching to get away though – which I had no good reason to be – even the worst loneliness doesn’t sound bad.’

‘So you weren’t lonely?’

‘Oh, I suppose there were times when I was lonely, but it doesn’t stand out in my mind. I was pretty well suited for the life, that much was clear right off the bat.’ He was still looking skyward. ‘What was I talking about before all this loneliness horseshit?’

‘On the deck at night, the wake, the sky...’ Noah was interested now.

‘Oh yeah. Well, I got interested in what the Captain had to tell me. I used to watch him take his sights, consult our charts, mark our position, do the math. I’d watch him with the sextant and nautical almanacs and parallel rulers. The idea was that if you had these things, and knew how to use them, you would never be lost. Theoretically speaking in any case.’ He took a deep, remembering breath; an old man’s breath.

‘After a couple of seasons I had a real sense for this stuff. I could measure the passing of time, usually to within minutes, by how tired I felt. My instincts on time were almost as reliable as my Benrus watch. I still have that watch somewhere,’ he said blankly. ‘A good sailor always knows what time it is anyway, but when your hobby is navigating, well, it becomes like a sixth sense. Put all together, by the time I was a mate, I could usually



mark our position, with the almost perfect sailor's sense I had, to within a half or a quarter of a degree both latitudinally and longitudinally when I handed the wheel off to my relieving officer.' He paused again.

'You'd check it all though, right? I mean against the charts and radar and all that stuff?'

'When I made Third Mate, we didn't have much in the way of electronic navigational equipment. We would use, basically, the same techniques that had been used for a hundred years. True, we had better charts and better regulations to follow, but it was still more of an art. By the time I made First Mate there were more developments in technology, but the truth of the matter was that the shipping companies were more interested in developing profits than they were in how their ships got around. They concentrated their resources on improving the loading and unloading equipment, not the navigational or safety equipment. Improvements in that area always had to come down from the Coast Guard and even then there were months or years of feet dragging. Nowadays, of course, the computers they have on board those boats make the sailor an adornment. Punch in your coordinates and press go, that's about it. Humph,' he concluded.

'Anyway, when my watch was over, on clear nights at least, I'd linger on the deck like I had when I was a kid. I'm telling you, on an October night, up on the northern half of Superior, when the northern lights are out and the sky is clear – you couldn't *imagine* a more beautiful sight. If I ever came close to believing in heaven, that was it. Goddamn it was beautiful.'

'It still is,' Noah said looking up at the sky.

'That's for sure. You see there?' he asked, pointing almost straight up at a cluster of bright stars. 'That's Andromeda, you can tell by the spiraling cloudiness of it. It'll be lower in the sky in the next month. That's Cassiopeia to the left there. That's Auriga there, and that's Capella, that bright star right on the edge of that cluster. You can't see Orion or Betelgeuse now because they're too low on the horizon. Those stars are so many millions

of light years away that it's almost impossible for my old mind to comprehend it now. But I'll tell you what,' he coughed to clear his throat and nodded his head affirmatively. 'I used to sail by their light, I used to sail by Andromeda's light, and I got around just fine.'

There was a long, easy silence between them. Olaf was still calculating some impossible star equation with the tip of his right index finger, still conducting, Noah thought it looked like, some star orchestra.

'The galley would start serving breakfast at six o'clock. My habit was to sit on deck or in the pilothouse revising my book of charts and my star atlas until right before chow time, take my morning sun sight, then head to the galley and eat breakfast like it was meant to be eaten. Buttermilk pancakes drowning in maple syrup and butter, eggs, hash browns, bacon and sausage, coffee, orange juice, a banana. Sometimes there would even be grilled steaks or Cajun chops.

'We all ate like that, all the time; it was one of the perks for living on a big old steel trap like we did. I still remember what it was like to feel as full as I did after those breakfasts. I'd go back to my cabin, slide off my boots, and lie down on top of my bunk.' He sighed contentedly. 'I didn't have anything in the world to worry about in that sleep. Nothing.'

'But when you woke up...?'

'I've never been a good sleeper, but those mornings were pretty damn good. After your mother and I married and you came along, the sleep wasn't so easy. There was something to miss and something to worry about all of the time.'

'How did you do it day after day? I mean, how did you get along without seeing us for months at a time?' There was nothing accusatory in Noah's tone of voice.

'I was ten years into my career when I met your mother; there was nothing else I could do. I thought,' he said and looked up at Noah for confirmation, 'that for the first few years of your childhood things worked out as well as they could. I thought that your

mother and you were doing okay. And it was a good living, much better than some of the alternatives.’

‘Much better for *who*?’ Noah asked.

‘Much better for all of us. We were able to afford a nice home, nice clothes for you and your mother and Solveig. We had our winters and layovers and the vacation up here each summer. It’s not like I didn’t know you.’

He was right, at least as far as Noah could remember – he did feel like his father knew him as a young boy. After the wreck was another matter, but before, when there were no demons and no resentment, his father had been the idol of his youth.

‘I never take the time to wonder what it was like for you; to imagine how it was to leave your wife and kids for months at a time.’

‘It was never your job to wonder about that. I’m not saying that the life we had together was ideal, especially after the wreck, I’m just saying it could have been worse.’

‘Maybe.’

Olaf looked away. ‘It all blends together for me now, everything before the *Rag*. Each of the ships and each of the years have become the same thing unless I’m looking at a picture, and even then I have a hard time keeping it all straight. But I’ll tell you what, my life was completely divided the night she sank.’

Noah couldn’t decide if his father was pandering to the moment or aching to reconcile in a way Noah was just beginning to understand. He tried to keep in his mind that the old man was, in all likelihood, dying, and he imagined that a dying man’s nature was probably pretty susceptible to nostalgia, but he also thought, this more rationally he was sure, about how easy it would be for a man like his father – like any man for that matter – dying or not, to look back on the failures of his life and find such easy answers in them. Maybe his father’s life *was* divided on the night his ship sank, but did that excuse the last thirty-three years? Did the sinking of that goddamn ship justify what came after?

‘I’m sure I can’t imagine what it was like,’ Noah said, not even knowing if he meant to be glib or not.

‘Not a day goes by now I don’t think about it, not a day,’ Olaf said finally.

‘Maybe it’s time we go on up to bed. You dozed off for a minute there.’

‘This is as late as I’ve been up in a long time – a *long* time.’

‘You picked a good night for it,’ Noah said, acknowledging the brilliant sky again.

‘That I did, but the pressures dropping again. Come morning, I bet it’ll be cloudy.’

‘Let’s worry about the clouds then. I’m beat.’

They walked back up the moon and starlit path, Olaf in front, panting and clumsy and tentative. The dog walked beside them to the door of the house and then curled up on the top step.

Inside, Olaf disappeared into his bedroom for a minute then reappeared in his union suit. Noah was standing at the sink brushing his teeth.

Olaf opened the stove door and put a couple pieces of wood on top of the glowing embers. ‘I’m glad we had a chance to talk tonight, Noah. I know it isn’t easy keeping score with an old man like me and I know it isn’t easy dredging up the past.’

Noah couldn’t think of anything to say.

‘We’ll get that tree over in the gulch tomorrow morning, alright?’ Olaf said awkwardly.

‘Yeah, sure.’

‘Alright then, goodnight.’ And he turned and trudged back into his bedroom.

Noah turned out the lamp over the sink and went to bed himself.

In the middle of the night Noah jerked awake. The heavy quilt, still tucked between the mattress and box spring at the foot of the double bed, lay over him like a piece of plywood. For a second, in the unfamiliar pitch-darkness, he thought he was being x-rayed –

the remnants of an already forgotten dream. He realized he had to piss as he rolled onto his back and shut his eyes again.

He moved his left arm under the quilt to feel for the edge of the bed, lifted the quilt when he found it, and slid his legs over the edge so that his feet were touching the dusty wood floor. It was so quiet he could hear the stovefire wheeze in the next room. He wiped his eyes, rubbed his nose, and thought: I have to shit. In an instant all of the old childhood fear-of-the-woods-at-night came back to him, blazing back to him, but he knew he couldn't wait until morning.

His jeans were hung on the bedpost. He reached for them, fumbled for the front side of them, for the zipper, and slid them on. They were cold and stiff. When he opened the bedroom door, the warm air from the living room surrounded him and warmed his bare chest. The small smudged window on the door of the stove cast a lamentable, barely discernable amber light.

He walked across the room with his arms in front of him, remembering there was an old flashlight on top of the shelf above the coat rack on the porch. There was no way he was going to the outhouse without one. He found the doorknob, nudged the door open, felt for the wainscoting along the wall before the door outside, and groped in the dark until he came to the coat rack. The flashlight was there, but it didn't come on when he slid the switch forward. He knocked the red plastic head of it in the palm of his hand, hard, a couple of times before it flickered on. The glow was as dull and dim as the light of the stove, but it was better than nothing.

There were a pair of unlaced boots on the floor and he slid his sockless feet into them. Hanging from one of the pegs on the coat rack was a hunter's blaze orange sweatshirt that he slid on, too. He stepped out of the house letting the screen door slam loudly behind him. He thought the noise might startle the bears or wolves that he was sure were lurking on the edge of the yard. When the reverberations of the slamming door

stopped though, the only sound was the disgruntled sigh of Sancho who was still asleep on the top step.

When he was a kid, the thought of making this walk alone would never have occurred to him. He could remember many evenings when he was eight or nine or ten years old, standing at his father's or grandpa's bed side, tugging at their arm, insisting that he couldn't wait until morning to go to the bathroom. He thought about what it might be like to have a son of his own now, what it would be like if his little boy were here, asking *him*, to escort him out to the shitter. It was the kind of thought that made him feel woefully unready to have a son. His own father had never feared the dark.

It was his habit, whenever he was frightened - whenever the turbulence on a transatlantic flight set the plane to shaking, whenever the highways glazed over with black ice and made driving treacherous, the time he was stung by a bee on his neck and his throat swelled like a mango and he couldn't breath - to think of Natalie. The image of her face always appeased the fear. Since he was terrified now, sure that *something* was going to attack him, he thought of her now. She would be sound asleep though, he was sure, and this was the solace in his fear.

He stopped in front of the outhouse. There were two soggy wooden steps at its base, rotted and carpeted with moss. The sky had gone completely black, cloud covered as his father said it would, and he realized in a shiver that the temperature had dropped several degrees since he went to bed. It felt like winter

The wooden latch on the door was rotten too. When he pulled the door it stuck for a second but then swung open and hung by a single hinge. He flashed the light inside and could barely discern the coverless toilet seat. There were a few water-wrinkled magazines on a stool in the corner, an old wall calendar curling at the corners nailed to the inside of the door, and a Folger's coffee can, uncovered, with a roll of mottled, damp-looking toilet paper in it.

He looked up at the sky and took a deep breath. The cold air was sharp on his lips and in his lungs. It felt good. He peeked into the outhouse again, shook his head, then froze when he heard what he thought sounded like fallen leaves being kicked around in the woods to his right. He shined the pathetic light into the woods, but saw nothing. The light was little more than an extension of the helpless, fearful feeling he himself had and it would hardly have illuminated his hand had he held it before the lamp now.

He hurried inside, decided to leave the door open, and let his pants down. The seat was every bit as cold and clammy as he thought it would be and it distracted him for a minute, but then warmed under him, as his legs goose pimples. He turned the flashlight off to preserve the batteries, trying to concentrate on the noises that were fluttering everywhere in the woods around him. There was a clicking of tree branches – the wind or an alighting owl, he hoped – outside, then a second of silence, then a chirp, a mouse or a chipmunk perhaps, then silence again, then another creak, a distant one, then a click, nearby, what sounded like a car door opening. Each of the sounds was amplified in the silence and came to him like the pitch and beeps of the headphone hearing tests he had always failed as a child. He couldn't be sure of any of them though he strained, head cocked, to hear them. He thought of Natalie again.

He had been breathing through his mouth because he hated stink and was sure that if anything, this splintered, soggy little box would stink. But when he sniffed the air inside, there was hardly any discernable smell, at all and what little scent he *did* catch was more pleasant than foul; it smelled like wet grass.

The toilet paper almost disintegrated to the touch. It was disgusting. When he stood to hike his pants up, the flashlight, which he'd balanced on his knee, rolled off his leg and bounced onto the outhouse floor. There was nothing to do but get on his knees and feel into the cobwebby corners to find it.

When he stood up, wiping the wet metal handle of the flashlight, which no longer worked even after several smacks against his knee, on the sleeve of the sweatshirt, he heard

the unmistakable sound of a car door slamming. He froze again, stared very intensely down the path towards the house, but could see positively nothing. His first thought was to step as quietly as he could back into the outhouse, close the door, and hope that whoever or whatever it was would just leave.

The problem, and it was a considerable problem, was that without the flashlight he might just as well have been blind. If he stepped off the path, he'd end up in the woods and probably turned around and heading in the opposite direction of the house. The woods were vast here, and in the cold, getting lost in them, dressed as he was, would be serious. The thought of spending the rest of the night in the grip of the darkness, lost in the woods, left him paralyzed and terrified.

For a minute or two he simply stood there, stone still. The outhouse was only four or five steps behind him, but for all the darkness between he and it, it may as well have been down in Duluth. The house, now being ransacked by someone or something, he was sure, was thirty yards through the woods, and although there was a path, even in the light of day it was easy to step off of it and find yourself turned around, tripping through the bramble. The pounding of his heart against his ribs was pronounced enough that for a second, as he stood there motionless, he actually thought that whatever was at the car might hear him. He imagined a whole cast of potential attackers: Huge black bears with three inch claws sacking the truck, drunk north shore hillbillies with bottles of empty whiskey and their hunting rifles, escaped Canadian convicts still in their prison issue jumpsuits with shaved heads and sawed-off hockey sticks.

He took a cautious step forward, then another. As he paused to take a breath, he heard what he thought was the screen door shut. Why wouldn't the dog be mauling the intruder? he wondered. Why wouldn't there be a little commotion? Wouldn't his father wake and startle the thief? Why, and this really hit him now, in a moment of uncommon clarity – who could have explained how or why? - would *anyone* have found his way all the way to this isolated house in the middle of the night? This calmed him – nobody was



breaking into his car or his father's car, this wasn't Boston for god's sake, it was twenty miles up a winding country road from a town of one hundred and fifty people. The only *possible* answer was a *logical* answer. At just this moment of realization, he saw the window on the back of the house, the window next to the door, turn lamp yellow through the leafless woods. His father was awake inside the house. Now he only had to get back down the trail. He used the lighted window as his beacon.

'Shit!' Olaf said as Noah came into the house. He was standing behind the counter of the kitchen area and had his hands and arms raised defensively, as if he were going to box the intruder. 'What in the hell are you doing?'

'I had to go to the bathroom.'

'You scared the shit out of me.'

'I scared the shit out of *you*? I was scared shitless myself. Did you open and close a car door? I thought I heard a car door opening and closing.'

'I did. I went out to get the box of photo albums from the back of the truck.'

'What are you doing up now?'

'I always get up early.'

'It's not *early*, it's late. It's the middle of the goddamn night.'

'Well, this is when I get up,' Olaf said sheepishly.

'And what about a toilet, huh? It's not 1850 anymore, you can get indoor plumbing, this must be the only house in America without a *toilet*,' he said. 'It's freezing out – a man shouldn't have to walk a mile through the woods to take a shit at night. And how about a flashlight with some batteries that work? It's pitch fucking black out there.'

Olaf looked stunned, almost frightened. He looked, Noah thought - and immediately felt bad for lashing out at his fear, that's what he was doing - like a child who can't understand a parent's rage; like he used to feel himself, as a boy, whenever the old man was giving *him* hell for breaking a garage door window with a ball, for accidentally tripping Solveig on the sidewalk, for not mowing the lawn just right.

‘There’s a flashlight here,’ Olaf said cautiously, taking a ten inch long light with a lamp five inches in diameter from the shelf beside the door. When he turned it on and shined it out the window, the trees lit up as if under a spotlight. ‘I keep the light here,’ he continued, turning the flashlight off and setting it back on the shelf.

‘Well, I’m going back to bed. I’ll see you in the morning,’ Noah said and walked across the living room and back into his bedroom.

**PART THREE: *The Rag is Burning***

Just the day before Noah might reasonably have stood shirtless in the sun, now there were snowflakes as big as cotton balls falling slowly enough that he could pick one out thirty feet in the air, watch it fall to the ground, balance weightlessly on a blade of brown grass, and melt in eight or ten seconds. He'd been watching the snowfall for twenty minutes from behind the screen door, sipping a cup of muddy coffee.

Olaf's heavy-footed clomping had woken him an hour earlier, but he'd stayed in bed - still smarting from a lingering sense of guilt and animosity from the night before - hoping that his father would get out of the house so he could be alone for a while. When he heard the screen door slam and the dog bark excitedly outside, he'd gotten up and fixed the coffee. Now, standing at the door, he wondered where the old man had gone.

It always surprised Noah to trace the illogical path of his thoughts from one topic to another until he'd gone, for example, from the image of his wife's beautiful, milky breasts pressed warmly against his own bare chest during their lovemaking - which had been the first thing he thought of standing at the door - to the unimaginable nightmare of twenty-seven men on a sinking ship. That both of these things crossed his mind during the same cup of coffee was a source of mild confusion, especially as he tried to reconstruct their degrees of separation. Unable to make sense of the connection, he finally just shrugged, finished the last tepid sip of coffee, and reminded himself that he had to get back into town to call Nat that afternoon. He went back inside, poured himself another cup of coffee, and settled comfortably into the armchair.

Although most of the details of the morning of the wreck were vague at best, a few had remained etched in his memory. He remembered two-year-old Solveig wiggling impatiently on his lap, her toddler's innocence so distant from his own, which was undergoing an atomic transformation in the dread and worry of their living room. He

remembered that his mother, despite her obvious and incredible anxiety, had commended him for being such a wonderful big brother. He remembered his mother's teary, swollen eyes - the center of the dread and worry - and the eruption of consciousness that their look provoked in him; the thought that maybe *he* was the cataclysm. He knew *something* had happened, or was happening, to inspire his self-consciousness; knew that his papa's ship was missing, though what 'missing' meant he didn't quite understand. Judging by his mother's fretfulness though, he knew it wasn't good, knew that his aunt Lena would never have driven through the middle of the night to be with them otherwise. And he knew - this surest of all - that if the morning ever came to an end, and if his father ever came back from missing, that all of the tears would not be for nothing. *How* he knew this, both then and now, was nothing short of mystifying. It was, as he had often chided himself, the only intuitive thought he'd ever had. That it came as a seven year old boy, on a morning like that one back in 1967, was his surest proof yet of how little sense life made.

Sitting in his father's house, all of the ancient childhood memories suddenly seemed urgent. It was as if they were some sort of verification; as if that morning was the reason he was here now; as if without that morning and the events that sprang it, there would be no *reason* to be here at all, at least not under the same circumstances, with the same ambivalence coursing through his thoughts.

'Oh, Lena,' his mother had said. 'Where *is* that thing?' She was talking about the newspaper, which had become the focus of her consternation; waiting for it had been an event in itself. Apparently the thought of hopping into the car and driving down to the gas station on Central Entrance had never entered his mother's mind. Whether this was because of the snow, which had fallen by the foot over night, or because leaving meant the possibility of missing a phone call or radio news broadcast he had never been able to figure out. But her want and need of the Herald that morning was something he never forgot.

Lena was an adoring aunt and sister who'd spent a lot of time with them when Noah was a kid. She was a miniature version of his mother - a less attractive one - whose

aquiline eyes and dusty blond hair accentuated an otherwise ordinary face. What she lacked in sheer beauty she made-up for with an instinctual grace and confidence, and she could make most people smile just by smiling herself.

‘The paper will come, Tove,’ his aunt said. Her voice had a hint of an accent that she must have picked up from her parents, Noah’s grandma and grandpa Dahlie, who had lived in Norway – like his grandma and grandpa Torr – until they were grown and married. ‘Don’t worry. Remember, it’s snowing like mad, and that slows the delivery boy, too.’ She spoke so gently and with such a sincere sympathy that his mother had finally put down the dust rag and ceramic figurine she’d been polishing for ten minutes and collapsed on the sofa.

When the thud of the paper hitting the oval pane of glass in the storm door finally broke the uneasy silence, his mother was too terrified to move.

‘Noah,’ Lena had said sweetly, ‘will you put your boots on and step out to grab us the paper? It should be right on the top step.’

Noah had sat there paralyzed, dying to do something like put on his boots and step outside, but when she asked he couldn’t move.

‘Honey,’ Lena persisted, ‘grab the paper and bring it to me, okay?’

Finally he did as he was asked. When he handed Lena the paper she took it, kissed the tip of her pinky and offered it to his lips in a gesture so familiar it restored, at least for a moment, a semblance of order. When he turned to look back out the window, he saw a section of the paper slip from his aunt’s hands and fall to the floor. The transistor radio sat on the kitchen counter and the droning, faraway voice of some WEBC newscaster was repeating over and over again that the *Ragnarok* was missing.

‘Well?’ his mother asked. She had rubbed her hands raw and was working on her elbows.

Lena was already into the paper, scanning each page for a headline. ‘Nothing so far,’ she said.

‘Goddamnit,’ his mother said after another moment, and whatever edifice of normalcy that had remained was crushed.

‘I don’t see anything,’ Lena said, turning the last page of the paper.

‘There it is,’ Noah had said, pointing at a section of newspaper that Lena had let fall to the floor. ‘There’s the *Rag*.’

Beneath the curlicue of the Duluth Herald masthead, a screaming banner stretching from margin to margin declared: *SS RAGNAROK MISSING: WORST IS FEARED*. Beneath the banner there was a file photograph of the *Rag* steaming under the aerial bridge.

‘At 12:27 AM today, the Superior Steel ship *Ragnarok* lost radio contact after making a mayday call, according to a spokesman from the Superior Steel offices in Duluth,’ Lena began reading immediately.

‘According to the spokesman, the ship is believed to have lost her rudder somewhere north/northwest of Isle Royale in Lake Superior.

‘A meteorologist from the National Weather Service reported high winds and heavy snow in the area. Other vessels in the vicinity reported waves of ten to thirty feet.

‘“The ship was under the command of Captain Jan Vat,” the Superior Steel spokesman said in a release. “He is believed to have been the officer that made the mayday. An hour earlier First Mate Olaf Torr reported a small fire in the engine room, believed to have started from a faulty fuel line.

‘“We have contacted family members, many of whom live here in Duluth, and will update events as they unfold. For now, we’re praying that search and rescue operations are successful.” Lena paused, looked at her sister, and then began reading again.

‘Both the U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards launched search efforts, but were hampered by dangerous seas and weather conditions. “Maybe when day breaks we can get back out there, but for now it’s just too risky,” U.S. Coast Guard Captain Don Nosur said. “We’ve got other commercial vessels in the area on the lookout, though.”’

‘Stop it!’ his mother yelled. ‘That’s enough! We know all this.’

Noah flinched at the sound of his mother's desperate voice.

'Noah, take Solveig upstairs,' Lena said. 'Play nicely in your bedroom until I call you down, okay?'

I must have been so scared, he thought now, reclining in the armchair. For once the cabin wasn't twenty degrees too warm, and it felt good to breathe in the smells of coffee and dying fire without choking. He was hungry, but he didn't have the gumption to get up and wring breakfast out of the under-stocked kitchen. Instead, he fell asleep.

He woke to the creaking of floorboards and his father toddling across the room with a fist-full of pearly fish meat in his hand. He watched his father from the shadowy half of the house through squinting eyes. It looked, Noah thought, like his father had aged ten years overnight. His gait was palsied and pained, and the expression on his wrinkled face suggested a diminishing resolve. The fish meat hanging limply in his hand looked like an extension of the loose flesh that was holding it.

Olaf dropped the fish on the counter as he walked past, and paused momentarily to steady himself and catch his breath. After a second he went to the stove, knelt and opened the door. He grabbed a couple pieces of oak from the wood box sitting beside it. He set the wood in the stove, and fanned the embers with a bellows.

'What's that on the counter?' Noah asked, startling his father.

'I thought you were sleeping.'

'I was.'

'It's fish I caught this morning. Thought I could cook it up for a late breakfast.'

'Were you out in the boat?'

'Nah, I caught it off the dock. It's walleye.'

'I didn't know there were walleye in this lake.'

'They started stocking it about five years ago. There's an underwater island just off the dock. They school there in the fall. They're easy to catch this time of year.'



‘Is there anything to eat with it? Eggs or toast?’ Noah remembered how good fresh walleye was, and the thought of a plateful cheered him up.

‘There might be some bread in the freezer. If there isn’t, I can mix up some biscuits.’

‘That sounds good,’ Noah said, sitting up and scratching the stubble on his face.

‘You see the snow out there?’ Olaf asked, limping back across the room to the kitchen.

‘Are you okay?’ Noah asked, standing up. ‘Why don’t you let me make breakfast?’

‘That’s all right. I’m fine.’

‘You don’t look very good.’

‘Just a pain in my stomach.’

‘Sit down, Dad. Let me cook breakfast.’

Olaf shook his head in agreement, crossed the room, and collapsed into the armchair with a quiet moan.

‘There’s flour in the canister next to the window,’ Olaf offered as Noah started flipping through the cupboards and shelves in the kitchen. ‘And there’s a skillet under the basin.’

‘No eggs though,’ Noah said after checking the refrigerator. ‘What should I use to bread the fish?’

‘I think there’s some buttermilk in the door of the fridge, in a green carton. There’s a jar of bacon fat in there, too. You can fry the fish in that.’

‘*Bacon fat?* How about a little olive oil instead?’

‘Olive oil? No, no olive oil, but there might be some butter in the fridge.’

Noah stopped for a minute. Both of his hands were palm-down on the counter and he was looking across the room at his father. ‘Do you really cook your fish in bacon fat?’

‘Sure.’

‘Do you have any idea how bad for you that stuff is?’

‘Doesn’t matter anymore,’ Olaf said. He was rubbing his stomach.

‘But it’s mattered until now.’

‘What do you mean?’

Noah wanted to be delicate so he started backpedaling. ‘That stuff is *so* bad for you, you know? Nobody cooks anything in bacon fat anymore.’

‘Aah,’ Olaf said, waving his hand dismissively. ‘It never hurt me.’

‘Actually, Dad,’ Noah began, but then couldn’t bring himself to lecture him: It *didn’t* matter anymore.

Olaf was listening.

‘Listen, Dad,’ Noah continued. ‘I’m sorry about freaking out last night, about the flashlight. I was just...’

‘There’s nothing to apologize for,’ Olaf interrupted. ‘I should’ve showed you where the flashlight was.’

‘It’s just that this is all...’

Again Olaf interrupted, ‘Noah, when I called you and told you I was sick, I never expected you to come.’ His voice was raspy and faint. ‘When you said you were coming, and when you got here, I couldn’t much believe it. Now that you’re here, well, just spending some time with you, it’s doing me good.’

‘I know you’ve got a life of your own and that being here probably isn’t the first thing on your mind, and,’ he paused, ‘I know you never liked that outhouse anyway.’

Noah wanted to say that in all the years of their falling out, the first thing he always wanted and the last thing he ever expected was to be in a situation like the one he was in now, not just this instant but the last couple of days. He wanted to say that for twenty-five years he’d been waiting for this side of his father to show. Instead he said, ‘You’re right about that. I’ve hated that damn outhouse since I was a kid and old enough to be afraid of it.’

‘So don’t apologize.’

Noah rinsed the fish in a stainless steel cake pan. Then he soaked the fish in a bowl of buttermilk while he mixed flour and seasoning salt with an antique whisk. He spooned a couple generous lumps of bacon fat from the jar and set them to melting in the heavy skillet on the stove. When the bacon fat melted and was bubbling and spattering, he rolled the fish – which he’d cut into four strips – in the flour and dropped them into the grease. With a long, two tined fork, he flipped the fish several times until it hardened and the breading began to crumble. He had pulled the loaf of bread from the freezer and was defrosting a couple slices on the counter.

It wasn’t clams steamed in chardonnay, he thought, but it doesn’t look bad.

‘You want a cup of coffee?’ Noah asked.

‘Sure.’

Noah checked the coffee pot on the stove and poured his father a mug. Then he took two plates from the cupboard, two forks from a drawer, and served a strip of fish and a piece of bread on each plate.

‘Do you want to eat at the table or in the chair there?’ he asked his father.

‘Here’s good.’

Noah brought him a plate and sat down at the table. The fish was still steaming and the smell of bacon fat filled the room.

‘This is good,’ Olaf said, taking a bite.

‘No doubt each bite is taking a year off my life,’ Noah replied, lolling a hot bite of the fish around in his mouth. ‘Natalie won’t let me eat bacon; I can’t imagine what she’d have to say about frying fish in bacon *fat*. I’m not even allowed to butter my toast at home.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m exaggerating, Dad.’

‘Humph,’ Olaf snorted, scooping the last bite of his fish into his mouth.

‘Speaking of Natalie, I have to get back into town to call her this afternoon. Mind if I use your truck?’

‘Course not.’

‘Is it going to snow all day?’

Olaf took his glasses off and looked out the window. ‘I doubt it.’

‘You want another piece of fish?’ Noah asked. He was getting up to get one for himself.

‘No thanks.’

‘The way I figure it,’ Noah said, forking one of the strips of fish from the still-hot frying pan onto his plate while he finished the last bite of his first piece, ‘If I’m going to kill myself I might as well hurry up and do it.’

‘Eat up,’ Olaf responded. ‘You’ll need the energy for getting the rest of that tree in the gulch.’

‘Can it wait until I get back from calling Nat?’

‘Of course it can.’

Noah took the last bite of fish then stood up to clear their plates from the table. Before he’d started cooking he’d put a kettle of water on the stove so it would be ready for doing the dishes when they were done eating. Now Noah was pouring the kettle water into the basin that passed for a kitchen sink.

‘Why don’t you go on and give your wife a call? I can finish cleaning up the mess.’

‘That’s okay, it’ll only take me a minute.’

‘Go on, go on already. Let me finish that.’

‘Really, Dad, it’ll just take me a second.’

Olaf looked genuinely disappointed, but he also looked so tired and old that Noah couldn’t bring himself to hand over the chore.

The powdered dish soap and lukewarm water weren't doing much to cut the grease, so Noah filled the kettle again and put it back on the stove.

'You know what I was thinking about this morning?' Noah asked, sitting down on the sofa across from the armchair. It was a boxy, springy thing that he'd been avoiding since he got there, sitting on it he knew why.

'What's that?'

'I was thinking back about the *Rag*.'

'What about it?' Olaf asked, a little uneasily, as if he were being accused of something.

'I was thinking about Mom, really, about waiting for news with her and Lena that morning.'

Olaf's hands were crossed, sitting on his stomach, both pinkies were fingering a button on his flannel shirt. 'It was a hell of a morning,' he said, staring unaffected at the bookcase.

'I remember we were all a mess at home.'

'*You* were a mess?' Olaf asked as he swiveled his head towards Noah and looked at him over the rim of his glasses. There was a hint of resentment in his voice and Noah, who had always felt inadequately tested in contrast to his father, felt himself blush.

'I mean a mess with worry,' he added quickly. 'I just remember being so worried, Mom especially.' His neck was burning.

Olaf was still fingering the button on his shirt. 'I don't know why I still get so testy about that. It was damn near thirty-five years ago now.'

'It was a big deal, Dad, for all of us. You especially. It seems like you're entitled to strong feelings about it.'

Olaf nodded in half-agreement but didn't say anything back. In the silence that fell between them, Noah sensed a familiarity. There was no uneasiness in it, no tension, and he remembered the days here, at Lake Forsone, when the three Torr men – as his mother called

them, grandpa, papa, and Noah – spent whole days out on the lake fishing. The silence then, of course, had an aim – namely not to scare fish – and though this new silence had no aim, and though it was compressed and practically vibrating with energy, it had a meaningfulness and calmness. They sat quietly for a few minutes until the kettle started to whistle.

Noah jumped up, took the hot water to the basin, and started the dishes again.

‘You know,’ Olaf said from across the room, ‘Except for the lawyers and Coast Guard investigators and Superior Steel brass, I never talked to anyone about it.’ He paused. ‘Maybe Luke some night at the Freighter, but besides that, never.’

Noah was stirring the dishwater with a green-checked dishrag, trying to make the dish soap lather. ‘I’ve read all the books about it,’ Noah said, knowing his father hated them.

‘Me too,’ Olaf said.

‘Really?’

‘Sure I have. Sure, sure.’

‘That surprises me.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ Noah said. ‘I guess I just wouldn’t have thought.’

‘They’re all rotten. None of them have it right.’ He was smiling, he looked happy.

‘I always figured that.’

There must have been eight or ten books on the subject of the *Rag*. Each of them reported, in effect, the same story: How the ship caught fire, lost her rudder, foundered, and left three survivors. The differences in their accounts came either with who was at fault, what the weather conditions were that night, or how they portrayed the most dramatic element of the catastrophe, the survival of Luke, Bjorn and his father.

‘Couple of them have gotten it basically right,’ Olaf admitted.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, they left out all the made-up nonsense, they stuck to the facts.’

‘How come you never gave any of those reporters or authors interviews?’ Noah knew the answer to this question but asked it anyway.

‘It was none of their goddamn business.’

Noah was scrubbing the cast iron skillet with a brillo pad, and thought that the conversation was over. The dishwasher was splotted with iridescent grease globules and bits of floating fish batter.

‘Stopped snowing,’ Olaf said suddenly.

Noah looked out the window. ‘That’s too bad. It was beautiful.’

‘There’ll be more. You can bet on that.’

‘Listen, I’m going to run into Misquah, call Nat,’ Noah said pulling the plug from the basin. ‘Is there anything you want me to pick up while I’m there?’

‘Actually,’ Olaf said, sitting up, ‘there’s a hardware store just up 61 from the Landing. If you wouldn’t mind, I need about six feet of chain.’

‘Chain?’

‘Yeah, a chain. You know, a chain, like you lock stuff up with. I need one-inch links.’

‘For what?’ Noah asked drying his hands on a dishtowel while he looked around the room for the keys to the truck.

‘Just a project I’m finishing up.’

‘Okay,’ Noah said as he raised his eyebrows and nodded his head. ‘Anything else?’

‘No. The keys are in the truck, if that’s what you’re looking for. Make sure you prime it, give it a little gas, before you start it.’

Noah hung the dishrag on a hook next to the window, checked his back pocket for his wallet, and said, ‘I’ll see you in a little while.’

On the county road, about a quarter mile in front of him, he saw an orange DNR pickup truck with blinking yellow hazard lights parked on the other side of the road. He could see two guys, one in the bed of the truck sitting on a big Coleman cooler and the other on the shoulder of the road with a shovel in his hands. As Noah slowed to pass them, he noticed that the guy with the shovel was scooping the eviscerated remains of the deer into the back of the truck.

He pulled onto the gravel shoulder.

‘You need directions?’ the guy in the truck said. He was wearing a stocking hat under a safety helmet and an orange reflective vest over a padded flannel shirt.

‘What are you doing there?’ Noah asked.

‘Just a deer carcass.’

‘Why are you shoveling it into the truck?’ Noah pressed. He could taste bile creeping into the back of his throat.

‘We try to keep the roads clear,’ the one on the road said, pausing to rest his arms on the nub of the shovel handle.

‘Why?’ Noah asked stupidly, peeking into the bed of the truck to see a half dozen deer carcasses in different states of decomposition. He looked away quickly.

‘It’s safer, for one. And who wants to drive past a bunch of dead deer? We clear thousands of these things off the road each year.’

‘I see.’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘I hit that deer a couple days ago. At least I think that’s the deer I hit.’ He found himself scanning the trees and tall grass for a familiar sign, anything he might recognize in order to confirm that this was his deer. Of course it had to be.

‘Looks like you got her good,’ the one in the truck said, raising his eyebrows at Noah, suggesting some kind of camaraderie.



‘Looks like it,’ Noah agreed as he stepped back into his truck and headed down to the highway.

The road and trees were wet from the snow, but the only place he could actually *see* any snow, the only place it stuck, was in the withered roadside wildflower petals.

At the Landing he bought a root beer before he called Natalie, hoping to get the acrid taste from the back of his throat out of his mouth. Although the snow had stopped, the weather looked to be worsening. The sky was getting darker and the temperature was still falling. It couldn’t have been much more than twenty degrees.

‘Hello, love,’ he said. The phone was cold against his ear.

‘Noah why haven’t you called?’ Nat answered. The phone had only rung once.

‘What do you mean? I called just yesterday. What’s...’

‘Well a lot has changed since yesterday.’ She was talking so fast and with such a quaver in her voice that for a second he thought she said, “Well I’m deranged since yesterday.”

‘Nat, honey, slow down. Tell me what’s going on.’

‘First of all,’ she said, and he could tell she was crying, ‘I went to the doctor yesterday after I talked to you and he said it looked like I was going to ovulate, that the Gonal F was finally doing its fucking job for once and there’s at least a couple good looking follicles. He thinks I’m going to ovulate... he says there’s a really good chance we could try and inseminate on Friday... of course, you’re in the middle of Minnesota two thousand miles away from here, so unless you could just, just airmail me a vile of your sperm, I guess we’re out of luck.’ She let out a sob and took a deep breath, trying, he thought, to get control of herself. ‘So another month, at least, goes by and I’ve been sticking myself in the goddamn leg with the fucking needle everyday for nothing – *for absolutely nothing!* – because you’re in Minnesota and I’m here.’ Again she paused and took a deep breath.

Noah could feel the cold seeping through his clothes. There was a power line stretching from a street light at the gravel entrance to the roof of the Landing that was swaying despite the fact that there was no wind. ‘Listen, Nat,’ he said, altogether unsure of what he could possibly tell her. ‘I’m sorry I’m here...’

‘No, no, no,’ she interrupted. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck. I’m not *blaming* you, Noah. It’s just the way it always *goes*. I hate it! I haven’t ovulated in three months and then you leave and of course I start bursting with eggs... I’m so tired of it – tired, tired, tired of it...’ Now she was bawling and he could hear her sniffing and choking and trying to breathe.

‘Nat, honey,’ he began, but she interrupted him again.

‘And that’s not even the worst of it... not even close. After I went to the doctor I met with Carol and Andy and they told me I was being laid off... laid off, Noah, I’ve been fired, *fired*. They said they need to take me off the HP account and that, even though I’m doing a “great job” and even though they “love me” – they have to let me go right now, out of fucking nowhere, and I literally mean nowhere – *out of fucking nowhere* – they’re letting me go. That smug shit-head Andy and that cow-faced idiot Carol, laying me off? Firing me? It’s the insult of the century!’

Noah couldn’t believe it. Natalie worked harder, and was smarter and more competent than anyone he knew, and to think she’d been laid off, right out of nowhere as she said, simply did not register with him.

‘What are you talking about?’ he said. ‘Are you kidding?’

‘Do I sound like I’m kidding?’ she snapped. ‘Does it sound like I’m joking? Of course I’m not kidding. I don’t have a job – see? I’m unemployed.’ She started to cry again. ‘I’m unemployed and childless.’ And now she was wailing helplessly, crying like he’d never heard her cry before; and he’d heard her cry a lot in the last couple years, every time the drugs she was injecting or ingesting decided to trick her hormones and emotions; every time the doctor told her she wasn’t ovulating that month or that she wasn’t pregnant after an insemination.

His first impulse was to hang up the phone, not because he didn't want to help or listen or talk her through everything, but because he knew that whatever he was about to say, through no fault of his or hers, would be monumentally wrong. He knew, reasonably enough, that Nat losing her job, though it was surely crushing her pride, in no way reflected the person she was; he knew that she knew this, too. And he knew, or at least he believed, that even though their struggle to have a baby had grown to ridiculous proportions, that they would one day, soon he believed, get pregnant and stay pregnant. Voicing any of this was absurd, though, because none of it would satisfy her fantastic pragmatism; none of it, no matter how true and how rational, could contradict the facts of the moment: that she was unemployed and childless. And for all of her wisdom, she was sometimes too much a slave to the moment.

'Okay, honey,' he began despite his better judgment. 'About ovulating, I know it's terrible timing, and I know how much it stinks and I wish so badly that I was there...'

'But you're not!'

'I know I'm not, and I wish that I were and I can't help that I'm not...'

'What difference does it make?'

'Nat, it does make a difference because right now, despite the fact that I'm not there and despite the fact that it hasn't exactly been easy...'

*'Hasn't been easy?'*

'Despite the fact that it's been very difficult, there's just nothing we can do about it right now. We'll have to wait until next time.'

'Maybe you *could* airmail it. You could go to a hospital in Duluth and they could pack it in dry ice and FedEx it.'

'Natalie, do you really believe it's worth all that trouble?' And the minute he said it, he wished he hadn't.

*'Worth it?'*

‘You know what I mean,’ he interrupted her now. ‘I’m sure it couldn’t even be done. I just don’t think it’s a very reasonable plan.’

‘And injecting myself with a syringe full of saline and fertility drugs every night *is* reasonable? Being injected with Methotrexate and having to lie on my butt for a month is reasonably?’

‘That’s not the question, Nat. The question is whether or not it’s reasonable to think we even *could* send a sample, in dry ice, from Duluth to Boston. I think we know the answer is no.’

‘Why are you saying this? You haven’t even checked.’

‘I only say it, Nat, because it’s not a practical idea at all, and even though we’ve had our troubles, I still think you’ll ovulate again.’

‘What if you’re there for three months?’

He hadn’t given much thought to how long he might actually have to stay, and when she suggested a hypothetical three months, the possibility, especially in light of the chill temperatures and her stabbing impatience, seemed oppressive beyond words.

‘It won’t be three months, Nat, it won’t even be three weeks.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Listen,’ he said impatiently. ‘I don’t *know* anything, but I’m sure it won’t be that long. And even if it is, we’ll just have to be patient. Try and be reasonable, honey. I know it’s shitty, but it’s not the end of the world.’

As if she weren’t listening to anything he said, she asked, ‘and what about my goddamn job?’

On the subject of her job he was less sure, less inclined to common sense. Even though he knew that the loss of her job didn’t undermine their stability, even though he knew that his income or the equity in the map shop could sustain them for a long, long time, he knew that her distress over being laid off was not necessarily a financial one. Although

she had always liked her job, she had very little respect for the higher ups at McCreary & Wynn, and having them issue her walking papers must have seemed the ultimate affront.

‘Sweetie, you can get a job anywhere you want,’ he exaggerated.

‘That’s not the point.’

He knew it wasn’t and regretted saying it.

‘It’s the shock and the hassle and the insult and the, the *disruption*.’

‘Did they give you any severance?’

‘Six months,’ she said, and he thought he could sense she was regaining her composure, calming down.

‘Well take the six months and relax, find something great, do whatever you want. Think of the disruption as an opportunity.’ The advice, coming from him, must have sounded absurd.

‘Like what?’ she asked, and though he knew she meant the question rhetorically – an insult to his stupid suggestion – he answered her anyway.

‘You can rest, focus on relaxing, on getting pregnant again.’

‘How can I get pregnant when you’re there?’

‘I already told you,’ he began recounting, and for the rest of their conversation Noah defended his rationalizations while Natalie contested them with emotional superlatives. She assured him that the reason she wasn’t getting pregnant had nothing to do with working twelve or fourteen-hour days. She was infertile – did he understand that? – and he was being stupid and insulting to suggest otherwise. The miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy didn’t change this. She both reassured him and chastised him for being away at the moment, but never bothered to ask him how things were going, which was good because he didn’t know anyway. And she resolved, finally, to sleep on it after a bottle of wine, a little Miles Davis, and a long hot bath.

‘That sounds like a great idea,’ he said, and was answered with silence. ‘Come on, Nat, I’m trying. Can’t you give me that? Can’t you tell that I feel terrible about all this? I

just happen to think that we'll be okay financially and you'll find a better job than the one you had. And that you'll *get* pregnant. Maybe not now, but soon.'

She sighed, audibly. He couldn't tell if she was exhausted with him or if she was coming to some sort of plateau in her anxiety. When she said, 'I know you're trying,' he knew she was done trying to make sense of things.

A semi truck with a black serpent painted on its trailer roared by. It pushed a cold, hard draft of air at him, and in the stirring of the air and the strumming of the tires, he couldn't hear what she was saying.

'...Well?' she asked.

'Nat, I couldn't hear you, a truck just drove by.'

'I said how's your father?'

'He's bad today.'

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'Nat, I wish I could be there. You know that, don't you? You know I want a baby as bad as you do, don't you?'

'Of course I do.'

'But that we'll just have to wait for another month or two?'

'Yeah.'

'And that your job was beneath you anyway? That you'll find something better? That there's no pressure, no hurry?'

'It's just...'

'But you understand that, right?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Well I am. I'm sure about everything but my Dad. I can't figure out what's going on with him.'

'Go back to the house and take care of him. Don't worry about me for a couple of days. I need some time to collect my thoughts anyway. Call me on Saturday, okay?'

She was resigned to her uncertainty, he thought, which made them the same person for the moment.

‘I love you, Nat. Trust me on this stuff, okay?’

‘Okay,’ she said, and he knew she didn’t and knew she was right not to.

‘I’ll talk to you on Saturday.’

‘Take care of him, Noah.’

There was an agate and smoked fish shop on the northern edge of town. What an odd combination, Noah thought as he pulled into the driveway. It was still early afternoon and the sign in the window announced, ‘Open ‘til Dark’ – which would be a couple more hours.

He parked the car near the highway so that he could see the curve of the road as it disappeared into the woods in the rearview mirror. He was thinking about Nat, naturally, mostly about her desperation for a child but also about her job. The situation – both situations – seemed to be getting bigger from the distance of only a few minutes. He was sure she wouldn’t have moved from the couch in their living room yet, that she’d still be lying there, curled up like a snail, with her head hanging over the cushion, crying dispassionately now because of how disappointed she was in him. He never knew what to say.

When he pulled the door of the agate and smoked fish shop open, a synthesized loon call startled him from above the door; it served in place of a bell. On the left, a refrigerated deli case – an antique one that hummed and clinked and dripped – was filled with smoked fish. There were sockeye salmon, lake and rainbow trout, whitefish and smelt, all whole, all golden, dehydrated, and eyeless. On the right, another glass case was filled with agate jewelry. On the shelves behind the case, there were bowls and bowls of loose agates.

‘How-dy,’ a late-middle-aged man said from behind the fish counter. He was thin and rough looking and the two sides of his sandy goatee were unevenly trimmed. ‘Rocks or fish?’ he asked, coming out from behind the counter to meet Noah in the middle of the store. ‘Name’s Lars. I do the fish, the little lady does the rocks, but she’s not here.’

‘Agates,’ Noah said, surprised to be hearing his voice. ‘I’m looking for something for my wife.’ It was only then that the purpose and absurdity of the place struck him. The only piece of jewelry he’d ever bought Natalie was the half-carat diamond ring he gave her when he proposed. The idea that he might actually buy her an *agate* nearly made him laugh.

‘Well we’ve got agates,’ Lars said. ‘We’ve got them in spades. What’re you looking for? A nice necklace? An agate ring?’

‘A necklace maybe.’

‘What color eyes has she got?’

*What color eyes?* ‘Green-gray.’ Noah was being dragged along, but he didn’t mind. There was something really sweet and infectious about this guy.

‘You like the green or the gray better?’

‘The green, I guess.’

‘Then you want a green agate.’

By now he’d stepped behind the jewelry case and was fumbling with the lock. There were hundreds of pieces of agate jewelry in the case, displayed without any regard for appearances. Gold and silver chained bracelets and necklaces were heaped and tangled together; earrings without matches sat in willy-nilly piles.

The first couple necklaces he pulled out of the case had agates the size of ping-pong balls attached to gaudy gold chains. Noah winced at them and asked if he had anything with a little smaller agate, something on a silver chain perhaps.

What am I doing? he thought. She’ll *kill* me if I buy her one of these.



But as soon as he thought it, Lars pulled out a pearl-sized, emerald green agate attached to a very thin, very pretty silver chain. ‘This one’s actually white gold,’ he said, putting on a pair of glasses and reading from the little tag. ‘And it’s a real Superior agate, too. An *Agate Beach* agate,’ he confirmed and winked. ‘Not all of ‘em are.’

Noah could remember a sign somewhere along 61 for Agate Beach.

‘How much is it?’

Lars looked at the tag again. ‘It says twenty-five, but I’ll give it to you for fifteen.’

‘Can you mail it for me?’

‘Buddy, if we couldn’t mail things we’d be out of business. Everyday I send a hundred pounds or more of fish to you folks down in Minneapolis. Hell, we know the UPS driver like he’s our son.’ He tottered back and let out a surprisingly deep laugh.

‘Well I’d like it then.’

‘Sure enough,’ Lars said, clearly satisfied with his salesmanship.

Noah picked a postcard with a picture of a white-specked doe in tall summer grass off a rack of postcards and scribbled a message to Nat. *It was either this or smoked salmon. I love you.* ‘Put this in with it, okay?’ he asked Lars.

‘You betcha.’

Back on the highway all of the dread and despondency came back to him. Instead of Nat’s problems – Nat’s and his, he reminded himself – he was thinking of his father. What am I going to do? he wondered. What in the hell am I going to do with him?

It wasn't until Noah got back to the house that he remembered the chain, and he wouldn't have remembered it then if not for the padlock on the shed. The shake shingles and cedar siding that had been so inconspicuous at first – sitting under the overgrown trees, among the overgrown grass and bunchberry bushes – had taken on a new significance with the knowledge that the shack was doubling as his mother's grave. He wondered was his father crazy for keeping his mother there, or was it the most natural place in the world for her ashes to be.

The smoke coughing from the tin chimney on the house smelled wintry. It was a good smell, clean and faint. As it rose up and dispersed into the gray sky, Noah forgot about the ashes and felt the urge to hunker down, to make a pot of coffee, stoke the fire in the stove, and pick a big book – a book of myths, or the biography of a king – from the bookshelf to spend his afternoon with. The thought of bundling up and heading back to the gulch to finish with the oak seemed not only like a lot of work, but a waste of time, too. There was no way his father would live to burn a tenth of the wood that was already split and stacked around the house.

When Noah walked in, Olaf was still sitting in the armchair, the afghan hanging over his shoulders. His father looked up but didn't say anything. The lamp shining over his shoulder – an old lamp Noah recognized from the house on High Street – lit only the corner of the room, and Noah doubted his father could see him staring from the door. Olaf was holding a magazine inches from his nose. The look of concentration on his wrinkled, white face convinced Noah – for a minute anyway – that he wasn't on the verge of dying, that despite the moans and limps and spasms of pain, there was still life in the old man.

Noah kicked his boots off, set them on the braided rug beside the door, and went to the stove for the coffee pot.

‘There’s not much left,’ Olaf said, setting the magazine on his lap. ‘I can make some more.’

‘I’ll make it,’ Noah said.

He grabbed the kettle and the coffee pot from the stove, filled the kettle with water, and set it back on the stove to boil. The fire was blazing, he could tell, not only from the heat it was putting out, but from the faint whine and pinging of the pot belly stove as it adjusted to the flames inside.

‘This fire is way too hot,’ Noah said.

‘What are you talking about? It’s cold outside.’

‘If it’s cold enough for a fire like this, then it’s too cold to get back in the gulch.’

Olaf tilted his head and raised an eyebrow. ‘We’ll have to get it soon, though. Another couple of weeks and we could be buried here.’

‘We’ll get it tomorrow,’ Noah said.

Noah was measuring level tablespoons of coffee into the filter and he could feel droplets of sweat sliding into the small of his back. It reminded him of Natalie for some reason, and the thought of her depressed him.

‘Have any trouble with the truck?’

‘No trouble with the truck, but I forgot the chain,’ Noah said.

‘You forgot the chain?’

‘It’s not a criminal offense, Dad. Natalie gave me some bad news and it slipped my mind. If it’s that important I can run back in and get it.’

‘Ahh.’

‘I can go back in,’ Noah persisted.

‘I’ll go tomorrow. Forget it.’

Noah felt his shoulders tighten and had an impulse to head right back out to the truck and on into town, but instead he went to his bedroom and changed into a t-shirt and

the only pair of shorts he had with him. When he came back out he finished making the coffee and poured himself a cup.

Olaf, who had started reading his magazine again, set it down. 'What was the bad news?'

Noah looked across the room at him. 'She lost her job.'

'Why?'

'Who knows? Office politics probably.'

'That stinks,' Olaf said.

'It's not the end of the world.'

'Humph,' Olaf said as he picked the magazine back up.

'And she's ovulating.'

'She's what?'

'She's ovulating – like now would be the time of month she could get pregnant.'

'So?'

'So I'm here, Dad. In order for her to get pregnant, I need to be there.'

'Go back.'

'I'm not going back,' Noah said. 'It's not that big a deal.'

Olaf didn't say anything, just turned his attention back to the magazine.

'What's that you're reading?' he asked.

'You saw that already. It's the magazine Luke gave me. There's an article about shipwreck property.'

'What do you mean, shipwreck property?'

'Who it belongs to, I guess.'

'I don't get it. You mean like who gets anything that's recovered?'

'I think so. Maybe you should read it. You're the guy with all the degrees.'

'Believe me,' Noah said laughing at himself, 'those degrees did nothing to make me any smarter. Are you thinking about trying to salvage the *Rag*?'

‘Rest assured of this,’ Olaf said, raising his coffee mug for effect. ‘Nobody’s ever salvaging the *Rag*. She’s too deep.’

Noah couldn’t tell if the old man was being solemn or not, so he hesitated before pushing the subject. ‘You know, I always wanted to hear the story from you. About the *Rag* I mean.’

Olaf looked down into his coffee cup, then he looked out the window, then he rolled his head back and shut his eyes. After a second or two, he looked at Noah and said, ‘I wouldn’t know how to tell the story. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.’

‘Start at the beginning, start in Two Harbors.’

‘It’s a long story, Noah.’

‘And we’re sitting in the middle of the woods. It’s snowing outside. We’ve got a fresh pot of coffee.’

‘It was a long time ago.’

‘It was snowing then too, right? When you loaded in Two Harbors.’

Olaf scratched his beard. In the lamplight, the yellowness of his moustache was accentuated.

‘You were light, weren’t you? Because it was the last run?’

‘We took twelve tons of taconite,’ Olaf began. ‘We were light because it was the last run of the year. We were going to spend the rest of November and December moving coal on the lower lakes. We always ran taconite until the end of the season, but it had been a pretty light year. Half the fleet didn’t even run after July or August.’

‘Anyways, it was always the First Mate’s job to oversee loading,’ he continued, still scratching his beard and mustache. ‘You knew that though.’

‘Yeah, I knew that.’

‘Well, it snowed like a son-of-a-bitch and before we could even start removing the hatch covers we had to shovel her clear.’

‘It was the fuel line, right?’ Noah asked knowing perfectly well that it was. He knew the details of what happened intimately, secretly.

Olaf looked at him askance. ‘On the trip up, we noticed the leak. It wasn’t too bad at a glance, and we managed to get from Toledo to Two Harbors without any trouble, but after we unloaded the coal and were refueling, we saw that the bilge was filling with fuel. I think that’s when Jan decided to have it fixed.

‘I remember thinking it was strange that the office let us get away with a repair like that so late in the season. I wasn’t suspicious or anything, but they never gave two hoots about maintenance during the season generally, let alone so near to laying up. I ain’t a spook, but something in the back of my mind got a little itchy then,’ he paused, scratching the back of his head. ‘I chalked it up to the engine being new, and the brass just not knowing how careless they could be, but I was still uneasy about it. Twenty-two hours we sat there while a crew put a new line in.’

‘What did everyone do? The crew I mean?’

‘We gave them fourteen hours leave, and most of them humped into Two Harbors.’

‘...And did their best to hump once they got there, I bet.’

Olaf smiled. ‘They usually did.’

‘In Two Harbors, though?’

‘You’d be surprised.’

‘I’d have to be,’ Noah said.

Olaf smiled again, shook his head, then turned more serious. ‘Some of those boys lived in Two Harbors, Bjorn was one of ‘em,’ he said. ‘He had a baby girl and a sweet little wife. He was off that goddamn boat five minutes after we told ‘em they could leave.

‘The boys who didn’t live there all got themselves pissed in the bars up on Willow Street or Poplar Street or wherever the hell the pubs are in that town. I’ll tell you what, a crew of twenty sailors can usually put a pretty good dent in the local girls’ scruples, and I’d venture to guess that more than one or two of those boys had a pretty good time that night.’

Here his father smiled again as if to admit that despite his age, the memories of those little Great Lake ports, and the rundown pubs that filled them, and the sailor-loving girls who knew the ship schedules like their multiplication tables, hadn't escaped him even now.

'The next morning, when the boys started to come back aboard, it was like watching a parade of zombies,' Olaf laughed. 'I remember the days before I met your mother, before I became an officer, too, and the shit we used to get ourselves into,' he smiled again. 'Those boys knew how to dig it up too. They were all red-eyed and pale, sweating in spite of the weather. I gotta tell ya, I didn't envy them one bit.'

'The boys who lived up there though, they all looked happy as larks, walking lightly you know,' he winked. 'But not Bjorn. I didn't know him very well even though I was the one who hired him. I didn't know what to think, but he looked like two different people at once. You could see he was happy – must have been thinking about his little girl and wife – but he also looked resentful as hell, probably about needing to ship out again. He was one of those guys who got tricked into life on the boats. He was just dumb enough to not be able to do something else, and just smart enough to hate what he did.' Olaf shook his head. 'There were a lot of guys like that on the lakes.'

Noah scanned his memory for the men he knew from his father's trade. Having had it put so simply, he could recognize the split personality in of many of them. Some of the men, like Luke, stood out. They were single-minded types whose personalities fit the stereotype: independent, gruff, and bigger-than-life characters who cluttered the myth of the ore men. But the majority of men he remembered - men from his childhood cruises on the boats with his father and from his time slumming down in Canal Park with his high school buddies – were just schmucks, working-class guys trying to beat a buck or two out of the industry. There was very little to distinguish one from another, and it made the whole wreck seem less fantastic.

Like me, he thought, they were probably all like me.

'I bet you put those sorry, drunk kids right to work,' Noah said.

‘You bet we did, we had to get the deck clear so we could get her loaded.’

‘But the fuel line, it wasn’t repaired yet was it?’

‘They were working on it, they told us it would be ready.’

‘And the weather, it was a pretty shitty day wasn’t it?’

‘One front had already passed – the one that left a foot and a half of snow on our deck – and another one was coming, a noreaster no less. We knew the seas would be rough and that it’d be cold as hell, so we wanted to get her loaded in order to get in front of it. It was no fun to be out there latching the hatches when it got below zero.’

‘And the forecast didn’t warrant sitting tight for a few hours?’ Noah asked.

‘We could see it coming, we could feel it too, but we never would’ve backed down on the basis of the weather reports we were getting.’

‘Were the weather reports wrong?’

‘Not wrong,’ Olaf said. ‘When the wind turned around and the flurries started out of the northeast, we all got that sinking feeling, and when the lake started crashing over the breakwater and the harbor water got choppy, we knew it was going to be a mean day, but it would’ve taken more than we saw.’

‘Was there a backup plan? About the weather I mean, if things got worse before they got better?’

‘We knew we could hug the lee of the Minnesota shore if we had to.’

‘That’s what you did, right?’

‘In the pitch goddamn darkness, that’s what we did,’ Olaf said. ‘There were three ships ahead of us, a French freighter full of lumber...’

‘The *Lachete*,’ Noah said.

Olaf looked at Noah sideways. ‘Yeah, the *Lachete*. There was also one of our boats out there, the *Heldig* and one of the boats from the Cleveland Cliffs fleet.’ He tapped his bushy lip.

‘The *Prudence*,’ Noah said, interrupting his father’s scant memory.



Olaf smiled. 'Was it you there or me?' he asked.

'Sorry.'

'I wouldn't have guessed this about you.'

'No?' Noah asked, pleased.

'No, I wouldn't. I expected you'd have forgotten this stuff. Forgotten about it or never cared enough to know in the first place.'

'A few books have been written on the subject,' Noah said. 'I've done my reading. Go on.'

'All three of those ships were updating us on the weather.'

'And each of them were talking about taking shelter from the time they set sail. What did they tell you that made you think getting started was a good idea?'

'It didn't matter what *they* told us. We were going to go or not go on the basis of Jan's gut, not on what some goddamn Frenchman had to say about the wind.'

'What about the *Heldig*? She was out there. Didn't you have any confidence in what she said?'

'You see, it was never a question of the confidence we had in the reports the other boats were making. They were instruments, that's it. It was always just a simple question: Did we feel like the *Rag* could handle what the lake was giving? If the answer was no for the *Heldig* or the *Prudence* or any of the other boats out on the lakes, it certainly didn't necessarily mean it was no for us.' There was no vanity, no posturing, in what his father said. Noah knew this as simply as he knew the story itself.

'So you steam out of Two Harbors.'

Olaf was gazing over his shoulder at the stove.

'Don't tell me you're cold.'

'No, no,' Olaf said looking up at him. 'I was just thinking.'

'Thinking about what?'

‘About how it felt to be on that ship,’ he said. ‘Standing on the bridge, even in the worst weather, it was easy to stick your chest out – to puff it up – because we knew that no matter what was in front of us the *Rag* was behind us.’

The suggestion of his father’s puffed out chest instantly reminded Noah of the sense of security his father had always provided him as a boy. He would’ve walked through a bear’s cage with the barrel-chested and brawny forty-year-old version of his father. It was hard to imagine that another forty years could deplete a man like it had.

‘The *Rag* was six hundred and ten feet long. Sixty-two feet abeam. The hull alone – hull number 768 – weighed five thousand tons. Loaded as she was, there were more than eighteen thousand tons – *eighteen thousand tons* – of steel lugging it up that lake under two thousand horsepower,’ Olaf said, raising an eyebrow. ‘The bridge was forty feet above the surface of the lake and still we had to keep the wipers going in order to see out the damn window. And still we were making better than seven knots.’

‘She usually managed, what, eleven or twelve knots?’

‘Under normal conditions and with a normal load, yeah, twelve knots.’

‘Seven knots makes for a long day up Superior,’ Noah said, testing his amateur jargon out on the old man.

‘Better than sixteen hours to Rock of Ages light.’

‘As opposed to?’

‘Ah, ten or eleven,’ Olaf said with a wave of the hand. ‘The point is she wasn’t normal.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean she shouldn’t have been making that time. The other ships were thirty or forty miles ahead of us and they weren’t making a third of the time we were.’ Again he shook his head. ‘But that’s just how she *was*. She was above the weather, above the seas, those things just didn’t bother her, they didn’t slow her down.’

‘Why?’ Noah asked, his excitement boiling now.

Without a touch of irony Olaf said, 'She was a goddess, I guess.

'I remember storms that she weathered that would've sunk other ships in a second. On Erie we sailed through the worst lightning storm I ever saw. Took two bolts right on deck. Lost one and a half coamings thirty miles from safe harbor. The pumps were working that night, I'll tell you that.

'Another time we hit a real son-of-a-bitch coming out of Whitefish Bay, heading up to Marquette. When we got to the Soo they were all set to close her down until it blew over, but when they saw we were next in line to pass, they let us up. Eight or ten boats had to wait out a twelve-hour blow in the St. Mary's River while we chugged it right out onto the Lake. Now that was a night we might've taken off.

'I remember eating dinner that night. We had pork chops and applesauce – that's it, nothing else. Nothing that had to be cooked on the stovetop because we were rolling too goddamn much. The guy that did the baking was named Ed Butterfield – we called him Butter – used to put together this delicious rye bread. When the weather got rough, we'd soak thick slices of it in water and then stick them under our plates to keep them from sliding around. It was an old trick. The next morning, when things calmed down a bit, I remember watching the Porters hacking it off with spatulas and butcher knives.'

'Didn't you ever wait the weather out?'

'Sure we did, just not nearly as often as other ships. Once or twice every couple of years we'd sit one out, but it took some kind of hell for that.'

'In retrospect, do you think you should you have sat it out?'

Olaf guffawed. 'The winds were supposed to shift more to the east. If they had, we knew we wouldn't want to face the middle of the lake. But we also knew we wouldn't have to, see? We knew that if push came to shove we could take shelter in the lee of Isle Royale,' he said snaking his arm - as if it were the ship - into the imaginary estuary between the Canadian shore and the long finger of Isle Royale. 'It was an uncommon tactic but one

we'd used before. And even if the wind shifted sooner rather than later, we knew – based on our own precedent – that we could muscle our way to safety.'

'It must have been exhausting riding against that weather,' Noah said.

'By the time we got to Rock of Ages light we'd been at it with that goddamn lake for more than eighteen hours. It was two o'clock in the afternoon and snowing so hard we couldn't see the railing around the pilothouse deck.

'And Jan hated to be blind,' Olaf continued.

'Blind? You had a brand new radar; a gyrocompass just installed, too. You guys weren't blind.'

'Of course we weren't blind. I mean, we knew exactly where we were and where we were heading, but when you can't see your hand in front of your face and you're putting up with the hell we were putting up with, you have a tendency to get a little hot. At least Jan did.

'He had a guy at every position for eighteen hours straight – a man at the wheel, a man at the radar, a man at the compass, a man on the charts – it was like watching an orchestra. Jan would say, *my heading?* and the Watchman at the gyrocompass would say, *four five, sir*, and Jan would say, *speed?* and a voice would say, *eight knots steady, sir* and Jan would boom again, *is it clear* and the Wheelsman at the radar would say, *clear, sir*, and Jan, *position* and the Wheelsman at the chart, *Captain, we are at such and such latitude and longitude, sir*, and Jan, *How much water have I got between me and that goddamn island?* and the Wheelsman at the radar would say, *sir, Isle Royale six point zero seven nautical miles bearing one hundred and forty-one degrees*, and the Wheelsman at the chart would settle it all, *six point zero nautical miles to shoal water, sir.*' Olaf had related the whole pilothouse episode as if he were a conductor himself, raising and wagging his fingers.

Noah, his heart actually beating a little faster, was sitting on the edge of the sofa. 'And the water is coming over your deck and it's snowing like the end of the world...'

‘And in the middle of it all, roaming from the charts to the compass to the wheel, Jan would take each piece of information and plug it into his internal calculator and come up with some goddamn equation the sum of which dictated every move he made.’ Both men were excited. ‘And despite his aggravation at being blind, despite that *goddamn* lake and the wind like a hurricane, he still managed it all without a hitch. I don’t think he ever even spilled any of his coffee.’

‘It doesn’t seem that hard for you to remember,’ Noah said.

‘Oh Christ no. It’s not hard to remember.’

Noah stood up and stretched his arms above his head. He was boyish, nearly giddy in the thrall of the story. He couldn’t sit still. ‘What about the rest of the crew?’ he asked.

This question sobered Olaf. ‘The Crew? Well, the crew was just a bunch of anybodies. With the exception of a couple guys – guys like Jan and Luke – they were just *men*. Men and boys.’

For the first time since Noah had arrived at his father’s house, he recalled the picture in the museum, the one of the whole crew dockside with the *Rag* in the background. Although he could not summon a single face clearly, he could recall the sensationlessness of looking at them. He could remember chalking it up to some kind of ambivalence towards his father, but in retrospect it was an ambivalence borne by the unconscious knowledge that what his father just said was – and always had been – the truth. Twice already he’d alluded to the ordinariness of the crew, and twice now Noah had paused at the realization of this deflating fact: They weren’t gods and giants sunk on that ship, they were men and boys. ‘That takes some of the starch out of the story, don’t you think?’ Noah asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Isn’t it more romantic to think of the guys that died as a little bit heroic, as swashbuckling sailors? As something more than a bunch of yokels from Great Lake port towns?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Olaf said, pausing to consider it seriously. ‘It’s real life. In real life there aren’t gods and giants, there’re boys from port towns.’

Except for you, Noah thought. ‘How well did you know them?’ Noah asked, trying to inflate their memory for the sake of the story.

‘I suppose I knew them all right. Less now, of course, what with it being thirty-some-odd years later, and the memory a little bit gone, but I knew them. They were my charge, most of ‘em.’ Olaf paused again. With the exception of his gesticulating hands he’d hardly moved at all since he started telling the story, and now he elbowed himself up from the chair to straighten his stiffened back.

‘There’s one picture of ‘em that I’ve never been able to get out of my mind,’ Olaf continued. ‘After we’d cleared the southwestern tip of the island, must’ve been around supper time, I went down into the crew’s quarters for a fresh thermos of coffee and something to eat. You remember that the top two decks on the bow of the *Rag* didn’t have any interior passageways, don’t you?’

Noah nodded.

‘Well, that walk usually took what, twenty seconds? Two flights of stairs, maybe thirty steps altogether? There were eighteen hours of snow and ice coating those stairs and that railing. You put that together with the wind and rolling of the boat and those two minutes were the hairiest of my life. Until then anyway.

‘The temperature couldn’t have been above zero and I was out there without my mittens, without a hat, gripping onto that goddamn railing for dear life. In twenty seconds my fingers were burning with cold. I was slipping all over the place helter skelter. And I couldn’t see three feet in front of me. I remember sitting down for a second, wrapping my arms around the railing with my hands tucked up inside my coat, and hugging that goddamn thing like I was a child and it was my mother.

‘The sound of that storm,’ Olaf continued, shaking his head as he closed his eyes for a long moment, ‘It should have been my first warning. I could hear the lake washing

and sloshing and crashing all over the place; I could hear the wind roaring like a goddamn locomotive; and I sure as hell could feel that wind coming from every direction.’ He looked hard at Noah, his eyes colorless in the cabin light. ‘For maybe three seconds while I was sitting there, everything went quiet and I could hear her bending.’

‘*Bending?*’ Noah said, sitting up and combing his sweat damp hair back with both his hands. ‘What do you mean bending?’

‘I sat on that icy step for a couple of minutes. I don’t know what in the hell I was waiting for, but I couldn’t move. The ruckus was out of this world, just howling and drumming all over the place. But for a couple of seconds everything went silent and I could hear her *bend*. I don’t know how else to describe it. It was a slow, high-pitched cry and I knew it was the *Rag* under the weight of all that ice and water. It sounded human.’

Noah dropped back onto the couch. ‘Those things don’t bend.’

‘Sure they do,’ Olaf countered. ‘Like skyscrapers give a little in the wind.’

‘What did you do?’

‘What did I do? I finally got down into the crew’s quarters, that’s what I did. And that’s when I saw them – this is what I was getting at – all bleary-eyed and miserable, sitting around the common table playing euchre. I asked them if they’d learned anything but they couldn’t answer, just shrugged like the answer was yes and went on playing. Those boys were so hung over, and when you put the weather and seas like we had on top of what they must have been feeling to begin with, well, they might as well have been dead already.’

Now it was Noah’s turn to shake his head. ‘Euchre?’

‘I never saw a card game on that ship without a pile of money in the middle of it. Hell, those boys found ways to gamble over solitaire, but not that night. They were just trying to keep their cards on the table.’

‘There were thirty men on that boat, the lesser part of half of ‘em on the bow – Wheelmen, Watchmen, Deckhands, the Mates – and the rest of ‘em in the stern – the Engineers and Oilers and Firemen and Wipers and the galley crew. They had their berths

in eight small cabins above the engine room in some goddamn cold and clammy quarters. Steel bunks with lumpy mattresses attached to the low overheads. Even the shortest guy back there couldn't stand upright without knocking his head on something.

'And noisy as hell, too. They had to sleep through the constant whining of that engine and the churning of the prop. None of 'em could hear a goddamn thing either. They had shit and grime under their fingernails all the time, and their trousers were always dirty at the knees. But for as filthy as they always seemed to be, that engine room was the cleanest place aboard that boat.

'The chief back there was a guy named Danny Oppvaskkum – a great guy – who knew the physics and chemistry and engineering of that ship like he'd invented it himself. Couldn't tell which way the wind was blowing, but he could've taken that thing apart and put it back together with a pair of pliers.'

'How old was he?' Noah asked, getting ready to compare the accomplishments of someone near to his age with his own. It was one of his regular exercises in self-deprecation.

'Danny must've been about forty-five.'

'Was it,' Noah paused hoping a seconds delay might make the question seem more delicate, 'you know, was it his fault?'

'Oh Christ no. No, no. Danny was as innocent as a child in that mess. He probably gave each of those boys an extra hour of life with his quick thinking.'

'How well did you know them all?'

'I knew Danny pretty well, but the rest of the engine room crew were his charge, so I didn't spend a whole lot of time with 'em. Sure I knew who they were, I knew their names at the time, but I didn't have much to do with 'em.'

'What about the other guys? The guys who didn't work in the engine room.'

'I knew them better. They were the guys playing euchre, the guys in the wheelhouse.'



‘There’s a picture of all of you in the maritime museum down in Duluth. Did you know that? They look like a football team in it.’

‘They might as well have been a football team, being as they were young and lean to a man.’

‘Did they have any idea, do you think?’

‘Any idea of what?’ Olaf asked.

‘Any idea they were about to die?’

Olaf thought about it. ‘The storm was bad, no doubt about it, but we were killing it. It was snowing like hell, and it was cold as hell, and there’s no doubt some of those boys *wished* they were dead seeing as how they were still reeling from the night before, but none of us thought we were going to die. Not in our wildest, worst dreams.’ He’d rolled up the magazine and was tapping his knee with it. After a second he concluded, ‘at least none of ‘em were thinking about it then.’

Noah got up again for another cup of coffee. Outside the air was still bleak, and the leafless trees were all tangled in a stiffening breeze. Inside it was still suffocating and the stove continued to ping with heat.

‘Should I make another pot of coffee? Would you drink more?’ Noah asked.

Olaf, whose hands were crossed over his lap, was thumb wrestling himself. He looked up. ‘I’m coffeed out.’ The few seconds of silence had clogged up his voice, and he had to clear his throat before he asked Noah how long it takes to brew a pot of coffee and make a couple turkey sandwiches.

‘How long it takes to what?’ Noah asked.

‘A pot of coffee, how long?’

‘I don’t know,’ Noah stammered.

‘Think about it for a minute.’

Noah threw his hands in the air as if he were giving up. ‘What, five minutes?’

‘It took me twenty minutes from the time I stepped into the little galley in the crew’s quarters to the time I had a fresh thermos of coffee and sandwiches for the boys on the bridge. I dropped a full jar of mayonnaise, I beat the hell out of my knee on the corner of the icebox, I nearly burned my left hand off making coffee. It was ridiculous to even be trying.’

‘But a man’s got to eat.’

‘I guess so.’

‘Was the walk back up to the bridge as perilous as the walk down?’ Noah asked.

‘It was no stroll on deck,’ Olaf said as he set his head back against the chair.

Noah, still in the kitchen, tried to place the story his father was telling in the context of what he himself knew, or had at least read. None of the three or four books that dealt with the wreck differed much in terms of what happened. Noah knew that his father returned to the bridge to find a panicked Captain. He knew that there were three methods of communicating with the engine room from the bridge and that none of them were working. Noah, standing at the kitchen sink, tried to remember the standard bell codes that were the last line of communication.

He could picture the brass chadburn standing like a giant, keyhole with a white face and black-handled lever that, when set to a certain position in the pilothouse, would signal the engine room to adjust some aspect of her speed or direction. He knew that if the chadburn failed there was an onboard telephone line that connected the two ends of the ship. And he knew that if both of those failed, there was a sort of morse code system of bell messages that the bridge could send to the engine room. *Two whistles check?* He wondered. *Four whistles all right?* He couldn’t remember.

In each of the histories written about the *Rag*, the authors had told similar stories of the simultaneous failure of all three methods of communication. None of them knew, though, precisely why the engine room - which would eventually respond to the bridge - took so long to comply with the Captain’s orders. The reason they didn’t know is because

the only man who had witnessed or been privy to the finer points of the communications snafu and lived to tell about it, had never bothered to tell.

‘Why didn’t you ever set the record straight on why they weren’t answering Jan’s command? It makes the whole thing seem sort of fishy doesn’t it?’ Noah asked. He’d always wondered what the cause or source of his father’s secrecy about the wreck had been.

‘Nothing fishy happened on that boat,’ Olaf said. ‘Not unless you consider twenty-seven men burning and drowning fishy.’

‘The reason I never gave those goddamn reporters the details is because what happened out there was nobody’s business but ours. Selling newspapers on account of our bad luck seemed like horseshit business to me. If people wanted to know what it was like to get out of something like that with your life, they should have signed up to ship out at Superior Steel and took the chance on finding out themselves. It was between us and the lake. The big-bellied newspapermen weren’t interested in what happened, they were interested in making a circus out of us.’

‘That’s a pretty harsh indictment? Don’t you think there were plenty of people who just cared enough to know?’

Olaf dismissed him with a wave of the hand.

‘The Coast Guard and National Transportation Safety Board reports both said the same thing – that when you got back to the bridge Jan was upset because he couldn’t contact the engine room and he wanted to check down because you were about to round Isle Royale.’

‘How in the hell do you know what the Coast Guard and NTSB reports say?’ Olaf asked, clearly shocked to hear Noah talking so authoritatively.

‘It wasn’t just the newspapermen who wanted to know,’ Noah said. ‘Besides, all of the books say the same thing. Is it true? I mean is it as simple as that?’

‘Jan’s agitation was as simple as that, yes.’

‘Well then why be so mysterious about it? Why leave everyone to wonder if you were covering something up.’

‘Because I didn’t give a good goddamn if people thought we were covering things up. It was *our* ordeal, see?’

‘When I got back up to the bridge, Jan was trying to get them to check the engine down. We were about to pass the northern end of Isle Royale and he wanted to be prepared to assess the seas.’

‘And they just weren’t responding?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Were you in danger?’ Noah asked.

‘Not really. It was Jan’s M.O. to be a little bit more cautious when he was blind – a good policy – but we weren’t in danger. At least not because of the weather, we weren’t going to run aground or founder.’

‘But not being able to get in touch with the engine room...’

‘*That* was cause for concern,’ Olaf said.

One of the things that had never added up for Noah was why – after only five or ten minutes trying to reach the engine room – Captain Vat had become so anxious. He remembered being on mid-summer cruises with his father when the *Rag* was still running on coal. He recalled the impression he had of the engine room after watching it in action for an hour or two. If not chaotic, it had certainly seemed perpetually hectic. All of the levers and gauges; the noise and motion; so many pipes steaming or dripping with condensation or whistling out of the blue; and so many guys, even on calm days, tending to the countless details, left him to believe that it was a miracle they had time to listen to orders of any sort. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what it must have been like back there on the night she went down – the commotion must have been quadrupled.

‘So what did Jan want? What did he do?’

‘He wanted them to check down, I told you that. What did he do? He nearly panicked, that’s what he did. When I got back up to the bridge he was sounding the bells for the third time. Three whistles,’ Olaf said, ‘it meant they were to check down. When they didn’t respond after the third try, he thought about sending a couple deckhands back to see what the hell was happening. In fact, he went so far as to summon them to the pilothouse.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ Olaf continued, ‘the look on the faces of those kids said as much as anything about what kind of shape we were suddenly in. We’d been at it for years, right? Jan and myself and Joe? But these kids were just starting out, just finishing their first season. It was the first big blow any of ‘em had seen. When Jan told ‘em to put on their life vests, and they took turns looking out the window into that wildness, Jesus, you’d of thought he was sending them right to hell.’

‘But he didn’t send them, did he?’

‘Goddman,’ Olaf said. ‘I sure as hell didn’t want him to send those boys across the deck. I thought it was a suicide mission.’

‘But *you* had to cross it.’

‘I did, later. But it was different when he asked me to go.’

‘Why?’

‘I guess I expected to go. I was used to responsibilities like that. These boys just wanted to go to bed.’

‘So why didn’t he send them?’

‘Another two minutes and he probably would have. As it turned out, not sending them cost them any chance they might have had.’

‘But why didn’t he? I mean, I know it’s because Danny finally called, but why didn’t he send them right away, when he brought them up?’

‘He held them back because he knew how crazy it would’ve been to send ‘em.

‘When Danny called, Jan lit into him like I’ve never seen. “Goddamnit Oppvaskkum, I almost sent two men across that fucking deck. Do you have any idea how dangerous that would have been? Do you realize that ignoring calls from the Captain – even in emergency situations, *especially* in emergency situations – is unacceptable if not outright insubordinate behavior? We’re fighting a fucking monster up here and you don’t have the time to heed my commands?” Oh Jesus it was a nasty chewing out.’

‘But he was trying to contain the leak! It wasn’t his fault!’ Noah said.

‘You’re right, it wasn’t his fault that the line was leaking, but I can’t imagine what kind of trouble they were in, or how fast that trouble must have found them, in order to justify not responding to the bridge. We’re talking about one of the cardinal rules here.’

‘So even if a guy’s got diesel up to his ankles in a place as combustible as that, it’s more important that he pick up the phone right away than figure out what the problem is?’

‘The point is that by not picking up the phone, he jeopardized the whole order of things. Because he didn’t pick up the phone, two guys were about to be sent out into that storm. Because he didn’t answer the phone, the guy in charge of the ship was paralyzed, see?’ Olaf asked.

The line of reasoning was so familiar to Noah, so familiar in a forgotten way, that he almost laughed. How many times had his father used the same hierarchical theory to make Noah mow the lawn or shovel the sidewalk in their old house on High Street?

‘Aren’t there exceptions to the cardinal rules?’ Noah asked. ‘Doesn’t it make sense that sometimes the situation is so severe that the rules just don’t apply?’

‘I’ve never seen it,’ Olaf said. ‘And I’ve seen a lot.’

That was familiar too, his father slapping down the trump card of experience.

‘Well what did Danny finally report? What did he say that forced Jan to send you across the deck?’

‘Danny knew right away how serious the problem was. As far as I could tell – and I never knew for certain – the main fuel line had ruptured near the tank, which was in the

forward half of the engine room where the coalbunker had been the season before. The leak was serious enough that the entire engine room crew, including the porters and steward, were busy trying to contain it. It had to have happened so goddamn fast, gotten out of hand so goddamn fast, that there was no chance to even sound an alarm.

‘When Danny finally got around to calling the wheelhouse, there was no question about the danger we were in. I only heard one side of the conversation, but there wasn’t much doubt about the possibilities. Jan decided in an instant that we’d better seek shelter, and his last words to Danny sent a hot chill up my back: “Double lash anything that could cause a spark, and keep a couple of those boys at the ready with fire extinguishers, we’re going to come about.”

‘Now, how’d you like to hear something like that from the boss’s mouth?’

‘I wouldn’t,’ Noah said. ‘It’d scare the shit out of me.’

‘Well it scared the shit out of me too. Jan and Joe and me got together in the chart room, we got our position figured out, and we decided to bring her around and head straight west for Thunder Bay, where the *Lachete*, *Prudence* and *Heldig* were already at anchor.’

‘What a nasty proposition.’

‘We had a little shelter from the worst of it being as close as we were to the north shore, but yeah, it wasn’t like we could just tip our caps and wave goodbye. We were going to pay for it. The good news was that once we got around, the wind would have been behind us and getting to Thunder Bay would have come pretty easy. Besides, it was the only option we had.’

‘So you came about, just like that?’

‘Goddamn,’ Olaf almost whispered, ‘I remember it like it was yesterday. He had the engine going slow astern while he waited for just the right lull – it seemed like days – and as soon as he felt it, he ordered engines full ahead and the rudder full left. Everyone in the wheelhouse swayed and lurched and grabbed for a railing or something to hold onto as she slid down one side of a trough and up another. She tilted severely for a second or two

while a big swell washed over the length of the deck. “That’s no way to treat us!” Jan hollered as she steadied.

‘We took a couple more waves across the deck before we got on course, but we *did* manage to get turned around. We were looking at two and a half hours,’ Olaf mused. ‘Two and a half, maybe three. That’s nothing. It’s like the amount of time it takes to play a baseball game; the time it takes to drive from Duluth to Misquah. It’s *nothing*.’

‘But it was too long,’ Noah said.

‘A half hour would have been too long,’ Olaf concluded, making to stand up. He planted his feet two feet apart, rested his elbows on his knees, lifted his head from beneath his drooping shoulders, and straightened at the knees, still bent at the waist. As he labored, a spasm of pain must have shot through his stomach because he fell back into the chair, clutching his abdomen with one hand and his lower back with the other.

Noah jumped up from the sofa too late to catch him, and found himself standing over the old man with his hands out. His father’s face was frozen and gnarled in pain. ‘Are you okay?’ Noah asked. ‘What can I do?’

Olaf took a couple deep, tremulous breaths and rolled his head back. ‘It’s cold in here,’ he said. ‘I was going to put another log on the fire.’

Without a word, Noah opened the stove and put a heavy piece of wood in among the embers.

‘I need a pillow for my back,’ Olaf said. ‘Could you get one?’

Noah went into the bedroom and grabbed one of the down pillows from his father’s bed.

‘Here,’ he said as he helped his father forward, pushing the lumpy, uncovered pillow down between the chair and his father’s lower back. ‘Do you want some aspirin or Ibuprofen?’

‘Ibuprofen?’ Olaf wheezed.

‘It’s like aspirin. It relieves pain.’



'I don't have any of that.' His voice was inching back to normal.

'What about an aspirin?'

'No aspirin either.'

'Anything? A glass of water?'

'Yeah, I could use a glass of water,' Olaf said, his head resting against the back of the chair. 'Are you cold?' he asked.

'Cold?' Noah said as he poured a glass of water, 'no, I'm not cold at all. It's really warm in here.'

'I'm cold.'

Noah brought him the water. 'Lift your head up,' he said.

'Huh?'

'Your head, lift it up,' Noah repeated. When Olaf lifted his head, Noah took the afghan from behind him. The old man's head fell back and rested on the chair again, and the soft, white, wrinkleless flesh of his neck was exposed in the lamplight. Noah stopped and looked at him, looked at his neck; he wanted to touch it, to feel it, to confirm that it was as delicate and velvety as it looked.

'What?' Olaf asked, rolling his eyes up to look at Noah.

'Here,' Noah said as he handed him the glass of water and put the afghan over his father's lap. 'What happened there?'

'Just a little cramp,' Olaf said.

'How often are you getting these little cramps?'

'Not often,' Olaf said. 'Not often at all.' And again he waved his hand. 'Grab that book over there.' He was pointing at the top shelf of the chest-high bookcase next to the sofa.

'Which book?' Noah asked.

'On the top shelf there. I forget what it's called. The black one.'

Noah pulled a book from the shelf. 'This?'

‘Let me see,’ Olaf said. He took the book and thumbed through to the back of it. ‘This is the one, it’s got transcripts of the radio contact between Jan and the coast guard and the other boats in the vicinity.’

‘Dad, we don’t need to talk about this anymore. I mean, if you’re not feeling well maybe you should take a nap.’

‘I’m all right, it was just a cramp. Anyway, I’ve got enough coffee in me now that I might never sleep again.’

‘You don’t look very good,’ Noah insisted.

‘I’m fine,’ he said as he handed the book back to Noah who opened it to the first transcript, a communiqué between the *Ragnarok* and the U.S. Coast Guard station in Grand Marais.

‘Read that,’ Olaf said.

Noah did:

22:15

Captain Vat: *Pan-pan, pan-pan, pan-pan. All stations, this is SS Ragnarok, SS Ragnarok, SS Ragnarok. Our position is [pause] 48 degrees 10 minutes 7 seconds and 88 degrees 20 minutes 7 seconds. Repeat, 48° 10' 7'' and 88° 20' 7''.* We are in heavy seas, wind gusts up to 78 knots, sustained winds 45 to 65 knots. Wave size variable to 20 feet. Report a major diesel leak in main fuel line. Repeat, major fuel leak in main line. Bearing 268° for Thunder Bay. Wish to alert any vessels in the area and U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards of our situation. Have a crew of thirty men; cargo twelve tons of taconite. This is the SS Ragnarok, over.

U.S. Coast Guard: SS Ragnarok, *this is U.S. Coast Guard station Grand Marais, change to channel 68, over.*

Captain Vat: *Roger.*

Coast Guard: SS Ragnarok, *do you copy?*

Captain Vat: *Roger, we copy.*

Coast Guard: SS Ragnarok, *do you require assistance?*

Captain Vat: *Negative. I only wanted to make you aware of our situation. The leak is bad, I've got a dozen men working on it, and the heavy seas aren't helping, but we should be okay. We're heading for Thunder Bay – speed of seven knots. Should be sheltered by zero thirty hours. Over.*

Coast Guard: *Roger, SS Ragnarok. We'll keep an eye on you.*

Captain Vat: *Roger that. [Pause] Are there any other vessels in the area?*

Coast Guard: *Negative, Ragnarok, you're alone.*

Captain Vat: *Roger. Out.*

Coast Guard: *Out.*

Noah saved his page in the book with his thumb. 'How far were you from Thunder Bay?'

'The last position I charted we were twenty-four or so nautical miles from the entrance to Thunder Bay. That's what? About twenty-eight miles.'

Noah opened the book and scanned the page. 'And how fast is seventy-eight knots?'

'Seventy-eight knots?' Olaf closed his eyes to think. Mumbling he said, 'Seventy-eight multiplied by six thousand eighty is... four hundred and seventy five thousand divided by five thousand two hundred and eighty...' he closed his eyes tightly. 'About ninety miles per hour.'

'And that's how fast the wind was? That's like a hurricane.'

'It was blowing, no doubt about that.'

Noah shook his head in disbelief. 'So you make the Pan-pan. Then what?'

'Then Captain Vat made the decision that saved my life. In the chart room behind the wheelhouse, he ordered me and a crew to the stern in order to assist Danny. He told me to take three guys, one of whom he wanted at the phone the minute we got to the engine room. The rest of us were to help out any way we could.'

‘Why’d he send you?’ Noah asked.

‘I was pretty good with mechanical things,’ Olaf said. ‘I guess he thought I could help.’

‘Did you think it was a good idea?’

‘A good idea?’

‘That you leave the bridge? That you go back to the engine room? I mean, did you think it was a good idea at the time.’

‘Things were happening awfully damn fast, and I don’t remember what I thought about it. I do remember thinking about that goddamn long open deck, though.’

‘So just like that, you went?’

‘Pretty much. Jan and I double-checked our position and heading, and of course I had to rally the troops, but it wasn’t much more than five minutes.’

Noah paused, sure that the question he wanted to ask was the riskiest so far. He put himself in the position of being ordered across an icy deck with winds gusting up to ninety miles per hour; he thought about Lake Superior exploding across the deck; he thought about getting to the engine room where thousands of gallons of diesel fuel were smeared across so many combustible engine parts; he thought of the nearly eight hundred feet of water that would have been beneath the keel of the ship; and he knew that he would have been terrified. ‘Were you scared?’

Olaf looked up at the ceiling. ‘I don’t remember being scared, no. But I sure wasn’t excited about what we had to do.’

‘Why didn’t you use the tunnels,’ Noah asked.

‘The *Rag* didn’t have a tunnel.’

‘But you could have just walked on top of the ballast tank, couldn’t you?’

Olaf smiled. ‘I forget how well you knew those boats. The *Rag*’s ballast tanks didn’t have square tops. They were slanted to meet the bulkhead without any straight angles.’

‘The object of the design,’ Olaf said, ‘was twofold. First, it was made to make cleaning the cargo hold easier. Without a straight ledge to sweep, we would save a half hour’s labor every time we changed cargos. It was also an engineering concept that allowed more of the ballast tank water – when the ballast tanks were full – to sit lower in the bulkhead, creating a lower center of gravity with less water. This way, it would take less time to pump the water out. The idea was a flash in the pan, and no other boats that I ever knew of were built the same way.

‘It wouldn’t have mattered anyway. We got across the deck just fine. It’s what we found when we got there that was the problem.

‘I stopped in my berth and changed into some dry clothes before I gathered the men to come with me. I stripped out of my damp pants and socks and shirt, and put on my union suit and dry pants, fresh socks and a turtleneck. I grabbed my pea jacket, my mittens, my watch and hat and when I was all bundled up, I topped myself off with the raincoat and the orange life preserver that had sat for years in the white wooden basket above my desk.

‘For some stupid reason I checked the four porthole windows in my cabin,’ he said. There was surprise in his voice, like it was a memory that had only come back to him then, thirty-four years later. ‘I wonder why I did that.

‘Whatever the reason, it gave me the minute I needed to remember the silver necklace your mother had given me the Christmas before. It was a sturdy sterling chain with two thimble-sized charms on it. One was a miniature ski jumper in flight that she’d ordered special from Norway. On the bottom of the skis your name was etched. The other charm was a dove in flight. Your sister’s name was etched on that.

‘I never wore that thing, but I sure did love it,’ Olaf said.

‘Why did you take it then, across the deck?’ Noah asked.

Olaf’s expression changed, he looked surprised, like Noah hadn’t been paying attention. ‘We were in a dangerous situation. We wouldn’t have made the pan-pan otherwise.’

‘I know, but that doesn’t explain the necklace and charms.’

‘I was about to cross a five hundred foot skating rink in ninety mile per hour winds with waves crashing all over hell and little more than a dog leash to keep me from going overboard if I fell. It sounds more dramatic when I put it like that, but I certainly knew what was going on, knew what *could* have happened.

‘When your mother gave me the necklace and charms, she told me to keep them with me all the time, she told me that they would provide me with luck. I decided that I wanted to have them with me when I died. In fact,’ Olaf said as he propped and then raised himself up out of the chair – this time successfully – and teetered across the floor. ‘In fact,’ he repeated as he disappeared into his bedroom, his voice fading in the opposite direction of Noah.

Jesus, Noah thought as he buried his face in his hands. Here was his father, so sick and alone, retelling a history that dwarfed Noah’s own. It seemed the least likely place to find the busiest intersection of his life – here in the woods, with his father of all people – and finding himself there terrified him. He was terrified of what his father had been through. Not just the wreck of the *Ragnarok*, but the wreck of his life after. He was terrified of his own cowardice, too, of the suspicion he had of himself that he would never have been up to the challenge of his father’s life, and certainly that he would never have been up to that November night. But worse than any of this, he was terrified by all the time that had disappeared between them, all of the years in which nothing between them *happened*. They were strangers, he realized, intimate strangers who, as it was turning out, depended entirely on each other. He wanted to curl up and weep.

Outside the snow had stopped and a dingy, deeply shadowed dusk was settling into the woods around the house.

‘Here it is,’ Olaf said. ‘I keep it on the night stand.’ The chain, Noah could see as his father handed it to him, was tarnished. The charms were almost black.

‘I’ve never seen this before,’ Noah said.

Olaf was settling stiffly back into the chair. 'It needs to be polished,' he said.

'Did you put it on?' Noah asked.

'What do you mean?'

'When you remembered it, in your cabin.'

Olaf seemed surprised that the conversation had turned so quickly back to the *Rag*.

'I actually did,' he said as Noah handed it back to him. 'I put it on and made sure it was under all my clothes.'

'And then you went to get the other guys, right?'

Olaf was fingering the clasp with one hand as he tried to remove some of the grime on the Dove charm. 'It's a damn strange thing, isn't it?' he asked. 'This flimsy little clasp holding together this chain, this soft metal chain.' He looked up at Noah. 'And that big old boat. Almost a million rivets, two football fields long, eight thousand tons. One of 'em made it and the other one didn't.'

The hugeness of his father's survival had never lost its effect on Noah. By the time he was in junior high, interrogations from his lunchroom buddies were a daily occurrence. Though Noah understood their fascination – Olaf was by then a local legend, the center of the shipping mythology – he was pretty short on answers. Their enthrallment was one thing, his own life at home quite another.

His favorite answer, he remembered now, was *he's just my Dad*. The irony wasn't lost on him.

Olaf was still working the patina on the charms with his fingers, his jaw quivering in the now familiar way. The look of concentration on his face had given way to a drowsy dreaminess. Noah was looking at him unconsciously, caught up in a dreaminess of his own. *He's just my Dad*, he thought again, almost startling himself. I wonder if anyone will ever look at me this way.

'What's on your mind?' Olaf said, balling the charms in his fist.

'Nothing really, just thinking about the *Rag*.'

'You've got a one track mind tonight.'

'I've waited a long time to hear this, that's all.'

'I can't believe your curiosity.'

'It's natural enough, I think.'

'I suppose.'

Noah got up and checked the fire in the stove. It was still smoldering. 'How did you pick the guys to cross the deck with you?'

'I picked Red because he was the single strongest guy I ever knew. Short bastard, built like a brick shithouse, with a red beard that hung to his chest and eyebrows the same color bushy as a hedge bush. He had a cannon ball of a gut, rock solid and sticking out



there like a pregnant woman. Huge shoulders,’ he hunched his shoulders up for effect, ‘but the smallest goddamn feet you ever saw. Like a fucking bird.

‘And a goddamn clown too. Always laughing and joking and playing pranks, good guy to have on your boat any time of year, but especially in the fall when everyone’s good and goddamn tired of each other.’

‘Was he a friend of yours?’

‘Red wasn’t a friend, no. But admired the hell out of him. He was a widow, about forty years old, and so prompt and on the ball that he was impossible not to like as both an employee and a crewmate. He worked his ass off, never talked back, never fucked up, just a good goddamn guy to have with you.’ Olaf looked like he was remembering an old lover.

‘During one of our lifesaving drills earlier that year, he actually lifted a guy into the lifeboat with one arm... while he was in the water himself mind you. He just picked him up by the collar and tossed up into the boat. It was amazing. I don’t doubt I had that in mind when I told him to bundle up.’

‘Why Luke?’

‘Luke was the guy I trusted most on that boat. He was the only guy – aside from Jan – who I absolutely believed would do anything to save another guy’s life. You asked about giants and gods, well, Luke was somewhere in the middle as far as I’m concerned.

‘He was in his cabin and I poked my head in there and said, “Luke, we’re going aft. We’ve got trouble,” and he was up and in his gear in thirty seconds. Keep in mind he was asleep in his skivvies at the time. Always willing to help, always had the best interest of the crew in mind.’ Olaf yawned, twitched his nose, and tried to cross his legs but couldn’t.

‘And why Bjorn?’

‘Bjorn was sitting closest to the door.’

Again the photograph in the maritime museum of the three men huddled on the beach came to mind. The distance between Bjorn’s place at the card table and that otherworldly beach suddenly seemed like light years. Noah wondered how much the

picking of that particular group of men mattered; he wondered if Red had been a weakling, or if Luke had been less willing, or if Bjorn had been asleep in his bunk, whether things would have turned out differently. And if things had turned out differently...

Olaf interrupted Noah's train of thought. 'We were out on the deck within minutes. I instructed the boys to keep together and latched myself onto the lifeline. I went first, then Red, then Bjorn, and Luke was last. The lifeline was a taut, half inch steel cable that ran from the bow decking to the stern decking right down the middle of the boat. We each had a line attached to our waist that we clipped onto the lifeline.

'Each of us had a flashlight and a walkie-talkie. There were half a dozen lamps running down the edge of either side of the deck. On a clear night they lit the *Rag* up like a boulevard, but they barely cracked the darkness that night. And the spotlight Jan had shinning down on us from the roof of the pilothouse was just a little thread of light in the dark. Might as well have been a star on a cloudy night for all the good it was doing.'

'God that sounds terrible.'

'The darkness wasn't the terrible part; it was everything else out there. Even though we'd gotten the ship turned around, we were still taking some pretty heavy seas. The big problem was the ice, though. The deck was icy, the lifeline was heavy with ice, and in no time at all we were icy ourselves. And the wind – Jesus Christ the wind – so strong at times that it'd just whip up behind us and send one of us sprawling face first onto the deck. We were getting the shit knocked out of us.

'And the snow,' he said finally and whistled.

'And cold?'

'So goddamn cold I felt like I was on fire,' Olaf said. 'On fucking fire.'

One of the few points of difference in the chronicles of that night was the moment at which the fire became the central fact of the catastrophe. Although Bjorn had told a reporter during an interview a few weeks after the wreck that they could smell the fire while they were crossing the deck – a fact that should have put the speculation to rest – some refused

to believe that given the fact of what transpired this simply couldn't have been true. Some argued that it would have been impossible to smell the fire, seeing how the smoke would have been contained to the engine room alone. These same people argued that any fire would almost certainly have resulted in an almost immediate explosion that the men on the deck would have heard and felt despite the tempestuous crossing. Noah doubted that any of these speculations held water. And although it seemed fair enough to assume that they might have felt or heard the explosion, it didn't seem out of the realm of possibility that they might not have, too. As for smelling the fire, Noah had little doubt that the stench could have escaped from any of a hundred crannies in the decking.

'How soon did you know she was burning?' Noah asked.

'How soon?' Olaf repeated. 'Hard to say. We were probably better than half way across the deck when it dawned on me that something smelled wrong. It was like burning hair is what it was, but there was so much other goddamn commotion that it must have been another minute or two before it hit me. We'd crossed under the hatch crane and were probably only three or four hatch covers from reaching the decking when the stink took over.

'All at once I knew what had happened, and no sooner had I put it all together than Red grabs me by the shoulder. I thought he was falling and using me to keep his balance or something at first, so I didn't turn around right away. But when he shook me again I turned around and he was shining his flashlight on his walkie-talkie.

'"Boss," he said, hollering at the top of his goddamn lungs, "Boss, the Captain's calling you."

'There was so much static and interference from the noise in the background that I could barely hear what Jan was saying, but the long and short of it was that we were pretty well sunk.' He looked off into the corner for a few seconds.

‘He told me she was burning,’ he said, ‘that we had no steerage, that the engine room was an inferno. I remember thinking, *the Rag is burning?* It seemed absolutely impossible.’ He looked down and went quiet.

‘Jan must have already made the mayday by the time he got around to calling you on the deck, huh?’

Olaf lifted his eyes slowly. In the dim light Noah might have mistaken their glassiness for tears, and he felt a surge of shame burning in his cheeks.

‘Hand me the book,’ Olaf said. ‘And grab my glasses off the counter.’

Noah got up, handed him the book, and took four long steps to the kitchen where he got his father’s glasses off the counter. ‘Anything else while I’m up?’ he asked.

‘No, no,’ Olaf said, waving him back to the sofa and taking his glasses as Noah handed them to him.

Noah sat back down, stretched his bare legs the length of the sofa, and put his hands behind his head.

‘I don’t know exactly what time it was when Jan radioed us on the deck, but it had to have been some time around ten forty or ten forty-five. Everything was happening so fast. I just can’t remember exactly.’ He had the open book under his nose in the lamplight and was scanning the page with his long, thick finger. ‘He made the mayday at ten thirty-three. And I’m sure he made the mayday before he signaled us.’

‘You said something about all of the answers being in the mayday transcript,’ Noah said.

‘I said as much as we’ll ever know is in here. It isn’t much.’ Olaf looked back down at the page for a second. ‘In the mayday,’ he said closing the book but keeping it marked with his finger, ‘he gives them our position – which had hardly changed from the time of the pan-pan – and tells them there’s a fire in the engine room, that he’s lost contact with the stern, that he’s got four men en route to investigate, and that he’s lost his rudder.’

‘That’s it?’

‘In a nutshell.’

‘But you went down there, what in the hell did you see?’

‘I saw hell is what I saw. It was like looking into the sun, brightest place in the goddamn universe but I couldn’t see a thing.’

‘That’s it?’

‘There’s plenty more we could speculate on, but that’s the gist of it.’

‘Speculate,’ Noah said.

Olaf smiled at Noah’s impatience. ‘We know the fuel line was leaking. We know that everyone on the stern was busy trying to contain the leak. We know that sometime between, say ten twenty and ten thirty, the whole thing went up, and that within minutes the steerage was shot and Jan had made the mayday. It’s safe to assume that there was some sort of explosion, because a fire alone wouldn’t have put the rudder out of commission so fast. It’s also safe to assume there was an explosion because we never saw any of those boys alive.’

‘When we finally reached the stern, I sent Luke and Red down below to see what was going on while Bjorn and I went up to the boat deck to see about steering that son of a bitch.’

‘What do you mean steering it?’

‘At the very stern of the ship, behind the stack, up on the boat deck, there were two emergency wheels. Jan told us he’d lost the rudder, so up we went. I’ll tell you what, there couldn’t have been a more wide-open spot for heaven to piss on us in the world than the ass end of that ship.’

Noah was trying to piece it all together. ‘But you didn’t have a compass, you didn’t have a radar or the charts.’

‘We knew which way the wind was blowing, though.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I figured if we kept the wind behind us, we’d be okay.’

‘Why didn’t Jan direct you from the bridge? You had the walkie-talkies.’

‘We couldn’t hear ourselves think, let alone what was being said on the walkie-talkies.’

‘So you had no contact with the bridge at all?’

‘Not after a certain point, no.’

‘And nobody ever came back to the stern to communicate anything?’ Noah was incredulous.

‘Nope,’ Olaf said.

‘Why? It doesn’t make sense.’

‘What doesn’t make sense?’

‘Why you were left alone back there.’

‘The crew on the bow was safer there than they would have been crossing the deck.’

‘What about Red and Luke?’

Olaf pinched the bridge of his nose as he took off his glasses. He sighed. ‘We were fighting it, you know? We had no idea what in the hell was going on but that we had to keep the boat pointed in the right direction.’ He was shaking his head and suddenly sounded as if he were pleading to a jury. ‘After a while – right before we ran aground – Red and Luke came up to the boat deck. Bear in mind, we’re still right in the middle of hell. It was cold and windy and we were soaked and coated with ice and standing up on that deck with targets on our chests, just *waiting* to get dead. We’ve got no idea what the hell is happening below us until Luke comes back up. In the middle of all that screaming wind Luke tells me we’re fucked, that the engine room and her crew are gone, that right below us all four decks are up in flames: The fantail deck, the windlass room, the cabins – everything – poof,’ he exploded his hands, ‘roaring away. He tells me they didn’t see anyone, that we’ve got no chance. Jesus Christ,’ he said under his breath.

‘And I’m thinking to myself, those goddamn boats sitting tight in Thunder Bay better damn well be on their way, and the Coast Guard better have a cutter and a few helicopters coming to search or we’re as good as dead.

‘My mind was all tangled up. I was sitting on a fucking time bomb with all the water in the world exploding around me. It’s so goddamn dark and cold and my guys are telling me that right at our fucking feet half the crew is cooked.’ He closed his eyes, looking, Noah thought, like he was trying to erase the picture from his mind. ‘I didn’t know what the hell to do so I grabbed Red by the arm and we went back down.

‘I told him to stay right with me, that we were going to hump it back into the engine room and see if there was anything we could do.’ Again he closed his eyes.

‘But they’d just been down there. They said it was impossible.’

‘I had to see it for myself, I guess. As much as I trusted Luke, I knew that it would haunt me forever if I got off that boat without checking on those guys for myself.

‘Jesus it was something. We entered by way of the galley. Everything that was flammable was blazing; all the boxes of food, the greasy stove top, the curtains on the window and the table cloth on the table, everything. Red and I both grabbed fire extinguishers and worked our way through the galley and dinning room towards the gangway that led into the crew’s quarters. We couldn’t have gone ten steps into those rooms without going up in flames ourselves.

‘The strange part was that nothing in particular seemed to be on fire. It was as if the air was on fire, all of the air. We were getting tossed around of course, and each time I got thrown against the wall I could feel how goddamn hot it was. If I hadn’t been soaked through and halfway frozen, I probably would have come out of there with burns everywhere. Instead it was almost a relief if you can believe that.’

‘How long were you down there?’

‘Impossible to say, ten, maybe fifteen minutes I’d guess. Once our extinguishers went empty we had no choice but to get back up on deck with Luke and Bjorn.’

‘I can’t imagine.’

‘Why would you want to?’ Olaf asked. ‘Why in the world would anyone want to imagine that hell?’

Noah took the question as a cue and sat there silently for a few minutes trying to remember what he knew about the ships that had laid up in Thunder Bay – whether it was just two or all three of them that had responded – and whether it was a search plane or helicopters that the Grand Marais Coast Guard had dispatched.

After a few minutes Olaf broke the silence again. ‘It had to be Canoe Rocks,’ he said.

‘What did?’

‘Where we ran aground. The death blow.’

Olaf labored to his feet again, this time staying bowed at the waist as he took a few steps across the living room towards a wall shelf that sat behind the dining table. It was teeming with cast iron cookware and decorative Norwegian dishes; unused cookbooks and antique cans of mosquito repellent. From the top of the shelf he grabbed what looked to Noah like a poster that was rolled up and tied with blue and white string.

‘I think this is an old chart of Superior,’ Olaf said as he tried to catch some of the dim light in order to read a curled up edge of it. ‘Right up your alley, come to think of it.’

‘Let’s have a look at that,’ Noah said as he pushed the mugs and magazines and books on the coffee table to one end.

Olaf fiddled with the knot for a couple of seconds before he gave up and handed it to Noah, who fidgeted with it himself for a second before biting through it and unrolling it on the coffee table. Olaf had grabbed a couple heavy books from the bookcase and set one at each end of the table to keep the chart from coiling back up.

It was an old Loran-C chart published by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that Noah recognized at a glance as worthless. It covered the north Superior shoreline from Grand Portage Bay, Minnesota, to Shesheeb Point, Ontario, and included the



entire Isle Royale archipelago. People were always coming into his shop in Boston hoping that the folded and faded maps they found in their attics were really priceless relics. More often than not, they were just like this one, worth nothing more than its original price.

Olaf had turned a couple lamps on and sat down knobby-kneed next to Noah on the sofa. 'You see here?' he asked dragging his nub-nailed thumb up the length of Isle Royale to its northeastern tip. 'These are the Canoe Rocks. And this,' he said dragging his thumb another couple of inches straight north, 'is where we came about, where Jan made the mayday. The wind was coming from there,' he said, stretching his arm towards the dark corner and then signaling the direction with his thumb by pulling it back towards them, 'so you see, the rocks were the first things in our path.'

'We came about at ten fifteen, the fire starts at about ten thirty, you factor an hour of powerless drifting in, and we'd have hit the rocks about eleven thirty. From Canoe Rocks, we drift a little farther southwest for a half hour or so, and sink exactly here,' he said, thumping a black X scrawled on the chart with his thumb.

Noah sat up, retraced the path his father suggested, and leaned in to have a closer look at the sounding marked on the chart. 'It says here the water's only five hundred and eighty-two feet deep. I thought the *Rag* was deeper than that.'

Olaf pointed at the fine print along the upper edge of the map. 'This chart was published in 1964. After the *Rag* sank, during the investigation, they spent a lot of time using sonar equipment and what not trying to determine the exact whereabouts of the wreckage. They discovered that the original soundings were off a couple hundred feet.'

'That's a sizeable error,' Noah said.

'Discrepancies on these lake charts only mattered if they were in shallow water, in the harbors and along the coasts. The difference between five hundred and eighty feet and eight hundred feet doesn't mean much to a boat drafting twenty-five feet.'

They both sat back and sighed and turned to face each other. After an awkward second Olaf looked away and patted Noah's knee before trying to stand up. The edge of

the couch was lower than the chair though, and he couldn't get his legs to lift him. Rather than trying to get up again, he let himself slide back into the cushions.

'Not too smooth,' Olaf said.

Noah had stood impulsively and found himself hovering uselessly above his father for the second time in as many hours. Instead of lingering there this time, he walked around the table and looked for something to do to distract them from the uncomfortable moment. A couple of seconds seemed like a couple of minutes before he finally grabbed the afghan from the chair and spread it over his father's legs.

'Thanks,' Olaf said.

'Of course, sure,' Noah stammered, the pity in his voice must have been obvious. 'Do you need anything?'

'Is there room in there for another log?'

Noah couldn't believe he was serious, but he opened the stove door to see. There were still three glowing logs sitting as they had originally been arranged on a pile of molten embers. Noah knew that another log wouldn't make any difference, so he took one from the wood box and tossed it in. When it hit the smoldering pile already in the stove, the logs collapsed and spread across the bottom of the stove in a bright, pumpkin-orange flash. The new log caught fire immediately.

'Close the damper a bit too, would you?' Olaf asked.

Noah did. As he stood there within a few feet of the open door, watching the bark on the split oak disappear into ash, he figured the temperature in the cabin must have been at least eighty degrees, maybe ninety.

He closed the stove door and went to the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water. 'If there was an explosion, isn't it possible that *that* was the cause of a rupture in the hull?' Noah asked.

'Sure, sure,' Olaf said. 'In fact, I'd be surprised if serious damage hadn't been done by an explosion, the fire alone even. But the fatal blow was the rocks.'

‘How do you know?’

‘It wasn’t more than a couple minutes after I got back on deck that we ran aground,’ Olaf said. ‘Imagine that big boat butting against a line of rocks each as big as a house. The jolt knocked me right off my feet. We were lucky that we had time to get ourselves attached back to our lifelines. If we hadn’t, we would’ve been in the water – and probably dead.’

‘You see, when the boat’s moving, in the open water, the waves are trying to hit a moving target. Up against the rocks, in the shoal water, they’re free to pound on whatever’s there. I remember trying to get my feet back under me and the water crashing up over the deck like we were just a little toy in a bathtub. I didn’t have a whole lot of hope right then, that’s for damn sure.’

‘It must have been terrifying,’ Noah said, imagining himself in the same situation. ‘What do you think about at a moment like that?’

Olaf looked at him from the corner of his eye. ‘Have you ever been in a fight?’ he asked.

‘What do you mean? Like a fistfight?’

‘Yeah. You and another guy mixing it up.’

Noah thought about it for a second. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘I’ve been in one fight,’ Olaf said. ‘In Westby, Wisconsin of all places. It was 1936, I was sixteen years old. I remember because it was the year I won the ski jumping tournament down there – you won there once too, didn’t you?’ he asked, but didn’t wait for an answer. ‘We were in one of the pubs in town after the meet, and some local guy got it into his head that I was trying to move in on his girl – which I probably was,’ Olaf smiled. ‘Well, he called me a few choice names and before I knew it, he’d cracked my head with a beer bottle. It wasn’t a clean hit, but it was enough to knock me down. Then he sets to work: kicking, punching, crashing bar chairs over my shoulders every time I tried to get on my feet. I didn’t know what in the hell had hit me, but I knew I had to get up. I thought

that son of a bitch might've been crazy enough to kill me,' he concluded, piercing his lips as if Noah should have been able to make sense of the anecdote.

He couldn't. 'So?'

'So,' Olaf said, 'I got on my feet, I landed a few punches of my own, I got the hell out of that bar.'

'And that's what you did on the ship?'

'I knew that I had to get up, that's what I'm getting at here. I knew that if I didn't get up, I'd be finished. You see?'

'Obviously you did...'

'Yeah, I did.'

'And it was like getting up from the barroom brawl,' Noah said, finally understanding what he was driving at.

'The point is, I'd been getting the shit knocked out of me: the walk across the deck, the time on the open boat deck, running aground and taking that pounding, that all adds up. It would've been easy to just cling to that icy deck and hope.'

'Why didn't you? Just give up I mean.'

'I guess there was some instinct to survive,' Olaf said. 'And I knew I probably wouldn't if I'd just sat there huddling and holding on for dear life.'

'Did you think you were going to die?'

Olaf thought about it for a second. 'I don't suppose I thought I was going to die, no. It was more a matter of thinking I wouldn't *survive*, of thinking the whole crew wasn't going to survive – there's a difference.

'We were only hung-up on the rocks for a couple of minutes, but that time was enough for me to put some perspective on our situation. We had no engine, no engine crew; no steerage; no communication between ends of the ship; no communication at all, with anyone; we were thirty miles from safe harbor, hung-up on a rock in what might be the

most remote part of the lower forty-eight states; it was below zero, a near whiteout, with waves in the fifteen foot range; and we were already soaked to the bone.

‘Now, I don’t care if you have two minutes or two days to make decisions when you’re in a mess like that, the fact is there just aren’t a whole lot of options. You asked me if I thought I was going to die. If I’d had the time, I might of. But I didn’t. I had to decide whether to launch the lifeboats or get back with the rest of the crew on the bow.’

‘Why would you have done that?’

‘Get back with the crew?’

‘Yeah, why would you have even considered that?’

‘They were my crewmates,’ Olaf said without hesitation. ‘I was an officer aboard a ship in peril.’

The notion of the crew’s importance touched an unidentifiable nerve in Noah. ‘I understand that,’ he said, ‘but crossing back to the bow would have meant leaving the lifeboats. If you leave the lifeboats, you’ve got positively no chance.’

‘That’s true *if* you know the boat is sinking, we didn’t.’

Noah shook his head. ‘You didn’t know you were sinking? You’re on the rocks, the lifeboats are ten feet from where you were standing, half the crew is already dead – probably dead, anyway – and you hesitate to get off the ship?’

‘They were my goddamn crewmates, I wanted to save them more than I wanted to save myself. How could I have helped anyone by getting into a lifeboat and paddling into the fucking night?’

‘How did you intend to save them by leaving the only means of escape? I’m not trying to fight, I just want to understand this and it doesn’t make sense.’

Olaf was clearly riled. ‘Oh hell I don’t know. Maybe I thought there would be safety in numbers, maybe I thought that one of those lifeboats out on the open water would have been suicide – I mean hell, it nearly was. Or maybe I just didn’t know what to do.

There's no manual for surviving the end of the world.' He balled both his hands into lopsided fists and pounded them against his legs.

'It doesn't matter anyway,' he concluded. 'No sooner had the four of us met back on the deck than we came off the rocks. As soon as we did, I knew exactly what we had to do.'

Noah got up again, went to the kitchen and wiped his face with a dishtowel. Outside it was dark, and Noah caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window. His hair was messy and on end and he looked drunk. There was condensation on the outside of the window, and he figured it would have been frost if not for the heat inside.

'Understand something,' Olaf said, picking up on Noah's restlessness. 'Up until we got off the rocks, I still had the notion that everything was going to come together. I still thought – and it's easy to see how ludicrous it was in hindsight – that somehow we could come out of it, you know? That we could avoid the end. I realize that sounds crazy given the situation we were in, but it's true.'

'And another thing, contrary to the myth, when you're on the edge of life and falling off, you don't stop and reminisce. At least I didn't. What you do is look for something to hold onto.'

Noah hoisted himself up onto the kitchen counter and crossed his legs. 'I guess,' he said, but didn't understand.

'And maybe there was a chance up until we came free, you know? Maybe everything going through my head wasn't just fear or indecision.'

Noah thought, he's pleading. Maybe not to me, but he is.

'It's all the same, though, like I said, because when we did come off the rocks, all I wanted to do was get off that goddamn boat.'

Noah looked up at him. 'You had to know at that point she was going to sink.'

'There wasn't much doubt about it, no. I mean, despite the fact that we couldn't see a thing, you could tell she was wallowing.' He paused. 'Whenever I think about it – about

what she would have looked like from a bird's eye view – I imagine a whale that's been harpooned. You know how they kind of float and drift along? The blood trailing them? How they start to list and go belly-up? You've seen it on TV, some National Geographic special on the Eskimos. That's what the *Rag* must have looked like.'

'How fast did it happen?'

'Can't say for sure, but between the four of us we couldn't have gotten the lifeboat launched in any less than fifteen or twenty minutes, and considering how far from the rocks she ended up, it was probably a little longer than that.'

'Not enough time for any of the other ships to get there?'

'No way.'

'Or the Coast Guard?'

'What were they going to do had they even been able to get there? Searching for us on a night like that would've been like looking for a cotton ball in a cloud. They never would have found us.'

'And the rest of the crew?' Noah asked, almost in a whisper.

'Don't know what happened,' Olaf said and put his head down.

They sat in silence for a while before Noah slid off the counter and went back to the armchair. 'You look tired,' he said.

'I'm always tired.'

'I'm tired too. It's late,' he said, looking at his watch to find that it was only eight o'clock. 'Why don't you get some sleep?'

'I think I will,' Olaf said. 'Give me a hand up, would you?'

Noah skirted around the coffee table and took his father by the elbow. His arm was thin and soft. Noah helped him around the table.

'Gotta hit the head before I turn in,' Olaf said.

'Me too.'

‘You know, I never thought much about it, but the worst part of the whole goddamn night came *after* we got the lifeboat in the water.’

They had both walked to the door and were standing in the dim light coming off the kitchen pushing their feet into a pile of unlaced boots by the door.

‘*That’s* the real story,’ Olaf said.

‘Why don’t you save that part for another time, huh? I think you should get some sleep.’

‘It was a hell of a thing, you know? A hell of a thing.’

‘I’ve no doubt about that,’ Noah said as he pushed the door open. The air was biting, and no sooner did Noah step outside than his bare legs and arms went taut and a shiver rippled up his back and through his shoulders.

‘You need to use the outhouse?’ Olaf said.

‘Only if there’s an ordinance against pissing on the trees.’

They walked to the edge of the glow from the house and stood next to each other on either side of a tree, their shoulders almost touching.

‘There are stars in the west,’ Olaf said, pointing through the trees. ‘It’s going to clear up.’

‘Hopefully warm up, too.’

‘What, doesn’t it get cold in Boston?’

‘Of course it does, it’s just that we usually hold off on the snow until winter.’

‘Ah hell, that wasn’t snow.’

‘It looked like snow to me.’

‘Besides, what are you doing wearing your goddamn beach clothes?’

Noah smiled to himself. ‘Because it’s hot enough in that house to bake a loaf of bread.’

‘Gotta keep warm.’



They zipped up and walked back towards the house, Olaf stepping cautiously across the wet, leafy yard. The wind was up again, blowing from the same direction as the clearing sky, and in the few minutes they'd been outside, it had stripped all the uncomfortable warmth and syrupy sweat from Noah. The heavy black branches of the jackpines roiling in the breeze muffled the clicking of the bare aspen and maple trees.

'Think there are any wolves within five miles of us?' Noah said. He was thinking of Sancho somewhere in the middle of the woods, wet and hungry or bloody chined, devouring a freshly killed rabbit.

'I'd be surprised if there weren't. Why?'

'I was thinking about your dog.'

'Don't worry about him. The wolves would have got him by now if they wanted him,' Olaf said as he climbed the three rickety, wooden steps back into the house. Noah held him steady by the elbow.

When he opened the door, Noah could feel the warm air surge out of the house. The blustery night had cleared Noah's head – had invigorated him – and when he stepped back into the house, he thought it smelled like boiling rutabaga. It was a smell that reminded him of his mother and the dreaded Friday night fish boils of his childhood. He was instantly sapped again.

He kicked off the boots and sat back down on the couch while Olaf filled a glass jar with water from the pitcher. He drank it. Then he filled it again, took two chalky looking tablets from a canister on the counter, and dropped them in the jar. Finally he dug into his mouth and pulled his teeth out and dropped them in the jar.

'What in the hell?' Noah said.

'What?'

'Since when do you have dentures?'

'Six years ago.'

'Six years ago?'

'I hate the goddamn things,' Olaf said, picking the jar up and holding it to the light. His lips seemed baggier without his teeth in, and it made him look even older.

Noah ran his tongue across the front of his own teeth. 'I didn't know you had them?'

'I guess you wouldn't have.'

'I guess not,' Noah said, and watched as Olaf set the jar back on the counter and turn towards his bedroom.

'Good night.'

'Get a good night's sleep, huh?'

Olaf nodded and went to bed.

**PART FOUR: *The Darkest Place in the Night***

What did Noah think of lying in bed? He thought of the dog, out in the black woods, fearless; he thought of his father's bloody shit and the loneliness that must have struck the old man the first time he saw it, he wondered what it would be like to know your dying was so near; he thought of Ed and the store and felt a flush of shame for the vanity of it, for the vapidness; he thought of Natalie bawling over some herbal, organic tea (she had pounds of it, every combination of berry and grass and herb and pine cones), watching an old James Dean flick in their loft, resenting Noah and his father for the same reason. But these things only passed through his mind. Mostly he thought about the darkness, which reminded him of Nat again, specifically of the follicles on her ovaries just ripe for the fertilizing. He cupped his balls in his hand and wished with his last waking thought that he could make love to her, that he could at least take a pass at those rare strands of potential *life*. He could almost picture his ejaculation and the mad, spermicidal dash to them.

He couldn't have slept long. When he woke the sun had not yet risen, but the darkness had been replaced with a grainy, pre-dawn light. He picked his watch up off the bedside table, tried angling it to catch the faint light, but couldn't even pick out one of the hands. It had to be before six though, an hour he hadn't seen in years

For ten or fifteen minutes he tried to force himself back to sleep, but the pounding at the back of his skull and the burning in his eyes made it impossible. He got up and tripped into the living room where the warmth took his breath away. After a series of closed-eyed yawns and long-armed stretching he noticed his father asleep on the sofa. He looked away, saw the teeth like a jar of pickled herring in the murky water and tepid light, and felt surrounded by sickness. The fire had been rekindled, the damper closed.

What a sight the old man made. On one end of the couch, his bushy-rimmed head rested on a pillow. A collage of blankets and quilts covered him, leaving only his clownish

feet – snug in thick, gray wool socks – dangling over the other end of the sofa. His arms were folded over his chest. The sleeves of his union suit were coming apart at the cuff. He might look like this in a coffin, Noah thought as he walked past him, slid on a pair of boots, and stepped outside for a piss. He walked to the same tree behind the truck that they'd gone on the night before and waited for his morning erection to go down. I'm going to get back to that tree in the gulch today, he thought. I'll get the whole damn thing split and stacked this week.

He started back to the house intent on trying to catch a little more sleep, but a ribbon of ghostly fog was curling up the trail from the lake. It caught his attention, lured him down. In the woods on either side of the path there were still pockets of complete darkness – a polka-dotted dawn –heavy, wet, and eerie. He could see the lightness above the lake and the still black water exhaling mist. He felt brave for facing it.

When he reached the beach, he walked to the edge of the water and kicked at a clump of limp grass. He was still wearing his shorts, and the cold air gripped his legs; he flexed his body to stave off the chill. All around the rim of the lake, the woods hoarded a darkness that didn't seem to make sense, coming as he had down the faintly lit path. But when he turned around to look back towards the house, it too was gone in the darkness.

Across the lake, above the rolling tree tops, the sky was turning a brilliant red that faded upward, seamlessly, through a million shades of pink and back to gray. Somewhere the sun was rising, but Noah could not tell where. Red sky in morning, he thought, red sky in morning, sailors take warning. The old adage had come to him, but seemed impossible to believe in all that quiet and calm. Not a breath of life – no birds, no minnows in the shallow shore water – was anywhere. The solitude fortified him.

He walked onto the dock and was startled by the creaking of its planks and pilings. The boat was tied to two posts by expert knots that he was sure required the simplest twist to untie, but looked complicated enough to hold the old thing there forever. He stepped into it and sat down on the unpainted, splintered seat and watched the ripples roll out on the

otherwise placid lake. He was happy. Natalie would love this place, he thought. He could picture her on a warm summer afternoon sitting on the beach with a magazine and sunhat under the shade of an umbrella. She would squint at him and smile and lick her thumb before turning the page. At lunch she would tell him that peaches were out, blueberries in, based on the latest health craze she'd just been reading about on the beach. He'd make himself a summer sausage sandwich and look at the kids. There were two of them – twins, he'd decided – three years old and sitting in the clearing in the yard, on the picnic blanket on the ground, in the sun. Fair skinned and straight haired, they were picking at a caterpillar. He would touch Nat on her knee and bow into the sunlight making monster sounds. The kids would jump up and scream happiness and stutter-step in circles. He'd spread his arms, scoop them up, and spin them 'round. Nat, clearing the paper plates would watch them, shielding the sun from her eyes with her hand.

A fish rolled out of the water right beside the boat – a big fish, lazily, waking perhaps – and Noah's reverie was lost. She's sleeping, he thought, looking at his wrist for the watch that wasn't there. He stood up, suddenly chilled, and started back towards the house.

Midway up the path he froze. The trees had swayed and murmured, and when they went silent again, he thought he heard a siren in the distance. It was very faint at first, and dogged. After a moment it stopped and he took another step, but only one, and froze again. This time it was clearly not a siren: It was a howl. Sancho, he thought hopefully.

He tried to move in a lull after the second cry, but couldn't. The light had come fully up, but was still weepy and drab. Everything – the trees, the car-sized boulders, the whisperless grass – melded into the same leaden hue and silence. The howling only compounded the stillness. For three or four seconds it stopped. Then a third cry went up. God it's beautiful, he thought in his fright. So beautiful, so *musical*. No sooner did he think this than the call was answered by another howl, this one behind him it seemed, across the lake perhaps. The two howls – one indistinguishable from the other – permeated the air,

gave it a texture that warmed the still morning. It must be melting the frost, he thought before he realized that the second howl meant that there was something besides Sancho – if Sancho was at all a part of the song – in the choir. He felt calm, felt a sense of inevitability, of serenity even. The howl had entered him, he could actually feel its presence in his gut, could feel it awakening something that he hadn't known was slumbering, something he couldn't exactly locate. It filled him the way the foghorns had as a child.

They sang for a long time. He was sure they were just two. He thought maybe it meant that either the hunt was over, and they were singing to reunite, or that they'd simply lost each other in the night and were calling each other back to the den. Or maybe there were pups, maybe it had all been a call to danger. When they stopped, and he was ready to move again, feeling suddenly and inexplicably strong, he took a couple of steps towards the house. He considered its black windows as though from a distance they might let onto something other than what was really there. When he was twenty or thirty yards beneath it, he saw a light flicker on in one of the windows and his father's head - his rim of frizzy hair - appeared in the window. It looked like a scene from an impressionist painting. But the image only lasted for a second before the old man turned and disappeared from the light.

As he stepped back into the warmth of the house and stomped off his boots, a chill coursed through his body. It was a chill that reverberated, one that left his fingers tingling and stars flashing in his eyes.

'Bright eyed and bushy tailed,' Olaf said.

'That's me all right.'

'Don't you remember that expression? Your mother used to say that about you every Saturday morning when you got up to watch cartoons.' His voice was thinning.

'Did you hear the wolves?'

'I was afraid that's what it was,' Noah said.

‘There’s a pack in the neighborhood; their turf extends right up to the shore across the lake. If you’re quiet and sit still long enough, you can see them watering themselves in the morning once in a while.’

‘What about Sancho?’ Noah asked.

‘Sancho knows better than to tangle with them. I’m sure they know about him, and he knows about them, but he’s big enough and wild enough himself they don’t bother him.’ He was rinsing his dentures in a bowl of water.

‘I saw you out there listening,’ Olaf said. ‘Awfully brisk morning to be out in your gym shorts.’ His union suit hung on him and he had the afghan slung over his shoulders. ‘Twenty-eight degrees according to the thermometer,’ he said, peering out the window.

‘Where’s a thermometer?’

‘Right here.’ He pointed out the window.

Noah stepped over and looked. Nailed to the window sash was a thermometer and barometric pressure gauge. ‘I’ll bet it’s five degrees colder once you get away from this house. You’re going to kill me with these fires.’

‘I can’t feel it,’ Olaf said, ambling back to the sofa.

‘Why did you sleep on the couch?’

‘Too damn cold in the bedroom.’

Noah shook his head. ‘What time is it anyway?’

‘Don’t know,’ Olaf said, settling back under the blankets.

‘I’m going back into Misquah to get the chain you asked for yesterday. Anything else you want?’

Olaf stuck out his lower lip and shook his head no.

‘Will the hardware store be open this early?’

‘I’ll bet it is.’

‘Then I’m going to go. I want to do some work on that tree in the gulch today, too.’



Olaf raised his eyebrows approvingly. 'Take the truck,' he said.

At the hardware store – a place called Knutson's that also served as a liquor store and post office – there were already half a dozen men, all as old as Olaf, milling about a deer stand that, according to a hand written sign, had just arrived in stock. Each of the men had a Styrofoam cup of coffee in their hand and plaid or blaze-orange vests on. They were all portly and had gray beards with nicotine-tinged moustaches or sideburns flecked with white. Noah walked to the back of the store under their curious stares, and rang the service bell on the counter. One of the men in the group excused himself from his pals and hustled back to the counter. He wore painter's pants, shirtsleeves and a plaid wool vest.

'Mornin',' he said, taking a sip of his coffee. 'What can I do for ya?'

'I need a length of chain.'

'What kind of chain?' the old timer asked, stepping behind the counter and draining his coffee. There was still steam curling out of the cup as he finished it.

'Is there such a thing as three quarter inch... something? I need twenty-five feet of it.'

'Let me show you what we've got,' he said, motioning with his long arm for Noah to follow. 'By the by, you care for a cup of coffee?'

'No, no thanks,' Noah said, taken aback by the gesture.

A couple of aisles over there was a huge selection of rope and chain, dozens of each. 'This here's what you must have in mind,' the old man said. 'It's your standard high-test, shot-peened chain. You can use it for towing or it's sturdy enough to use to secure things on trailers, like snowmobiles for example. What do you need it for, anyway?' He looked at Noah over the rim of his reading glasses.

'I don't exactly know. It's not for me, but it looks like it'll do.'

'Is it for an inside or outside job?'

'I honestly have no idea,' Noah said. He felt like an idiot.

‘Because if you’re using it for something outside, we have polyurethane encased links here. This’ll hold up better to the elements.’ He was uncoiling a couple feet of it from the heavy-duty spool on which it was displayed.

‘I’d better play it safe,’ Noah said and laughed, embarrassed. ‘Let’s go with the polyurethane.’

‘You got it,’ he said. ‘And if it’s the wrong stuff, just come back and we’ll get you what you need.’ He hollered towards the back of the store and a tall, skinny Indian kid with a baggy sweatshirt that said *Grand Marais Football* on it stepped from behind a door. ‘Cut me twenty-five feet of the three quarter inch poly, alright?’

‘Sure thing, boss,’ the kid said as he hurried back into the room from which he came, only to reappear three seconds later with what looked to Noah like a giant pair of pliers. He ducked into the aisle where the chains were.

‘Kid’s a good worker,’ the old man said. ‘Hard to find up here.’

Noah nodded stupidly and followed him back to the cash register.

‘You ain’t from around here,’ he said. It wasn’t a question. ‘But you look familiar.’

‘My father lives up on Lake Forsone,’ Noah said.

‘Of course, you’re a Torr,’ he said. ‘I bet I knew you when you were a kid.’ There was a broad, generous smile on his face. ‘Your grandpa bought everything he needed to build that place from me. He was one of my first big customers. I used to play poker with him right back there,’ he gestured to an office behind the counter. ‘How’s your old man doing anyway? Haven’t seen him in a while.’ It was clear from his tone of voice he had no idea about his father’s health.

‘He’s okay. He’s doing alright.’

‘Tell the old codger Knut says hello. Tell him to come down and have a cup of coffee some morning.’

‘I’ll do that. I’ll let him know.’

The kid in the sweatshirt brought the chain and set it on the counter. The whole idea of sharing a cup of coffee in the hardware store struck Noah as so bizarre, as such an antique way of doing business – of *living*, for that matter – that it made the whole transaction seem unreal. It filled him with an unspecific happiness, and he wondered what in the hell he was doing there.

Knut put the chain in a plastic bag and took eight dollars from Noah. ‘If that doesn’t work for you,’ he said, motioning to the bag on the counter, ‘bring it back. We’ll get you what you need.’

‘Thanks,’ Noah said. ‘I appreciate your help.’

When he got home, he parked the truck beside the same tree. As soon as he stepped out, with the chain in the bag dangling beside him, Olaf came out of the house dressed for a polar expedition. He was wearing a beaver skin hat, his old wool pea coat, a scarf wrapped tightly around his neck and mouth, mukluks, a pair of wool cargo pants with pockets ballooning on either leg, and a pair of worn choppers.

‘What are you going to wear when it starts getting cold?’ Noah said.

Olaf smiled. ‘Any luck with the chain?’

Noah held the bag up. ‘Knut says hello.’

‘Humph.’

‘Nice guy. There’s not much you couldn’t find in that store of his either. It’s doubling as the local coffee house, too. He told me to tell you to come down some morning and join him and the boys.’

Olaf waved his hand as if to dismiss the notion of that. ‘He runs a good business, been around a long time.’

‘Where are you headed anyway?’

Olaf turned half towards the shed, still deep in shadow. He put his mittened hand up to take the bag from Noah.

‘There’s something I have to show you,’ Olaf said.

‘Something in there?’ Noah looked at the shed.

‘It’s what I needed this for.’ Olaf held the bag up.

‘You should look at that,’ Noah said, pointing at the bag, ‘to make sure I got the right thing.’

Olaf peeked at it. ‘This is fine,’ he said. He was slapping his left hand against his thigh. He turned to look at the shed again, made a tentative step in its direction, but stopped and faced Noah. The top of the trees started swaying as a breeze filtered down to them. It stirred the chill in the air.

‘Dad, what’s going on?’

‘You should know I didn’t call you hoping you’d come help with this, but I can’t quite do it myself. Let me show you.’ He took a deep breath and walked towards the shed. Noah followed.

The padlock wasn’t locked, and Olaf unhooked it from the hinge and hung it on a nail pounded into the doorframe. He had to tug hard on the door to get it opened. When he did, the three panes of glass rattled in their chipped frames. Olaf looked behind him, stepped into the shed and pulled aside the curtain, barely illuminating the welter of junk piled everywhere. There were mildew-stained cardboard boxes, old gas cans, splintered canoe paddles, busted lawn chairs, a step ladder missing every other rung, a mattress with grotesque brown stains leaning against the back wall, two pairs of Noah’s childhood skis leaning in the corner, old life preservers hanging from hooks on the wall to his right, and on the left a table that must have been his father’s workspace as evidenced by the hack saw, the stainless steel tubing, and the ten gallon barrel. The whole place smelled like ripe, wet wood.

Where, thought Noah, disgusted, could her ashes possibly be in this fucking mess? ‘This place is a sty,’ he said, stepping over a stack of *Life* magazines.

Olaf was clearing his toolbox from an old wooden barrel that sat on the floor beside the table. He raised his eyes to acknowledge the mess. 'You and your sister used to sleep out here.'

'I know, I can't believe it,' Noah said.

'There's a nice cross breeze out here in the summer,' Olaf said, lifting the soiled curtain with the hacksaw to show the cracked window.

'God, it stinks, though,' Noah said. He was breathing through his mouth.

'Does it?' Olaf said. 'You recognize that?' He pointed at the barrel.

'This barrel?' Noah said. 'Yeah, I recognize this.' He stepped towards it, pried the top off, and looked down at thousands of taconite pellets.

'Your mother hated these things. She thought they were messy.'

Noah picked a handful of them from the barrel and rolled them around in the palm of his hand. 'They were,' he said. 'They still are.' He showed his father the black smudges on his fingertips.

'I used to bring them home for you.'

'I know,' Noah said. 'I remember that.'

'You loved it. You thought it was the neatest damn thing.'

Noah smiled, felt boyish. 'It was pretty cool. My friends thought so too.' He put the pellets back in the barrel, set the lid back on, and sat down on top of it. 'What are you working on out here?' he asked, picking up a four-foot section of the surprisingly heavy steel tubing.

'Hard to explain exactly.'

For the life of him, Noah could not imagine how the piles of junk and the chain he'd just bought could amount to anything of consequence. He looked up and saw Olaf's big eyes looking down at him.

'I need a hand getting this down to the lake.' He kicked the barrel between Noah's feet.

‘To the lake, why?’ Noah said. He could tell his father had lost his confidence and was skirting around the real reason Noah was out there with him.

Olaf cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. ‘I’ve got to anchor the dock for winter.’

‘That’s simple enough,’ Noah said. It seemed perfectly reasonable. Maybe he’d been reading his father wrong after all. ‘I’ll get it down there today.’ He had a momentary sense of relief, but then looked at his father and realized that carrying the barrel down to the lake wasn’t the whole job.

Olaf cleared a couple of coffee cans filled with screws and nuts and bolts and nails from an old desk chair and sat down across from Noah.

‘Is this something about Mom?’

‘No, no,’ Olaf said. ‘Of course not.’ He looked like a kid all bundled up in his coat and hat and scarf. ‘Listen, I’ve been thinking a lot. Thinking about... you know, this business...’

‘What business?’

Olaf raised his hands, still in their choppers, as if he were preaching a sermon. ‘About everything, Noah, my life, my age, my health. I *know* what’s happening to me. I’m not a fool.’

Noah sat up and put his hand on his father’s wooly knee. ‘You *are* being a fool about it though. It doesn’t have to be this way. You don’t have to do it alone. We can take you to see the doctor. You can get treatment for this.’

Olaf put his hand on top of Noah’s and looked at him over his glasses. ‘I’m eighty-two years old. I’ve lived a long, long time. Had a very full life...’ He was whispering. ‘I don’t want to prolong things. I know you think it’s ignorant or selfish or *something*, but the simple fact of it is that once you’ve done it for as long as I have, once you’ve come to terms with everything you’ve wrecked in this world, everything you’ve

loved and hated – once it's all tucked away and measured out – six more months or a year doesn't *matter* anymore.'

Tears surged into Noah's eyes. 'Maybe it doesn't matter to *you* anymore, but you're not alone here anymore.'

'I know that – I know I'm not the only one.' He took his mitten off and raised his warm hand to Noah's cold cheek. 'I know how *terrible* I let things get between us. I know what a lousy father I turned out to be. But,' he said, removing his hand from Noah's face and pressing his own tear-swollen eyes with his thumb, 'if it's any consolation, I never meant for it to happen like it did. I never.... I never wanted anything less.'

'Well then what is all this?' Noah made a broad, sweeping gesture with his arm. 'We can have some time here, we've *got* time now.'

'I know, I know.'

'So why are we sitting in this stinking fucking shed? What aren't you telling me?'

'I started to ask you...'

'But then you stopped. Then you got me all weepy about being here, about wasting all the years. Tell me what you're not telling me?'

'I'm not not telling you anything. I just need help, that's all.'

'This must be some favor for the lead up you're giving it,' Noah said. He wiped the tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket.

'It is,' Olaf said.

'Would you tell me what in the hell you're talking about?'

'This chain,' Olaf began, reaching over to touch the plastic bag that still held it, 'when I, well, when...' Olaf looked up to the ceiling. 'I'm going to die soon...'

'Oh no!' Noah sprang up off the barrel. 'No, no, no.' He hurried towards the door, and then turned around again. 'No, no, no.'

Olaf had swiveled in the chair and held a hand up as if to try and grab Noah. 'You don't even know what I'm going to ask you.'

‘Absolutely not, Dad. I don’t know what’s going on in there – ‘ he pointed at Olaf’s head – ‘but whatever it is, you can forget it. Just forget it.’

‘Noah, please, will you listen to me?’

‘No, you listen, I’m not going to, to do anything,’ his voice trailed off.

‘Just listen for a goddamn minute.’

‘No way, Dad – I will not...’ his mind was reeling at the gruesome possibilities. He looked at his father, so helpless there, his scarf still covering his throat. ‘You’ve got to be *crazy*,’ Noah said. ‘To ask something like, like whatever you’re about to ask me, you’ve got to be nuts.’ He shook his head and stumbled out of the shed.

He heard the shed door creak open again as soon as it slammed shut, then heard his father’s dwindling voice above the rustle of kicked leaves. ‘Noah...’

Noah stopped mid stride and turned to face the old man. ‘Who does this, Dad? Who can even imagine this in their head?’ He did a sort of pirouette. ‘Who, whawhat – Jesus!’

Olaf had caught up to him. ‘Noah, you’re not goddamn listening to me.’

‘I’m not going to help you kill yourself. You’re out of your fucking mind to think you can get me up in the middle of goddamn nowhere and ask me to *kill* you. I’m here to save your lousy life.’

‘Oh for fucksake Noah, I don’t want you to kill me.’

Noah couldn’t hear him for the fury in his head. ‘I mean it.’ He started to walk away, but stopped. ‘And don’t ask again.’

Noah left him standing there and went into the house. He tore through his suitcase, put on his jeans and a sweater, and took a pair of leather gloves from a shelf by the door on his way out. He jogged around the house carrying the chainsaw and headed for the gulch. Olaf was still standing in the middle of the yard, his swaddling scarf dancing around his neck in the flirting breeze.



He hurried to the gulch, ducking under low hanging tree branches and stumbling over pine roots and rocks. The morning was up and full, and the dawn's red sky warning was looking prophetic. Already he regretted running off, but he didn't know why.

He stepped to the edge of the gulch, kicked at the trunk of the tree and took a minute to catch his breath. The gully looked shallower than it had a couple days earlier, filled as it was with the low limbs he'd already sawn off. He inspected what was left of the trunk that spanned the two sides of the gulch, and though he suspected that the tree was steady and strong enough to walk on, he had an irrational hesitation to do so. It dawned on him as he stood there that he had no idea how to begin, so he grabbed the saw, swung himself down into the gulch, and tugged on the cord until its awful whine exploded into the air.

At first he worked from the underside of the tree with the saw above his head. For three or four minutes, balancing on the steep incline of the gulch's wall, he let the saw rip through the hard wood as it rained sawdust on him. When the saw slipped through the topside of the trunk, he flinched, expecting the bottom half of the tree to teeter into the gulch. It didn't. When he took his finger off the trigger and set the saw down to see how precariously the oak was perched, he realized that he couldn't close his hands, couldn't shake the knot in his neck or the sting in his shoulders. He looked at the tree spanning the gulch and couldn't imagine how he might endure cutting even half of it. He brushed the sawdust from his hair and killed the saw engine.

On the bank of the gulch were loose clumps of rusty soil, two-foot tall tangles of dead grass, and rope-like stalks of bramble. He used them to hike himself up. There had to be an easier way of doing this, he reasoned. He stepped onto the tree trunk. When he felt no give from the pressure of his foot, he put the full weight of his body onto one leg and bounced, still no give. He grabbed the saw, started it again, and tiptoed backwards out onto the tree. It couldn't have been much more than eight or ten feet above the floor of the gulch, but it seemed much higher from his perspective, especially when he looked towards the lake.

Though it startled him to realize that he was out on that oaken high wire with a buzzing chainsaw, it invigorated him, too.

Measuring off a boot and a half, he set the saw onto the tree and hit the trigger. From this angle the saw worked much easier. In less than half the time it had taken him to make the first pass from the underside, it cleaved the first stump, dropping it into the bramble on the floor of the gulch. He took his finger off the trigger, bent cautiously at the knees a couple times, and still feeling no bounce, made a couple more cautious backwards steps and sawed off another section. His shoulders and back were tingling and his hands shaking. He managed to drop six or eight oak stumps onto the floor of the gulch. When he turned the saw off and looked behind him, he saw that he was a solid third of the way across, and suspended above the bramble below him as if he were on the bowsprit of a ship.

By now the trunk was as big around as a truck tire. He knew that he couldn't cut straight through, so he began the next pass from a side angle. He'd have to make his way through half of it then finish from the other side. He managed to cleave a couple more stumps but soon discovered that no matter how many different angles he came at the tree from, the saw didn't have a long enough blade to get through it. He was sweating like a fiend, covered with sawdust.

It was a relief to turn the vibrating, shivering thing off, but there was also a hitch: He found himself at the end of what was left of the oak, ten feet above the shrubs and tree limbs, without the forethought or the inclination to simply walk backwards, to the root end of the tree. In an instant he panicked and jumped instinctively into the tangle in the ravine.

It had all happened in ten seconds – the despair of his stupidity, the panic, the leap. When he landed, prepared for broken bones, he discovered he was fine. His ankles were unturned, neither his knees nor his shoulders were dislocated. He felt a slight sting under his eye, a scratch, but that was it. He untangled his legs from the mess of tree limbs and dead leaves, looked up at the tree trunk suspended there like a giant, wodsy erection, and laughed at himself. It was not a laugh to ease tension or to mock seriousness either, but a

simple bellyful. He laughed at his own ineptitude, at his inability – in a moment that didn't even warrant a crisis – to think to walk backwards.

When his fit of happiness stopped, he was sitting on one of the stumps on the hillside. He caught his breath, tightened the gloves on his hands, and brushed more of the sawdust from his sleeves. Every limb and muscle in his body felt stretched and weak, but he was also recharged. He stacked the stumps – a couple of which had rolled several yards down the gulch – into a pile at the base of the incline. When they were all collected, he hoisted them, one at a time, out of the gulch. The first half, the narrower of the bunch, were light enough he could just toss them up. The second half were another story. He tried tossing the first of them up as he had the smaller pieces, but it simply hit the flat face of the gully wall and rolled back down into the ravine. The second, even heavier stump, he managed to get up onto his shoulder. The thick bark bit his face as he crawled up the embankment, using his free hand to pull the rest of his body, inch by painful inch, towards the rim of the ravine. His feet churned in the loose, oxidized soil, and every other handful of grass and sprig came free of the earth, causing him to stumble onto one or both of his knees. His left hand – the hand holding the stump in the crux of his neck and shoulders – began to cramp from the weight and weird angle it had ended up in. He slipped again, and the bark bit into the flesh on the nape of his neck. It was edging around his neck, about to roll down his back. The thought of it crushing his Achilles caused an adrenalin surge that gave him the strength to plant one foot firmly and heave the stump up and out of the gulch.

He collapsed onto the bank, half standing and half sitting, and felt his pulse throbbing in his wrist. He tried to catch his breath. His lungs were in his larynx, and sweat soaked his socks and shirt. *Goddamn* the wind funneling up the gulch felt good, stirring the grass and oak leaves and cooling his flush face. He took off his gloves, felt the back of his neck, saw blood on his fingertips.

After his breathing settled, he heaved the other blocks of oak out of the gulch. When he got the last of them up, he swung the saw onto the lip and crawled out himself.

He was covered with burrs and twigs, filthy, and elated. This is the kind of work a man oughta do, he thought, recognizing the stupid bravado but embracing it just the same. Sweat and blood, he thought.

The wheelbarrow was parked where they'd left it. In its rusty, dented bottom, shallow pools of melted frost had formed. Noah carted it back to the edge of the gully and muscled a couple pieces of the sawn oak into it. He felt a tingle in his back, bent at the knees, gripped the handles of the wheelbarrow, and started towards the house.

The trail was spotty at best, but the tree roots, rocks and potholes were nothing compared to getting the stumps out of gulch. He carted them back to the yard and dumped them in the same spot he'd left his father standing that morning. It wasn't until his third or fourth trip that he noticed the door on the shed still open. In the light of the window, he saw his father working at his bench. Noah stood there, frozen as he'd been in the thrall of the wolves' howling. He could see, through the papery curtain and dirty glass, that the old man was still bundled up. His back was to the window, his long arms wrapped around something. For a minute or two, Noah watched his father work. When the old man finally lowered his arms and stepped to the right, bending at the waist, Noah saw that the barrel was on the tabletop. He nearly swooned, stumbled back, and felt his own exhaustion like a syrup over his entire body. How in the hell did he get that thing up there? he wondered, turning away towards the house.

At the kitchen counter he made a cheese sandwich with the dregs of the refrigerator. In the icebox there were only several mason jars coated with freezer burn, and the last half of a loaf of bread. The refrigerator was hardly better equipped, but at least there was mayonnaise and pickles and the cheese he'd bought the other day. He thought of making a sandwich for his father, but when he saw that there was a dirty breakfast bowl in the sink, he reasoned the old man had had his oatmeal and probably wasn't yet hungry again. So he put

his sandwich in a Ziploc baggie, washed his blood-streaked neck with a dishtowel, and headed back towards the gulch pushing the wheelbarrow.

Midway back he stopped automatically and looked up at the back of the old ski jump. There had been several instances since he'd been back when he'd thought of climbing the rickety old thing – of calling up those old memories that were so hard to place without being at the top of it, looking down the inrun – but each time the thought of it crossed his mind, he had been distracted by one episode or another. He set the empty wheelbarrow down and kicked his way through the overgrowth to the lopsided steps that led up to the base of the scaffold. The jump was overrun with grass and moss and dormant wild flowers, but it held firm in the wind. The scaffold itself was built to meet the ground at about the spot where the inrun started to flatten. There were four telephone poles supporting the top of it, and two more midway up the scaffold. On the left side of the inrun there were two-by-fours pounded into the pine cross boards that served as the steps, and waist-high railings and plywood walls. Thirty steps, Noah remembered as he started to climb, thirty steps that he took two at a time.

When he got to the top he stood for a minute looking down the inrun, feeling the wind coming directly up at him – a headwind, he fondly recalled. The feel of it conjured up images of weightless, cerebral flights. Beyond the takeoff, on the left, the old coaching stand his father and grandfather used to huddle on had completely sunk in the vegetation. He could still see the railing, unvarnished and bent. It was easy to imagine both of them standing there, their hushed voices carrying up to him as he latched his boots into the cable bindings and lowered his goggles over the rim of his white leather helmet. It was the flattery he overheard on those mornings that gave him his first sense of vanity. They likened him to themselves when they were his age. Given their prolificacy both here, as was the case with his father, and in Norway, as was the case with his grandfather, he felt sure of his ability and the potential of at least a modest stardom himself. To be sure it was a detriment to hear those unintended accolades. When the time came for his next jump and

the coaching commands from his father were barked up at him – *more shins through the transition, keep the chest low, drive over the knees, strong* – he had been too caught up in visions of Olympic glory to heed them any mind. When the same mistakes were made jump after jump, day after day, the two elder Torrs simply lost their patience and made Noah practice alone. After an afternoon of silence – an afternoon of concentration – all of the little lessons would be applied and he was ready for the next set of instructions.

He sat down now, his feet dangling down the inrun, and took the cheese sandwich from his pocket. It looks so damn big, he thought, surprised. It was awfully small in contrast to the Olympic-sized jumps he'd competed on as a teenager, but in his years of forgetting almost entirely about the sport, he'd lost his perspective, too. Even though the landing hill was overgrown with seedlings and six-foot-tall grass, and the takeoff indistinguishable in the bushes, he could easily imagine the whole scene packed with snow; even though the lake was frothing in the wind, he could see the ski tracks narrowing in the distance. It had not been that long ago.

The voices of his father and grandfather unintended on the wind, the brightness of the sun glinting off the snow, the cold toes and wind burned cheeks, none of it was lost after all. The gloved hands on the gate; the skis squeaking against the hard, packed snow at the top of the jump as he slid them back and forth before pulling himself onto the inrun; the track dissecting the scaffold and the pine boughs marking the edges and the take off; sitting in the crouched position as he hurtled down the ramp, through the transition, and onto the takeoff; the serenity and silence of the flight, the camber of both his skis and his body in flight; his hands ruddering him left or right, his chin out over his ski tips, and the light, effortless swivel of his hips to maximize lift; the perfect instinct to land and the explosion of consciousness *in* landing; the immediate mental review of all that was right and all that was wrong with the flight... none of it was gone after all. Maybe it was the thing – the single most important thing – that he'd ever done, that sport, those jumps. Maybe it was the unifier, the thing that made them the same men. Hadn't his father just said it himself?

Hadn't his father just reminded him the night before that they'd both been champions in Westby, Wisconsin? Hadn't the same been true of tournaments in Ishpeming and Eau Claire and Iron Mountain? Didn't he still have *dreams* about it? Of flights that never ended? Jumps that orbited the earth?

He looked back towards the house, was deafened by the wind in his ear. What in the hell was the old man working on in that rotten shed? And why had he been so quick to shrivel up in the face of the favor his father had wanted to ask? Didn't the million mornings standing on that coach's platform beside the takeoff in the wicked wind and chill of the Minnesota winter add up to something? Fuck the years. I owe him *something*. He took the last bite of his sandwich then stood up at the top of the jump. Even if I don't owe him something, I can do him the favor of listening.

He climbed back down the inrun, left the wheelbarrow in the middle of the path, and walked back to the house. When he came around the back and into the yard, he saw a black Mercedes minivan with North Dakota plates parked next to the rusted out Suburban.

The last time Noah had seen Solveig was four months earlier, at little Tommy's fifth birthday party. Big Tommy (God, how Noah hated the way his sister distinguished between her oldest son and her husband) had inherited his parents house on Lake Lida, a little place just north of Maplewood State Park, thirty miles southeast of Fargo on the northwestern Minnesota prairie, and the weekend-long shindig was planned for there. Noah and Nat made the trip against his better judgment and only after Solveig had assured Noah that their father would not be there. The old man, she had told him, couldn't come because, as he had put it to her, he was knee deep in chores and the summer was closing fast. It was June

Although Noah loved Solveig's kids, loved her too, and had even grown able to tolerate the backslapping and cheap beer Big Tom was famous for, he knew that the sight of those little cherubs would set Natalie back at least a year in what he had privately dubbed her Acceptance Program, the moniker he'd given their infertility problems and her hesitant coming to terms with its stuttering successes. He knew it would crush her to be there.

When they pulled into the paved turnaround in the Town Car they'd rented at the Fargo airport and saw the profusion of Republicanism – the basketball hoop in the driveway, the lilacs and gladiolas and perfectly trimmed hedges, the three open garage doors with three brand new cars – he knew that it would have been wiser to put the visit off until Christmas, when at least it would have been dark sixteen hours a day. But they were there, looking at each other with knowing, sarcastic smirks on their faces when Big Tom, sporting cutoffs and flip flops, came bounding out of the house with no shirt on and three cans of beer, and they knew there was no turning back.

Noah had had to drink both cans of beer while Natalie skirted around the sophomoric jabs of the good-natured galoot about her teetotalling, and they were subjected



to his tour of the estate. And it was an estate. After poking their heads into each of the four bedrooms, each of the five bathrooms, the family room, the dining room, the kitchen and sun porch and formal living room with the thirty foot brick fireplace, Big Tommy led them into what he inexplicably called the Aardvark room, where hockey trophies of every size and mounted deer heads littered the walls and surrounded a Boflex machine and dumbbells that sat well-used on the floor. After he challenged either of them to punch him in his hairy gut and they both laughed uncomfortably and declined, he let them off the hook by opening the sliding glass door that let onto a stone patio, which in turn let onto the four-acre back yard.

‘This,’ Big Tommy had said, taking a little bow, ‘is the lawn. They ought to play the Masters here, huh?’

And goddamn if they couldn’t have, Noah thought. The lawn was perfect, the grassiest green he’d ever seen and mown in a crisscross pattern like the outfield at Fenway. On the left it slopped gently down to a border of trees and the lake, and on the right, it slopped up to a picket fence and a carriage house complete with pastel painted bargeboard and ornate stained glass windows. Set in the middle of the lawn, on a manicured knoll, was a screened in gazebo that was flanked by a flagpole and birdhouse of equal height.

‘That,’ Tommy said, ‘is the hot tub.’ He pointed at the gazebo. ‘We’ll soak our asses off in there after the kids go to bed. And that’ pointing at the carriage house, ‘is where you guys’ll stay. Plenty of privacy, right?’ and he winked at Noah.

‘Speaking of the kids,’ Nat said, trying her level best to stay cheery.

Tommy smiled big. ‘They’re down at the lake.’

‘Which is?’ Noah asked.

‘This way.’ And Big Tommy drained his beer, crushed the can, and took a fade away jump shot with it at an unplanted planter.

On the dock, little Tommy was crushing crayfish with a ball peen hammer. Solveig was towing the two toddlers around in a rubber raft, up to her waist in the inviting water. She didn’t see them at first.

‘Hey ya little murderer,’ Big Tommy yelled to little Tommy, ‘put that hammer down and come say hello to your aunt and uncle.’

Without so much as looking up, little Tommy kept right on bashing the brains of the crayfish with his hammer while Solveig scooped the two tikes out of the raft and waded into shore. She handed Nick to Noah and Julia Anne to Natalie as both kids began bawling as if on cue.

‘Don’t feel bad,’ Solveig said, kissing Noah and Nat both on the cheek. ‘They’ve been crying since the day they were born.’

Big Tommy nudged Noah on the elbow. ‘They’re your sister’s kids, ha!’ And Noah could only laugh himself. It was all so perfect.

The weekend didn’t disappoint: It was a disaster. After forty-eight hours of speedboats and pontoon cruises and bratwurst and country music, Noah and Nat got back into the Town car, waved their goodbyes, and drove back to the airport in Fargo. Natalie cried until their plane landed at Logan, and when they got back to their condo in Cambridge, she let loose:

*Why should that guy have the three most beautiful children in the world and we can’t have one? He’s more in touch with is stuffed deer heads than he is with his kids! And your poor sister, who would even let her husband walk around in his college hockey jersey? Who would even let their husband own a t-shirt that says ‘BIG TOMMY’ on it? What has he done to her? And that house! Does he think he’s the President of the United States of fucking America? Maybe he should spend less time fertilizing the lawn and changing the oil in his sixty-whatever Camero and more time teaching his son that killing crayfish for not reason is simply not “cool.”*

Noah had sat there silently, and when he dropped her at the Harvard Square T stop the next morning she said: ‘You never said anything about this weekend.’

‘What?’ Noah asked.

‘Doesn’t it all appall you?’

‘Nat, she’s my sister, it’s her life.’

‘That’s it?’

‘That’s it.’

‘And you don’t see how messed up it is? How distorted and unjust it is?’

‘That’s not really true, Nat. She may live a different life than we do, but her kids are not part of some cosmological imbalance.’ He knew that there was a whole other side to her reasoning. ‘Listen, she makes up for him. And he can’t help it – he’s a dolt, a great big harmless dolt. Let her be happy, okay? Let her be happy and just bank on things working out for us. They will.’

Well, things hadn’t worked out for he and Nat yet, and Solveig was certainly not happy when Noah walked into the house and saw her sitting beside their father on the sofa, a handkerchief wiping away the waves of tears washing out of her eyes.

‘Sol?’ Noah said as he walked in. ‘What’s going on? I thought you couldn’t get away. When did you get here?’

‘Just half an hour ago.’ She stood up to give Noah a hug.

‘What about the kids?’

‘They’re with the neighbors.’ She was sniffing; her face was soaked with tears.

Noah took a box of tissue from a shelf in the kitchen and handed it to her. ‘What a surprise. I’m happy you’re here.’ He turned to look at his father. ‘Isn’t this a nice surprise?’

Olaf’s eyes were glassy, his hair more dramatic than usual. He looked thrilled. There was a smirk unfolding from his wrinkled, drooping cheeks, and a color in them Noah hadn’t noticed was missing until now. Despite his obvious pleasure, he sat up on the sofa and said, ‘I wish you wouldn’t have asked her to come.’

‘I didn’t ask her to come.’

‘Don’t be silly, Dad. Of course I’d come.’

‘Well there’s no need to ball,’ Olaf said.

‘Come on, Dad.’

‘I’m okay,’ Solveig almost sang. ‘You two leave each other alone.’ She put her arm around Noah’s waist and hugged him again.

‘How long can you stay?’ Noah said.

‘Only through the weekend, but I think I can come back next Friday.’

‘You should bring the kids next weekend,’ Noah said.

‘I don’t know about that,’ Solveig said.

Olaf cleared his throat. ‘Don’t bring the kids if you come back next weekend.’

‘The kids would love to see you,’ Noah said.

‘I don’t think it would be such a good idea,’ Solveig said. ‘You know how they are – so high energy and all. They’d be bored stiff stuck in the cabin all weekend. And besides,’ she sighed, ‘there’s other stuff to do, other things to take care of here.’ Her eyes flooded again.

‘You know best,’ Noah said, taking his arm from around her. She smiled, and for an instant was their mother.

‘Whoa,’ she said as he stepped away, waving her hand in front of her nose. ‘You stink.’

Noah stuck his nose inside his sweater and rolled his eyes as if to agree. ‘I’ve been sweating my ass off over in the gulch. I guess I didn’t realize it.’

‘And you’re a mess,’ she said, picking two burrs off his sleeve.

Olaf looked at them over his glasses. ‘Did you have any trouble over there? Get much done?’

‘I put a dent in it. Maybe half of it’s sawn and ready to be split.’

Olaf nodded.

‘You should work a shower into your routine,’ Solveig said. ‘The stinking lumberjack thing doesn’t work for you.’

‘I’d give just about anything for a shower right now,’ Noah admitted.

They all three looked at each other and smiled simultaneously, awkwardly.

‘Listen,’ Noah said. ‘I’m going to finish carting that wood back here.’ He poured himself a glass of water and guzzled it down. As he turned to walk outside, he stopped to watch Solveig sit down next to their father. She reached up with both of her hands and tamed his hair. When she looked across the room at Noah, it was impossible for his mother not to cross his mind again.

Instead of fetching the rest of the wood, Noah crept across the yard and into the shed. One of the pieces of the stainless steel tubing was attached to a mahogany strip of the barrel by a dozen bolts. Lying in a pile on the table were another dozen bolts and the other piece of tubing that was, apparently, being shortened by something less than an inch. At least that’s what the hack saw sawn half through it suggested.

Branded along one of the barrel planks were the black words: *Superior Steel & Steamship Company* and the original logo of the company. The barrel must be a hundred years old, Noah thought as he rubbed his thumb through the tarnished grooves of the insignia. He was trying to imagine what in the hell the contraption could be for. As he wrapped his arms around the barrel and lifted it off the table, it dawned on him that he might have been imagining it all. He set the barrel down and backed out of the shed, hoping for a last-second truth to fall from the rotting rafters. None did.

Outside the wind was blowing harder than it had all day. It was a cold wind too, the kind of wind that knocked trees over. He grabbed the wheelbarrow and headed back towards the gulch. Passing the back of the ski jump, he reminded himself to apologize about his spat that morning. He also resolved – again – to help the old man with the barrel, whatever it might be for. The simple thought of the apology, coupled with Solveig’s unexpected arrival, reinvigorated him.

He got the rest of the wood back to the yard in three trips. When it was all stacked neatly and the two biggest stumps had been set up to be used as splitting blocks, Noah

decided his work for the day was done. He was sweating again, and with a blind resolve, decided to do the Nordic thing and jump in the lake with a bar of soap. He stepped inside, smiled at his father and sister who were sitting in the living room, and grabbed a towel and soap from the kitchen sink. Neither Solveig nor his father seemed to notice him at all.

Down at the lake the steely clouds were already turning to night, and the wind whipped water was curling up in waves and washing onto the shore. He stepped onto the dock and bent to untie his boots. He took off his jeans, sweater, and shirt, and finally his boxer shorts so that he was standing naked at the end of the dock. The stiff wind was blowing full into his face. Instantly the sweat that had only a second before been dripping from him, was dried – seemed almost to encase him – as the wind wrapped around his naked body. He stood there, distracted by the cold, and had only a single moment of clarity – one moment of apprehensive panic – before he jumped feet first into the choppy lake.

From the instant he was under the water, he could feel it seizing him, clamp like, slowing his blood and crippling his muscles. Although he'd been anticipating something like it, he could never have prepared for the paralyzing grip the water set into his body. If he hadn't kicked and pulled for the surface the instant he was submerged, he might have ended up unconscious on the rocky bottom of the lake. But because he had planned on surfacing immediately, he managed to pull himself out of the water almost as quickly as he jumped in.

Crazy though the idea had been, it was not unprecedented. Both his father and grandfather had been inclined to the late autumn and even early winter baths. They were a point of pride between the two men, Noah knew, and he remembered watching them – their long lean arms and muscular legs, their hairy balls tucked up under their dangling cocks – as they dove into the water while the early winter snow whitened the sky. It was a rite of passage that Noah had not grown up fast enough for. As he climbed back onto the dock and began lathering himself with the bar of cracked Ivory soap, he felt some pang of long anticipated fulfillment.

The air was warm in contrast to the water, and as he washed away the day's hard work and grime, he couldn't help but feel that everything was balancing out. He didn't know why.

He scrubbed his underarms, legs, and feet; he wet the soap again and lathered his hair and face with it, then his neck and arms and finally his ass and scrotum. Before he could psyche himself out, he dove back into the lake and went through the same convulsions, loss of breath, and stardust behind his eyes. But this time he needed a second to rinse himself, so he messed his hair with his hands and kicked his legs like a lunatic while he watched the soap disperse and disappear in the dark water. In six seconds he was back on the dock, warming himself in the forty-five degree air. He wrapped the towel around his waist, gathered his filthy clothes, slid his boots on, and ran up the path like a deer.

Olaf and Solveig were both startled to see him, naked to the waist and wet haired as he was. They were sitting close to the stove, holding pie irons in the open door.

'What in the hell?' Olaf said.

Solveig tried to say something but only stuttered her shock.

'You told me I stunk,' Noah said. 'I didn't want to ruin dinner.'

'Did you?' Olaf asked, pointing towards the lake.

'In the lake?' Solveig completed his question. 'You could have killed yourself.'

'Trust me, I will never do that again,' Noah said as he looked down at his soft, claylike belly.

'Well Jesus, put some clothes on would you?' Solveig said playfully. 'That might ruin our appetite.' She motioned to his burgeoning belly.

'He's a middle-aged man,' Olaf said. 'That's what happens to middle-aged men.'

'Didn't ever happen to you,' Solveig said, reaching over to pat Olaf on his stomach.

Noah rolled his eyes and slipped into his bedroom to change. When he came back out, Solveig was setting three plates around a casserole dish filled with the sandwich-sized pasties they'd been baking in the pie irons.

'Dad wants you to pull the old piano in from the porch,' Solveig said as she helped Olaf to his seat at the table. 'He wants it over against that wall. I'll move the books if you'll move the shelves and roll the piano in. I thought we could do it after dinner.' She flipped her head towards the bookcases between the chair and sofa. 'What do you two want to drink?'

It was clear to Noah – and it must have been clear to his father, too – that Solveig had inherited every ounce of their mother's household elegance. Even here, in the still-too-hot and dusty living room, even as she wore a sweatshirt and jeans – something their mother would never have been caught dead in – she had a maternalistic and old-fashioned airiness, a sophistication as she moved about the place that struck Noah as almost frightening for the resemblance. He wondered whether it was for his father's benefit that she'd become this matriarchal throwback, or if she'd really turned into such a housewife. Certainly, if anyone might have demanded this type of behavior from a wife, it was Big Tommy.

'Sure,' Noah said, snapping out of it. 'I'll bring it in after dinner. Where is it anyway? I didn't even know it was here.'

Olaf tapped the window beside him. 'I can't imagine how out of tune it is.'

'It'll be fine,' Solveig said, sitting down herself after opening a sleeve of crackers and putting it on the table. 'How are the pasties?'

Both Olaf and Noah had a mouth full of food, but they shook their heads approvingly in what Noah thought must have been identical gestures. After he swallowed Noah said, 'is this Mom's recipe?'

Solveig picked one of the pie irons from the top of the stove. 'Of course it is.'

'It's delicious,' Noah said.



Every childhood Christmas Eve that Noah could remember had been spent here at the cabin, and every Christmas Eve meal had been chicken pasties cooked in the pot-bellied stove for the kids, and lutefisk and lefsa for the adults. As far as he could recall, this was the first pasty he'd had since he was in high school, but the succulent bits of chicken, corn, and carrot, and the melt-in-your-mouth pastry were as unexpectedly familiar to him as the spinach and mushroom pizza he and Nat ordered three times a week from a little pizzeria on Vasser Street.

'Dad?' Solveig prodded.

Olaf had taken another bite, but he spoke with his mouth full. 'It's wonderful, sweetheart, just wonderful.'

When they were finished eating, Noah got up, cleared their plates, and set them in the sink to wash later. Solveig made sure the afghan that had become a staple around Olaf's neck was tucked in his collar and keeping him warm.

The piano was hidden under mounds of old junk – a fishing net, a canvas tarp, empty boot boxes, a telescope with a cracked lens, empty bags of dog food – beside the refrigerator on the porch. Noah cleared a path, unlocked the wheels on the legs of the piano, and rolled it into the living room. A long time ago, Noah remembered, the piano had been refinished with a deep, wine-colored varnish. Now the glassy finish was dull from years of neglect and the harsh extremes and moisture on the porch. Solveig had cleared the books from the shelves and was sliding one of them into the second bedroom.

'It's a ghost piano,' Noah said. 'Doesn't it look like a ghost?'

'It's been sitting out there for the better part of ten years,' Olaf said. 'I should have taken better care of it.'

'It's not like you play, Dad. And besides, this room's not exactly built for a piano. They take up a lot of room.'

'Even so,' Olaf said. 'It's a shame it's in such bad shape.'

Noah had wheeled it across the floor and was positioning it against the wall. ‘Toss me a dishrag,’ he said to Solveig, who was standing at the kitchen counter with her hands on her hips. She flipped him the rag, and he dusted the piano off.

Noah had hoped that by cleaning it up and getting it in the right light, the old Acrosonic might not look so like his father, but by the time he wiped away the dust and dampness, it looked even worse than it had at a glance. It looked even more like a ghost. When he lifted the cover off the keys, pulled a chair from the dining table, and sat down to play Chopsticks, its wail startled everyone. As tone deaf and musically oafish as he was, even he could tell how discordant it had become in all that time and inattention. Every third or fourth key failed to strike any note at all, and the keys that did were more like shrieks than musical notes.

He looked over his shoulder at Solveig who was still pouting and had her hands covering her ears. ‘Clearly,’ Noah said, ‘we’ll need to get a piano tuner up here. You can’t play on this.’ He stood up, closed the keyboard cover, and wiped his hands on his pants.

‘Awful,’ Solveig said.

‘Goddamnit,’ Olaf said under his breath.

Solveig walked over to him – he was still sitting at the table, fingering his dirty napkin – and put her hands on his shoulders. ‘Don’t worry about it, Dad. We’ll just call someone to come tune it. It will be fine.’

Olaf had a look of determined disappointment on his face. ‘You’re in Misquah, not Fargo or Boston. I’ll bet there’s not a single piano tuner in the yellow pages.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Noah said as he headed back out to the porch to undig the bench. ‘We’ll find a piano tuner.’

As he rummaged through the mounds of rubbish, he could hear Solveig at the piano, playing some classical number that missed every third note. By the time Noah found the bench under an old kerosene stove and Styrofoam cooler filled with yellowed newspapers, Solveig had mercifully quit playing.

He lugged the bench into the living room, set it down in front of the piano, and wiped his hands again. 'You've got to get rid of some of that junk,' Noah said as he turned to address his father. But Olaf was gone. Noah looked at Solveig and pointed towards Olaf's bedroom door as an irrational fit of panic crept into his throat.

'He went to the toilet,' Solveig said.

'That was weird,' Noah said. 'I just had a little panic attack.'

'Maybe you're softening up on him.'

'Maybe he's softening up on *me*.'

Solveig was washing the dishes in the sink. 'Whatever,' she said. 'I'm just glad to see the two of you acting like a father and son.'

Noah shrugged his shoulders. 'I didn't even hear him go out.'

She took a deep, audible breath. 'Noah, what are we going to do with him?'

Noah sat down on the piano bench, felt his exhaustion buttering his bones, and shook his head. 'I'm not all wrong about this, am I? It's as bad as it seems, right?'

'I think so.' Her voice was quavering but she kept from crying.

'He's building some goddamn contraption out in the shed.'

'I know, he told me about what happened this morning.'

'What did he say?'

'That he wants to be buried in the lake, that he's building some kind of anchor for it.'

'I knew it,' Noah said.

'Knew what?'

'That he had some crazy idea up his sleeve.'

'We can't bury him in the lake, Noah.'

'Of course we can't. I know that. What else did he say about it?'

'He said that he pushed you too far, that he felt bad about asking you to come here. He's afraid you think he's just using you or something.'

‘I don’t think that at all.’ Noah felt terrible. ‘What did you say to him about his plan?’

‘I bawled like one of my kids, basically, then told him in no uncertain terms that we would bury him properly in a cemetery. I told him he didn’t need to do some eternal penance for something that happened thirty-five years ago and was entirely out of his control.’

‘I bet he loved that.’

‘He didn’t say anything.’

‘Of course he didn’t say anything,’ Noah said.

Solveig sat down on the sofa and folded the afghan. ‘I talked to Tom about having him come stay with us.’

Noah looked at her.

‘He was wonderful. He said he’d do whatever I wanted to do, that we could hire a nurse to live with us if we needed to.’

‘That’s pretty goddamn nice,’ Noah said.

‘I bet you’re thinking what I’m thinking though.’

‘That there’s no way he’d ever leave here?’

‘Something like that.’

‘So?’ it was Noah’s turn to ask.

As Solveig raised her hands in surrender, the door opened and Olaf came teetering back in. ‘Goddamn wind blew my cap off,’ he said. He was stomping his feet and unpeeling himself from his coat and scarf.

‘It did a number on your hair, too,’ Solveig said.

Noah got up to look out the window, expecting to see the maddened wind. Instead he could only hear it, like a freight train boomeranging around the house. ‘Jesus,’ he said, tapping the windowpane. ‘What’s coming?’

'It's just blowing,' Olaf said. He was standing over the kitchen sink, tending to his teeth.

'It sounds like the house is going to blow over,' Noah said.

'It's stood up to much worse than this,' Olaf assured him, setting the glass with his teeth and the effervescent cleansing tablets on the edge of the counter.

'You should put that somewhere safer,' Noah said. 'With all three of us tripping around here, someone's bound to knock it over.'

Without pausing, Olaf picked the glass up and set it on one of the high kitchen shelves. 'I'm going to bed. Goodnight.'

Solveig looked at her watch, then at Noah. 'It's only seven o'clock, Dad.'

'He's up late,' Noah said.

'Stoke the fire for me, okay?' Olaf said, raising his finger at Noah.

'Sure,' Noah said.

'Goodnight, Dad,' Solveig said.

Olaf ducked into his room.

'Where were we?' Solveig whispered.

Noah closed his eyes and rolled his head back. 'Where were we? We were getting nowhere as fast as anyone ever has.'

They talked for a couple more hours about what they were going to do with Olaf. When, after countless dead ends and hopeless alternatives they decided they'd better just take things as they came and quit trying to plan for them, and after Solveig wept inconsolably for the better part of a half hour, Noah finally realized what a toll the day had taken on his body. Somewhere in the intersection of his fatigue and forlornness, he caught a glimpse of how it might all measure out; he saw the point of his father's will to call it quits, even thought maybe the old man was right.

'Sleep on it, Sol,' he finally said. 'All we can do is wait right now.'

‘Wait, wait, wait,’ she said, trailing off into their irresolution. She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her sweatshirt and laughed for all her tears. ‘That’s all we can do, huh?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Okay,’ she said, and uncurled herself from the couch. ‘Do you mind sleeping out here?’

‘Of course not,’ Noah said. He could practically grab his sleep; the thought of falling into it filled him with relief.

‘One more thing, Noah,’ Solveig said as she slid her shoes on. ‘You’re going to kill me, I know, but I hate going out to that outhouse by myself.’

Noah had already unbuttoned his pants and was letting the tingle of sleep take him over.

He must have sighed. ‘I know, I know. I’m sorry. But it creeps me out and I have to go.’

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Okay.’

Outside the wind drove sleet into the nape of his neck. Noah shone the flashlight down on the trail and Solveig held his arm as if they were walking to the theatre. When they got to the rickety old outhouse, Noah pulled the door open, shined the light into the stinking wooden box, and handed her the flashlight as she stepped in.

It was cold but not bitter, and when she closed the door he was left standing in the darkness. I doubt, he thought, that even if the wolves were howling now I’d be able to hear them. In the crack between the rotten outhouse floor and the mossy door, a dim strip of light was the only thing to disrupt the blackness. Strange, he thought looking at it, but I should be afraid right now and I’m not.

In the few minutes he stood there waiting for Solveig, he began to feel almost reckless in his confidence. He couldn’t think of the opposite of fear, but that’s what he felt. He lifted his face to the wind and piercing sleet, raised his arms to expose all of himself, and

laughed out loud. Then a strange thought occurred to him: He wondered whether or not he'd regret his confidence in the morning, if it would leave him feeling like a braggart.

When Solveig was finished, he let her walk ahead with the light while he tailed along. Back inside the house she said, 'God is that place creepy, especially at night.' She shook the sleet out of her hair. '*Especially* on a stormy night.'

Noah, who was dizzy with bravado for facing down his anxiety, dizzy for want of sleep, said, 'Just think of all the times someone's been out there in the middle of the night. Nothing's ever happened to anyone, right? You've got the odds on your side.'

'I suppose,' Solveig said. 'But it still gives me the willies.' She was turning out the lamps. 'Doesn't it give you the willies?' Noah heard her say, but he was already falling asleep on the sofa.

Goddamn, the dreams.

There were serpents wound around sinking ships with icicles for fangs; piano songs in harmony with the wailing of a wounded wolf, one bleeding from the rectum; there were fires and lightning in the distance; and in the middle of the pandemonium, Noah himself swinging the blunt end of the splitting maul at a giant. Over and over the scenes repeated themselves until they diffused into a grayer sleep and he dreamt about softer things. He dreamt about Nat.

It was a heavy sleep – a deep one, too – and when sometime in the middle of the night Noah woke with a start for one groggy second, he saw his father asleep on the chair, collapsed at the neck as if he were only flesh and billowing gray hair.

The patter of rainwater on the roof woke him. As he strained to hear his father or sister stirring in their bedrooms, he could only make out the thumping in his own head. Outside, the rain streaming over the gutters and cascading down the windows gave Noah the bleary impression he was looking out from behind a waterfall, and it wasn't long before he realized he was alone in the house.

He thought of going back to sleep, even rolled over to do so, but decided that he'd already slept too long and too hard. He had a crick in his neck to prove it. Only after he sat up did he feel the grip his body had on him. It was as if his muscles had turned to marble and his blood to tar. For an illogical second he wondered whether he was sick, but almost immediately he figured he was paying for the labor of the day before. So he wrapped his arms around himself and replayed his dreams with a child's intuitiveness. The meaning never came to him, though. Then it dawned on him that he loved the paternlessness of the mornings here, that they were their own world of possibility.

Both of the bedrooms were empty, both beds were made, and the fire was as temperate and comfortable as it had been since he got there. He looked out the blurry window and saw that there were only two cars in the yard – his own dented wagon and his father's antique Suburban. He wondered where they were for the few seconds it took him to don his boots and the rain slicker, but as he stepped outside to go to the outhouse, his body loosening with each movement, he gave up on the thought of them and felt a giant sense of relief. Given the weather, he could justify a day on the couch.

Except for the rain, which was torrential, the morning was as calm as the night before had been riotous. All of the pine trees were sagging under the deluge, and even the leafless hardwoods – the Poplar and Aspen and Birch – were limp of limb. The wind,



though, was gone, and as he sat on the stoop with the outhouse door open watching the rainfall, he couldn't help but imagine that the water was quelling the wind, was drowning it.

When he got back inside the house he put a kettle of water on the stove for coffee and stoked the fire, which was barely burning. He stirred the last simmering embers with the poker, fanned them with the bellows, and then sat back satisfied when the new log caught fire.

Since he'd been back, he'd felt a near constant sense of responsibility. Any moment that he hadn't actually spent doing something, he'd spent wondering what he *should* be doing. Now though, as the stove fire warmed the room and his body finally started to slacken in the heat, he felt no obligation to anything. He sat on the floor in front of the stove and stretched while he waited for the water to boil. When it did, he got up and made a pot of coffee.

As he settled back into the sofa, he noticed Solveig had plugged her cell phone re-charger into the wall next to the piano and that the phone itself was sitting in the cradle. He picked it up and called Nat.

'Hey sweetie, it's me,' he said.

'Noah? It sounds like you're in a tunnel. Are you at the pay phone?'

'New development: Solveig's here. I'm using her cell.'

'Solveig's there? Since when? I thought she couldn't come.'

'She got here yesterday. She's leaving tomorrow.'

'Surprise, surprise'

'She's already wheeled him off somewhere. It's raining like crazy here. You should see it.'

'You know, I was just sitting here dying for you to call. I got your package this morning. It's beautiful, Noah, I'm looking at it right now.'

'You already got it? When?'

'The UPS driver left ten minutes ago.'

‘What time is it?’ He was confused.

‘It’s a little bit after ten here, after nine there.’

‘Wow,’ Noah said. ‘That means I slept for something like twelve hours. Humph. And they already delivered it?’

‘What made you think of sending it?’

Noah tried to picture the necklace but couldn’t. ‘You sounded so glum when I talked to you the other day. I felt terrible because I wasn’t there, so I stopped at this gift shop after I talked to you – you should have seen this place – and got it for you.’

‘Well I love it, I really do.’

‘It’s supposed to draw attention to your eyes.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The color of the agate is supposed to accentuate your eyes. That’s what the guy at the shop told me anyway.’

‘Let me see,’ she said, and must have been looking in a mirror. ‘Hmmm, I don’t know about that, but it’s lovely just the same. And *you* are so sweet.’ She made a kissing sound.

‘I’m sorry things are so rotten right now. And I’m sorry I’m not there to... whatever... just be with you.’

‘Don’t be sorry. I’m the one who’s sorry. I shouldn’t have dropped all that guilt on you. It was just my emotions getting the better of me. Anyway, you forgive me. Listen, I’ve thought it all out – everything – and I have a whole new attitude.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Screw work, screw the doctors, screw the constant anxiety of feeling out of control, of feeling like everything’s going wrong and that it’s my fault.’

‘I’m in favor of all that.’

‘And I’ve decided enough is enough on the fertility front.’

‘What in the world does that mean?’

‘Listen to me, Noah. I made a list the night before last and I want to read it to you.’

He could hear her ruffling through some papers.

‘Ready?’ she cleared her throat. ‘Trips to doctor’s office for fertility or pregnancy related visits: eighty-seven. Number of prescriptions filled for fertility or pregnancy related drugs: thirty-four. Number of full days – or the equivalent of – missed at work for all fertility or pregnancy related appointments, or days spent recovering: thirty-two. Number of opportunities for us to make love that were lost by way of some fertility or pregnancy related ramification: at least a hundred that I can think of, probably twice that many. Number of times you’ve had to jerk off over some sticky Playboy in the doctor’s office: six. Number of miscarriages: two. Number of ectopic pregnancies: one. Number of hours spent in paralysis, bawling my pathetic eyes out: countless.’ She stopped.

‘Jesus, that puts it in perspective.’

‘It’s documented in my calendars. I have it all written down.’

Do I dare? Noah thought before he said: ‘is there a statistic in there, a percentage of likelihood maybe, for the odds of us getting pregnant if you truly decide you’ve had enough? If you stop taking the drugs?’

‘That’s just the thing, don’t you see? The percentage is zero. We lost this one, Noah. It’s over and we have to accept it.’

‘I’m not willing to do that,’ Noah said.

‘We’re not going to quit *trying*. I’m just not going to be such a junkie anymore. Maybe the problem has to do with the laboratory my body has become for these people.’

‘For *these people*, Nat? These people are doctors who specialize in getting people pregnant.’

‘Some help they’ve been,’ she said.

‘Nat, that’s not fair to them.’

‘What do you mean it’s not fair to them? They’ve been getting it wrong for four years, Noah.’

'I know nothing's worked to the end yet, but do you really think that it's best to pack it in and go alone? Don't you think that despite the setbacks we're still better off letting them help us?' Did he believe that they weren't?

'Noah, I've taken five different fertility drugs, I've had three DNCs, I have a *scar* on my arm from where they draw blood. I've quit drinking, quit eating sea food, lived on wheat germ and prenatal vitamins for months at a time!'

'Don't forget about the torpedoes,' Noah said, and they both laughed.

'That's right, the torpedoes! I forgot all about them.'

The torpedoes were the suppositories she'd been prescribed during all three of her failed pregnancies, little bumble-bee-yellow estrogen supplements that she inserted into her vagina each day and each night. They had to be refrigerated, and she kept them in a Ziploc baggie next to the margarine. Every morning when he made his toast he'd remind her to take one by hollering up the stairs *man the torpedoes* to which she would invariably reply, *damn the torpedoes*. It made him laugh every single time.

'Can we think about it?' he asked.

'All we do is thing about it, Noah.'

'I mean can we mull it over? Can we visit with Dr. Cooker about it? Maybe decide about this when we're not both dealing with these other things?'

'Oh God,' she said. 'I'm such a selfish jerk. How is your father? And what's the story with Solveig?'

'Listen, you're not selfish, and you're not a jerk. My father's the same as he was two days ago. Solveig being here is a complete and welcome surprise. But I want to talk about us, Nat. I don't want to give up on this yet.'

'I told you, we're not going to give up on anything. But I want to try a new approach, one without hypodermic needles, without so many blood tests, without pornographic magazines and test tubes, you know? We haven't made love without feeling

like it was doctor's orders in *years*, Noah. Don't you think that's symptomatic of something?'

'Obviously,' Noah said, and he was both thrilled and appalled with her newfound perspective, 'something's wrong. That's why we see the doctor. But I doubt your intuition is the best antidote.' He sighed. 'Listen, I'm sure I can't imagine what it's like for you to be on all those drugs, to be prodded and poked like you are. And I know I have no authority when it comes to telling you what to do with your body – I would never try to – but I really want us to think about this.'

'We will think about it, I don't want to exclude you, Noah, I never have – *I wouldn't* – but while you're there and I'm here, try thinking about what I've said.'

'Fair enough,' he said. 'Now what about your job?'

'Nothing has changed. I haven't even talked to them. But, I have had a breakthrough: I'm going to be a kindergarten teacher.'

'You're officially nuts,' he said, hoping she would laugh.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'A kindergarten teacher, Nat?'

'Yes, exactly.'

'Since when have you decided to become a kindergarten teacher?'

'Since last night.'

He thought, she's bonkers, then he thought, she'd make a great kindergarten teacher. 'What happened last night?'

'I was watching the news. There was about six hours of coverage on the elections – which are in four days, by the way – then the weather and the Celtics and Bruins scores.' She stopped talking.

'And from that you decided to be a kindergarten teacher?'

‘Not exactly. After the sports, in that god awful stupid feature they have every night, they did a report on this woman who’s been teaching at a public school in south Boston for forty years. It was inspirational.’

Noah mimicked an anchorman’s voice. ‘*Finally, before we go tonight, the story of a Boston kindergarten teacher who was shot by one of her students today...*’

‘It’s not a joke, Noah,’ she said. ‘It wasn’t like that at all. She was just this amazing woman who was forced to retire two months into the school year because of cancer. They were applauding her lifetime of service.’

‘Let me guess,’ Noah said. ‘You saw it and realized that you haven’t done anything in your life to warrant such a spot on the news?’

‘I’m not that vain, Noah. What I realized is that certain things are more important than how much money you have or how much prestige is associated with your job.’

‘Sweetie, you’ve always known that.’

‘I’ve always known it, but I’ve never done anything about it. I’ve always worked to make money.’

‘*Everyone* works to make money.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘The point is that you’re going to change the world now?’

‘Don’t scoff at this idea, Noah. I am entitled to reassess my life.’

‘Of course you are.’

‘And I *am* reassessing. What I’ve found out is that I’m an incredibly lucky woman – even privileged. I have the means of making a change like this. I have the resolve, too. And,’ she said, and would have pointed her finger right into his chest had they been standing face to face, ‘I have a husband who supports me as much as I support *him*.’

‘All of that’s true, Nat. There’s nothing to dispute on any of those points. Nothing at all. And I *do* support you, would support you through anything. The only thing I’d like to point out again, is that you’ve made a couple of pretty huge decisions in a highly

emotional state of mind. Maybe after things sink in a little bit, when you've had a chance to digest the fact that you've lost your job and all that, you'll feel differently. Maybe you won't want to make wholesale life changes, you know?'

'I'm not just off in Tripsville here, Noah. This is serious stuff that I've thought seriously about.'

'Of course it is,' he said. 'I'm not suggesting otherwise.'

'It sounds like you are.'

'Let's just make a deal: when I get home, we'll sit down and measure this all out, okay? You think about it and I'll think about it and we'll decide together what's best, all right?'

'When are you coming home, anyway?'

'That's the million dollar question.'

'The short answer to which is, you don't know.'

'That's right.'

He told her about everything that had happened: his bath in the lake, the tree in the gulch, the wolves howling, the trip down memory lane on top of the ski jump, the contraption in the shed and what Solveig had told him it was for. When he told her that he had resolved to abide by his father's wishes, only to realize how preposterous the idea was, she pushed him.

'Why is it crazy? They're his last wishes.'

Noah was a little shocked. 'Don't you see how gruesome it is, though? How *psychotic* it is?'

'He's the one who's had time to think about it.'

'Just because he's had time to think about it doesn't make it right.'

'Doesn't it?'

'Of course not! It doesn't take seven years of living alone in the woods to realize how nuts it is.'

‘And if he were asking to be cremated, say, you’d know just as surely – just as quickly and impulsively – that it was the right thing to do?’

‘Yeah,’ Noah said, suddenly suspicious of her line of questioning.

‘Just put yourself in his shoes, Noah. Maybe you’ll come around on the idea.’

‘You’re toying with me, aren’t you?’

‘I’m just suggesting that you think about it from his perspective. It’s the last thing you can do for him.’

Noah wasn’t convinced that she was saying what she meant, but he conceded to think about it just the same. ‘Well, thanks to you, I won’t have a moment’s peace all day now.’

She laughed. ‘Hey, you take me to task, I’ll take you to task. That’s how it works.’

‘It’s not fair, though, you’re so much smarter than I am.’

‘It’s not a question of fairness. Besides, life’s not fair, isn’t that your motto?’

He laughed now. ‘My new motto is two-thousand-miles-is-too-far,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you come here?’ It was the first time the idea had crossed his mind. ‘There’s no reason you can’t. Or shouldn’t.’

‘It has occurred to me, but I think I’d better not, at least not now. I think it’s going to be good for the two of you to spend some more time alone together. I’d just be a distraction.’

‘It’s distracting not having you here.’

‘Only because you can’t live without me,’ she teased. ‘If it gets to be too much longer, I’ll think about it. Right now, I think it’s best if I don’t.’

‘Don’t get too comfortable without me.’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘I love you.’

‘I love you, too.’



‘And I’ll call you again soon.’

‘I already can’t wait. And Noah, thanks for the necklace. It’s beautiful.’

‘So are you,’ he said and they hung up.

Outside the rain hadn’t let up. He sat back on the sofa, stretched, and rubbed his eyes with his chapped hands. They still smelled faintly like the rawhide gloves he’d been wearing the day before. He would have loved to go back to sleep, but he hadn’t even fully wakened yet, so he just lay there with his eyes closed and took inventory.

The conversation with Nat, though it had resolved very little, left him with a new sense of possibility. Even in the span of the couple of minutes that’d passed since he said goodbye, he’d already started to come around on the idea of giving up on the fertility treatments. He remembered how the first couple years of trying had been almost magical in their ability to bring the two of them closer together. There had been such solidarity of purpose, such a marveling at prospects, that the failures, in their way, were as much a blessing as a curse. It wasn’t until after the first miscarriage that things had actually started to seem, if not a little bit hopeless, both urgent and unlikely.

He could remember that morning as vividly as if it were yesterday. He had startled himself awake from a bad dream and found the bed cold and empty. He could hear the sound of the bathroom faucet, and in the dim light he could see Nat’s bare legs beneath the sink. Under the stream and splashing of the water, he could hear her unappeasable, almost silent sobbing. When he stumbled into the hallway with the sheets still tangled in his legs and feet and stood in the bathroom door, she didn’t even look up from the bloody underpants she was washing in the sink. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,’ she had muttered on top of her sobbing. For ten seconds he stood there agape before she finally looked up at him, spit out a few more profanities, and threw the stained panties into the garbage can. He tried to console her, tried to hug her quivering away, but she rejected him. For the first time in their lives together, she rejected him. The only thing he could think of in the sadness of that

morning was the crib and baby bedroom set they'd bought two days earlier that was sitting in the garage.

The second and third miscarriages had been worse in their ways, but it was that first one that took the deepest stab at their hope. Gone were the late night talks as they drifted off to sleep about what they would name their kids, gone were her explanations of how certain drugs worked and what they were meant to cure or alter. And gone was the sense of possibility that had sustained them through all the false starts and missed chances. Over the next couple of years their inability to have children had taken on a ridiculous sense of proportion. It was mired in an unremitting despondency that could pop-up any time. They might see a duckling in the pond at the park, and one or both of them would fall miserable for three days. They might see a pregnant woman in the grocery store and forget what they were there for. How many weekends at a bed and breakfast in Vermont had been planned only to have been canceled for an unexpected visit to the clinic? The answers were innumerable, and the sudden prospect of cashing in their fertility clinic chips and trying good old-fashioned, timely sex - of tossing it up for fate - was starting to sound like a pretty nice change in lifestyles.

But burying his father on the bottom of Lake Forsone? This was a different matter, and he couldn't believe that Nat thought it was a good idea. He tried to imagine the legalities and logistics of it, of explaining to the County Coroner that the old man had built himself an anchor of the everlasting sort, and that he intended to use it here, so that he could rest in peace with the trout and deep water. When he tried to imagine a hearse rolling up the rutted road, the idea seemed just as absurd, though. Unable to convince himself of either funeral arrangement, he got back up and stoked the fire again because he didn't know what else to do.

He looked through the refrigerator for something to eat but found nothing. He sat down at the piano and tried to finger out the first few bars of an old piano lesson standard, but between the lamentable tune and his own sorry playing, he resolved to quit and call a

piano tuner first thing Monday morning. After he washed the dishes and finished his coffee and scoured the books – now stacked on the floor – for something to read but found nothing to pique his interest, he finally settled on a couple of magazines sitting in a rack beside the chair, turned the reading lamp beside the chair on, and plopped down to page through them.

The first was a two-year-old hunting magazine full of Remington rifle and NRA advertisements, and features on hoof and mouth disease and elk hunting in Wyoming. The second was the *Wisconsin Lawyer* his father had been reading a few days earlier. He checked the table of contents for the shipwreck article and turned to page eighteen.

He read it twice, bored first by the tedious, archaic legal rules and history, and second by the clichés of Spanish frigates sunk with King's ransoms off the coast of The New World. Though the article was pedantic and forgettable, it did trick him into a question that he spent the rest of the afternoon pondering: What was left of his father, his mother, his sister, even himself, on the bottom of Lake Superior?

He imagined his father's berth on the *Ragnarok*, a place he knew well from the summer cruises to Toledo and Cleveland and Ashtabula that he'd taken as a child. He could picture the porthole windows and steel bulkheads, the riveted floor and the braided rug his father kept at the foot of the diminutive bed – too short by two feet for his father – that was always made. He remembered the officer's desk opposite the bed – mahogany, indestructible, stately with an inlaid glass top – that was bolted to the bulkhead. He remembered the pictures of the four of them beneath the desktop, the sense of awe it gave him to think that a picture of him should be included in such a sacred and important place. He remembered the narrow locker in the corner of the berth, the spare black boots polished to a dead flat shine that sat on the floor beneath the sweaters and coats hanging on the pegs. And he remembered the pictures pinned to the inside of the locker door, too. There was another one of him, mid-flight on the bunny ears ski jump in Chester Bowl at the age of five.

He tried to recall what was in the three small dresser drawers, but realized he probably never knew, so he imagined crisp BVDs, black socks, a shaving kit, his *Life* magazines, and a framed picture of his mother.

As far as Noah understood, this article was telling him that all of that was no longer his father's but Michigan's or Minnesota's, depending on which state's territorial water the wreckage rested in. What a crock of shit, he thought, that some state Historical Society owned that part of his past, that the calamity of November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1967 hadn't been damaging enough, hadn't taken the perfection of his childhood and crushed it, but that any proof of that perfection, even were it salvageable, wouldn't be his for the taking. Maybe he was beginning to understand the shape of his father's bitterness.

It was well after dark before Olaf and Solveig returned. Though it had been a relief to have the morning to himself, he'd become, by turns, angry, worried and finally indignant about their disappearance. The day that had begun so welcomingly alone had turned into something like a prison term, and by the time he saw the headlights of his sister's minivan shining down the road, he was hot enough that he had to resist rushing outside to meet them. Would the courtesy of a note been too much to ask for, he wondered?

When they came inside - his father first, held at the elbow by Solveig, swaddled in full winter wear again - Noah's bristling back settled at the sight of him. Olaf looked at him with the faraway eyes of a dying man. Solveig looked old herself, splotchy faced, and swollen eyed.

'Where have you been? I've been worried all day. Would it have been too much trouble to write me a note?'

Solveig was helping Olaf out of his coat. 'I did leave you a note, Noah, on the coffee table.'

'Where ?' Noah said as he blushed and got up to look again under the magazines and mess on the table.

‘We left so early this morning and I didn’t want to wake you,’ Solveig said, steering Olaf to the sofa where she helped him sit down.

Noah looked up at him. ‘Are you alright?’

Olaf looked at Solveig.

‘He’s okay, Noah. We went to the hospital in Duluth today. That’s why we’ve been gone so long.’

‘You what?’ Noah asked his father.

Solveig answered for him: ‘We talked about it yesterday, Noah, while you were outside I guess.’ She was on her hands and knees looking under the sofa, from where she pulled the note. She handed it to Noah, who read it:

*Went to take Dad to the Hospital.*

*We’ll probably be gone for the better*

*part of the day as we’re going down to St.*

*Mary’s in Duluth. Would have told you,*

*but Dad didn’t want me to.*

*S.*

Noah was shocked. He read the note again, folded it and put it in his pocket, and ran both hands through his hair. ‘Well?’ he said at a loss for words.

Solveig was sitting on the arm of the sofa next to Olaf, who still hadn’t spoken since they’d walked in. ‘Noah, let’s help dad to bed. Then we can talk, okay?’

Then she said to Olaf: ‘Dad, are you ready for bed? Why don’t you go ahead and get ready? Noah will stoke the fire.’ She looked at Noah.

‘Alright,’ Olaf finally said, and looked at each of them.

Solveig helped him up from the couch.

While Olaf tended to his dentures, Solveig took several small plastic bottles of pills from a white paper bag and began sorting them. There were at least half a dozen different prescriptions, some of which she set aside without opening. After Olaf stashed his teeth on

the same high shelf he had the night before, he poured himself a glass of water, kissed Solveig on the cheek, and said goodnight.

‘Here, Dad,’ Solveig caught him by the arm. She scooped the little pile of pills from the counter and into the palm of her hand. ‘Take these.’

Olaf looked at her, then at Noah, and grabbed the pills. ‘Goodnight,’ he said again, his voice quieter and scratchier than it had been even the day before.

‘Goodnight,’ Noah said. ‘I’ll get the fire going for you.’

Olaf raised his fist full of pills and went to bed. For a couple of dumb minutes, Noah just stood there, trying to make sense of the startling turn of events. When he finally snapped out of it and got a couple logs into the stove, Solveig had already started to cry.

‘What in the hell is all this?’ Noah asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

‘Come sit over here,’ Solveig said, patting the seat next to her on the couch.

‘How did you... all those *pills*... he looked so...’

‘Noah listen,’ she straightened herself up, wiped the tears from beneath her eyes, even smiled a sheepish, desperate smile. ‘I wanted to tell you, I wanted for you to come with us, but Dad was so, I don’t know, so tough guy about it. He didn’t want me to tell you. I *told* him you would need to know about it. He insisted.’

‘What did they say?’ Noah asked, regaining a little perspective.

‘They did tests, took a lot of blood, did a proctology exam, took some tissue samples for biopsies. They’re going to call my cell phone Monday with the first round of results. I’ll leave it hear with you. I told them to call you, Dad doesn’t want to talk to them.’ She was biting her lower lip, fighting more tears.

‘Did they say anything about what they saw? I mean, could they make any preliminary diagnosis?’

She gave-up resisting her tears and wept silently for several minutes. When she got it together again she managed to say: ‘All those prescriptions, they’re mainly to make him more comfortable. The doctor told me he must be in a lot of pain and that things looked,

well, not very good. The proctology exam showed advance signs. She said that she was pretty confident the blood and tissue tests would come back on Monday, and that she'd be surprised – very surprised, she said – if they didn't confirm what she suspected: That the cancer would be way too advanced to try chemo or any other treatment. She said it was probably only a matter of time.'

Noah couldn't breathe for a minute. 'Did she say how long?'

'She only said that he was a big strong man, and that even though that doesn't necessarily mean anything, it doesn't hurt either.'

'How was he?' he motioned to the bedroom. 'He seemed so depressed.'

Again she cried for a few minutes before she could choke out an answer. 'I wish we wouldn't have gone. I knew, he knew, you knew... we all knew what was happening. I just thought that maybe there was something they could have done.'

'He seemed so defeated, didn't he?' she continued. 'I'm afraid he resents me now.'

Noah put his arm around her. 'Don't beat yourself up about this. Listen, they gave you some prescriptions for the pain, that'll help right there. It's *good* that you took him. He should have gone sooner.' She was sniffing again. 'Hey, we knew all this, didn't we? I mean, did you think they'd just put a band-aid on him and say he was alright?'

'I'm not *surprised*, Noah, not in the least. But my father is dying – *your father is dying* – and I'm, no *we're*, allowed to be sad. We're allowed to cry.'

Noah tightened his grip on her shoulder. 'I know that, Sol.'

After a second Solveig sat back and looked at him. 'I really did mean to tell you we were going. This isn't some game I'm playing.'

'I know.'

'After I finally convinced him that at the very least he could do it for me, for my peace of mind, after he agreed to go with me, he said, "under two conditions: Don't tell Noah, and tell me you'll drive past the house on High Street." I really pleaded with him,

Noah, and I'm not being melodramatic. I told him that it was about time he let you in, that you'd come an awful long way to spend this time with him. I told him all of that and he only said, "I'd rather just the two of us went, I'd rather we didn't tell Noah about it right away." I didn't have a choice.'

Though it took him a second, Noah thought he understood. 'It's okay,' he said. 'Sorry I was a little snotty when you got home. I didn't see your note.' He got up and shook his head, walked aimlessly around the room for a minute, then sat down in the chair.

'We drove past the old house, too,' Solveig said. 'He wanted to see it so we went there first thing this morning.' Her eyes welled up.

'You can tell me about it later, if you want,' Noah said.

'No, no,' she sniffled and smiled. 'We were sitting there idling in front of the house. It was early, around eight thirty, and there was a man cleaning his gutters out. I was looking at Dad, who was staring out the window. I said, "Dad, why did you want to see this?" and he said, after a few minutes, "There were a lot of times when I couldn't remember exactly what our house looked like. I don't mean lately, I mean when I was gone, out on the lakes. I'd try and try to picture it but couldn't. The outside, I mean. The inside I could see just fine, but I couldn't picture what it looked like from the street. I should have known that was a bad sign."

'Oh Jesus it was sad, Noah. I said, "Stop that Dad, you were a wonderful father. You provided for us and loved us more than you knew.'"'

'But he didn't, Solveig.'

'I know that, but that's not what you tell him at a time like that.'

'I'm such a shithead,' Noah said. 'Goddamnit.'

'Don't start beating yourself up too.' She stood up and walked to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water and blew her nose. 'I could sure use a drink,' she said.

'This place is as dry as the California desert, I'm afraid.'

'Just one little snifter of brandy,' she said and smiled.



‘How did the house look? The same?’

‘I felt like I was ten again. Literally. It looked exactly the same – the same dingy stucco, same wooden fence, same swing on the porch, even the trees and shrubs in front looked the same.’

‘Did he say anything else?’

‘No, not really. I told him how I used to sit in the window and watch the harbor entrance, waiting for him to come home,’ she smiled and drew a picture in the air. ‘I used to spend whole days braiding and unbraiding my doll’s hair hoping to see his ship arriving. I was feeling very nostalgic this morning, I’m feeling nostalgic right now.’

‘I used to do the same thing when I was a kid,’ Noah said. ‘Only I did it before the wreck. I think we were waiting for two different people.’

‘Oh not really, Noah. He loved us just the same before and after. He just didn’t know how to feel about himself.’

‘That’s kind of sappy.’

‘You think he loved you less? You think he was happy to go from the man he was to the man he became?’

‘I didn’t say he was happy about it, but I don’t think it’s that simple, either.’

‘What’s not simple about it?’

‘There’s a long list of things that aren’t simple about it, Sol.’

‘For example,’ she said.

‘For example, I never saw a smile that wasn’t really a smirk after I was seven years old.’

‘What, he wasn’t allowed some unhappiness?’

‘*Some* unhappiness, yes. Even *a lot* of unhappiness. But not a lifetime of it, no. Not enough unhappiness to ruin our whole family.’

‘You know, you gave up on him too early,’ Solveig said.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I mean, he got better as time went by. He got better after Mom died.’

‘After he killed her you mean. After he froze her fucking heart.’

‘Was her heart so frozen where Mr. Lovelace was concerned? She wasn’t perfect either.’

Noah could have done a back flip. ‘She was fucking the neighbor, sure, but she had a pretty good reason for it.’

‘Shhh! Keep your voice down,’ she said hurrying towards him.

‘You think he doesn’t know?’

‘Of course he knows, but I doubt he wants to be reminded of it now.’

‘Reminded of it? Reminded of her? Solveig, her ashes are in the shed with all the rest of the shit from his life. He missed her dying, and now he’s lugging her around with him. I doubt he needs reminding.’

‘Noah, if you knew Natalie was screwing around, if the two of you were as unhappy as that, would you rush to her dying bedside?’

‘You’re goddamn right I would! And Dad would do it differently if he had the chance. He told me so. He admitted it. And he *apologized*.’

‘If he apologized for it, if he admitted he screwed up, then why are you still dragging him through the mud?’

‘The question is why are you defending him? Why are you dragging *Mom* through the mud?’

‘Oh Noah, I’m not. I’m only trying to point out that there are two sides to this story. You got the short end of it from him, I know that as well as you do. I just think that, with things the way they are, you should, whatever, deal with it a little.’

‘Listen, I am dealing with it, pretty goddamn well if I may say so. And you know what, I’m even starting to see everything through his eyes. I really am. What he went through – Jesus – it was a nightmare, a thousand times worse than a nightmare. But I still get this, I don’t know, this rankling about it all.’ He shook his head.

Solveig didn't say anything right away. Instead she walked over to Olaf's bedroom and cracked the door open. She looked in, closed it again, and nodded as if to imply he was asleep.

'Listen,' she said as she blew a wisp of hair off her forehead. 'The thing is, there's not that much time left to tell him that. That's all I'll say. There's not much time.'

Noah sat back, put his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. 'What are we going to do?' he said after a minute.

Solveig looked at her watch. 'We're going to go to bed right now. Can we talk more tomorrow?'

'Who knows how we'll feel tomorrow?' Noah said.

Solveig smiled. They must have been feeling the same uncertainty. 'I'm sorry about going without you, Noah. It was a lousy thing to do.'

'I'm glad I didn't go,' Noah said and waved his hand. 'I mean it, I'm glad you took him. I feel better.'

‘You baking a pie?’ Noah said, one eye closed, the other squinting, as he woke with the dull shimmer of the kitchen light shining on him.

‘You could say that,’ Olaf said.

‘Pies for everyone in Misquah?’ Noah pressed, putting his hand up to shield the light.

‘Sure.’

There were a dozen or more Mason jars sitting on the kitchen counter, each fuzzy with freezer burn. Olaf had a couple others under his arm that he was carrying from the refrigerator to the kitchen. He was all dressed.

‘Seriously,’ Noah said. ‘What is all that stuff?’

Olaf set the last of the jars on the counter. ‘It’s for you and your sister,’ he said. ‘I’ve got some stuff here for you and I wanted to give it to you it before she left. I guess she’s got to be on the road by noon.’

‘She’s coming back next weekend, though.’

‘Sure, sure,’ Olaf said.

Noah had rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and was up and stretching and yawning. He’d slept like a baby again, and the grip his body had had on him the morning before had loosened. He walked over, picked up one of the jars, and held it up to the light.

Olaf took it from him and set it back on the counter. ‘Wait until your sister gets up,’ he said. ‘And put some pants on. There’s some coffee on the stove.’

Noah’s jeans were sitting over the back of the chair and he hiked them on. Then he poured himself a cup of coffee. ‘So, want to tell me about your trip to Duluth?’

Olaf put his hands palm down on the counter. ‘Solveig didn’t tell you?’

‘She told me a little bit.’ Noah didn’t know whether he was curious or resentful.

‘I went for her.’

‘What did the doctor tell you?’

‘You’ll have to ask your sister that. I wasn’t really paying attention.’

‘Those prescriptions they gave you, are they making you more comfortable?’

‘Will you grab that box and put it on the coffee table?’ Olaf said, pointing at the wooden whiskey box from the restaurant. It was sitting on the floor next to the refrigerator.

Noah picked it up and set it on the table. ‘The prescriptions?’ he said.

‘I didn’t take them.’

‘Of course you didn’t,’ Noah said under his breath. His mood was starting to sharpen; it wasn’t good.

‘What?’

‘Nothing. I didn’t say anything.’

Solveig came lightly from the bedroom, still in her flannel pajamas and a flowery fleece robe. ‘What’s with all the racket?’ she yawned.

‘You have to be up to see the sunrise here, it’s a rule,’ Noah said.

‘The coffee smells good,’ she said, yawning again.

Noah got her a cup, spooned in a thimbleful of sugar, and put more water on to boil.

‘There’s a big box on the dresser in my room, Noah. Could you grab it for me?’ Olaf said. He was grunting around, moving the jars to the coffee table now.

‘Looks like Christmas is coming a month early,’ Noah said to Solveig who was sitting in the chair sipping the coffee Noah had fixed her. He went into his father’s room to fetch the box. When he got back out, he sat down next to Olaf on the couch and said, ‘Enough with the suspense, what is all this stuff?’

‘Before you answer that, Dad, give me a minute, okay?’ Solveig said, springing up and into her room. In thirty seconds she’d changed and was headed outside. The open door sent a cold draft of air whirling through the house.

‘Why not take the prescriptions?’ Noah said as soon as he heard the door slam.

‘The doctor says you must be in a lot of pain.’

‘The doctor never asked me if was in pain.’

Pigheaded old man, Noah thought. ‘I’ve seen you in pain, Dad. It’s obvious you’re in pain. I doubt the doctor felt like she needed to address the obvious.’

‘It’s not too bad.’

‘Why not give them a chance? Did you ever stop to think that they might actually be *good*? That they might actually help’

‘If I need them I’ll take them,’ Olaf said as he cut the tape from the top of the box with his pocketknife.

‘I can’t believe you won’t even give them a shot,’ Noah said.

‘How about we just forget the prescriptions and the trip to the doctor? I went, it’s over, we don’t need to harp on it.’

‘Then there was no point in going at all.’

‘Agreed,’ Olaf said, and he started to unload the box of its folders.

Noah wanted to press the issue but was too annoyed with his father to muster any questions. Instead he just sat there drumming his fingers on his legs. A minute later Solveig burst back into the house in front of another cold draft of air. She was out of breath and pink cheeked.

‘Whew!’ she exclaimed, clapping her hands. ‘You need a bathroom in here.’ She sat back down in the chair and wrapped both of her hands around her mug of coffee. ‘Where were we?’ she said, her cheer like an anvil amid the surliness still lingering between the two men.

‘Dad was just explaining to me what a waste of time it was going down to Duluth yesterday,’ Noah said.

‘Were you pestering him,’ she asked Noah, shaking a sarcastic finger at him.

‘Dad, was he pestering you?’

Olaf scooted around the table to the stove, where he put a couple of new logs in the fire and freshened his coffee.

‘Not too much of that,’ Solveig said, pointing at the coffee. ‘You remember what the doctor said.’

Olaf raised his mug.

‘Apparently, he didn’t even listen to the doctor,’ Noah interjected. ‘He didn’t think it was important.’

Solveig smiled at Olaf. ‘Of course he doesn’t remember what the doctor said. Why would he?’

‘Alright,’ Olaf said. ‘Enough about the doctor. I have some things to give you two. We have some business to take care of.’ On his way back to the sofa, he grabbed the last Mason jar from the kitchen counter. When he plopped down, very unsteadily this time, he spilled coffee all over the back of his hand. He swore under his breath, wiped his hand on his pant leg, and pressed one of the jars against the burn.

‘Are you okay?’ Solveig said.

‘I’m fine.’

‘What’s in the jars?’ she asked.

‘He’s baking pies,’ Noah said. ‘Blueberry pies for everyone in Misquah.’

Olaf didn’t look up from the jar he was opening. ‘This is your inheritance,’ he said, pulling a block of frozen one hundred dollar bills from the jar. ‘There should be about five hundred thousand dollars for the two of you to split. On top of that, there’s another ten thousand or so in the bank and about six uncashed pension and Social Security checks. There might even be a couple in the mailbox, I haven’t checked in a while.’ He pulled a file folder with the account information at Lake Superior Savings and Loan in Grand Marais and the short stack of checks.

‘Jesus, Dad,’ Noah said, looking at Solveig whose face was frozen in shock. ‘Jesus. You know, that’s an awful lot of cash to have in the freezer.’

Olaf shook his head as if to agree. 'I don't know how it works in terms of claiming the inheritance, tax wise or anything I mean, but you two can figure it out. You're both listed as beneficiaries on a life insurance policy, too. It's only worth a couple of bags of bread crumbs though, probably not even worth your time.' He furnished another file folder. 'And you're both listed on my account at the bank. I've left instructions with them that in the event of my death, either of you can manage the account.'

'Aside from the cash, which you should split evenly, all I have is the house and land. I have no idea what it's worth, but I hope you don't sell it regardless. Your grandpa built this place and it belongs in the family. If you decide to get rid of it, I trust the two of you to split things up fairly.'

'Dad, slow down a minute,' Noah said. He stood up, looked at the Mason jars lining the table – there were sixteen of them – and repeated, 'Slow down a minute.'

'Dad,' Solveig said, her voice unsteady and trembling, 'Dad, this is all very shocking.'

Olaf looked back and forth at both of them, as if he were watching a slowly played tennis match, and said, 'What's shocking about this? I'm executing my will, we've got to get this stuff dolled out here. Who knows if the three of us will be together again? This is just business. Bear up, will you?'

'If you give us all your money,' Noah said, 'what are you going to live on yourself?'

'Oh Christ,' Olaf said. 'I don't need any money to live on. What do I need money for?'

At this Solveig buried her face in her hands and started to cry. Noah was standing in the middle of the room equidistant from his father, Solveig, and the pot bellied stove, too stunned to say anything more. He could feel his pulse quickening and sweat trickling down his back again. He was sick of sweating.



‘Sit down, would you Noah? And Solveig, please quit crying. There’s no reason to cry.’

Solveig kept crying and Noah was as still as a statue.

‘Please!’ Olaf said, the kindness in his voice gone. ‘Sit down.’

Noah stepped to the chair and sat down on its arm next to Solveig. He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

Olaf cleared his throat. ‘Listen you two, this is stuff we need to do. There are things you need to know, alright?’ Without waiting for a reply, he continued. ‘This is the deed for the house. The taxes are paid through the year and I believe you have until next December to pay them again. The tax this year was, let me see, about twenty-eight hundred dollars. I’m putting all this stuff in a file titled “Estate,”’ he held up a brown accordion file that he proceeded to tie shut.

‘The rest of this stuff is all yours.’ He took the largest newspaper wrapped thing on the table and tore the wrinkled, yellowed paper from it. It was a ski jumping trophy. ‘Class five first place, 1966. Duluth Junior Invitational,’ he read and handed it to Noah.

It was, Noah remembered, the first trophy he’d ever won. A gold plated ski jumper in flight sat on a white marble base. He took it from his father and felt tears coming to his eyes. ‘I remember this. I remember the day. After the competition was over, and you’d figured I’d won, you taught me how to shake the presenter’s hand.’ His voice was shaky.

‘There’s a box of these things out in the shed, but I pulled this one. I remembered it too,’ Olaf said. He fished a folder from the box. ‘This is yours,’ he said to Solveig, and handed her a red folder. Inside there was a Chopin score with a pink ribbon stapled to it.

She took it with a look of certain recognition and closed her eyes to quell the tears.

‘You were a freshman in high school,’ Olaf continued. ‘1979, third prize at the state competition. The only night I was sober between 1967 and 1997.’ Solveig and Noah both looked at the floor.

He presented each of them with their birth certificates, old report cards and school projects, acceptance letters to colleges, pictures of prom dates, letters from the mayor of Duluth extolling their hard work and community leadership for planting trees on arbor day, articles from the Herald about ski jumping tournaments and piano competitions. The right person could have fashioned a biography for either one of them from the miscellany that now sat spread out on the coffee table. By the time he'd finished unpacking the folders and boxes of memories, he was down to one last shoebox. His energy was flagging.

'All that's left are your mother's figurines and some family photographs,' he said. As he unwrapped a miniature ceramic ballerina, he added, 'for the goddamn life of me I never understood your mother's affection for this crap. These things always struck me as toys, as something fit for little girls, not grown women.' By now he was unwrapping another figure, a two-inch-tall man in a tuxedo and top hat with a handlebar mustache. He held it up as if to prove his point.

'It was just a hobby, Dad,' Noah said.

'Why not knit if you want a hobby? Why not needlepoint? Why not quilting? Why not ballroom dancing?'

'You were never around to dance with, Dad,' Solveig said, surprising even herself. 'All I mean is, it's hard to be a ballroom dancer if your partner's in Toledo and you're in Duluth, right?'

It would have been easy for the implications to embarrass them all, but Olaf held up another figure, a penguin this time, decked out in a navy officer's uniform. They all laughed.

'God, they are stupid little things, aren't they?' Noah said. 'Those things were all over the place in that house.'

'You get the picture,' Olaf said, wrapping them back up in newspaper. 'There's this box and another somewhere in this mess,' he swept his hand to suggest the general clutter of the house. 'There's other stuff, too, of course, but I trust you two can sort it all

out. Be careful when you do, that's what I mean to say. Who knows what's hidden in all this?'

After a minute Noah said, 'Dad, Jesus, who keeps their whole life savings in Mason Jars? Why isn't the money in the bank like it should be? Why isn't it invested for God's sake?'

'It was never my thing – investing money in stocks or real estate. You got your paycheck and you cashed it, put a little bit in the savings or checking account to cover your bills, otherwise you managed with what you had.'

'Dad, you're talking about a half a million dollars.'

'And you want me to gamble all that money away on the stock market?'

'Forget it,' Noah said.

After another awkward silence, Solveig said, 'What are we supposed to do with all of this money? Do I buy a briefcase I can handcuff to my wrist and bring it to the bank in the grocery store? I realize I sound ungrateful – I'm not – but I don't know what to do with this.'

'Solveig, I'll take care of it,' Noah said. 'I'll deposit it here, at the bank in Grand Marais. It'll be okay.'

'The only other thing,' Olaf said, oblivious to their concerns, 'are the funeral arrangements.'

'God this is morbid,' Solveig said.

'Solveig, sweetheart, these are just things we need to take care of. You were at the doctor yesterday, you heard what he said.'

Olaf's voice, Noah thought, was deteriorating with each word he spoke. It was as if the cancer was stepping on his chest and no amount of coughing or throat clearing could give the words more energy. His voice lent his words and almost religious, certainly a sermonistic, timbre that was as hypnotic as it was sad. It was almost beautiful.

‘We are not dropping you out in the middle of that lake,’ Solveig said, she was too choked-up to cry now. ‘It’s a ridiculous idea, absolutely ridiculous.’

‘Will you listen to me?’ Olaf pleaded.

‘Dad, listen,’ Noah said, though he had no idea what he was going to say. ‘Solveig and I talked about this. The idea of sinking you in the lake is really hard for us. Aside from the logistics of it, it’s just a really creepy idea – to tie your dad up to a barrel of taconite pellets, row him out to the middle of the lake, and heave him over – it’s just an awful damn lot to ask of your kids.’ He looked at Solveig for help.

‘How would we ever be able to visit you?’ Solveig said. ‘How could we put flowers on your grave? How would I explain to my kids that their grandpa was down with the fishes? Where they’re swimming?’

‘I’m sure it’s illegal,’ Noah said.

‘And bad for the lake,’ Solveig said. ‘I’m sure it’s not good for the lake.’

‘Are you done?’ Olaf said. ‘Because if you’re done, I’d like to say what I have to say.’ He looked at each of them.

‘Listen you two, will you? When you get to be as old as me, and when you look back on your life, it’s impossible not to regret every other step you took. I do anyway. But you also get to see the wonderful things. The most wonderful of the wonderful things – for me – were days spent here, with the two of you, when you were just little kids, before so much went to shit. The happiest days of my life – happiest without a doubt – were the Christmas mornings we spent here. I remember waking up to the looks on your faces as you pulled toys and candy from your stockings. Goddamn, I remember it like it was yesterday. And that feeling of, *my god, these are my beautiful children!* And those afternoons in the summertime while I was on vacation and we were out fishing. Jesus. Sometimes the only good things I can remember are those mornings here and those huge feelings of love you stirred in me.’ He paused, twisted his head, and looked intent. ‘If that sounds sad, or like I’m feeling sorry for myself, it’s not meant to.’

‘Anyway, I’m not a religious man. I reckon the nearest we come to an afterlife is how we’re remembered in our children’s minds. I figure the more often you think of me when I’m gone, the happier my ghost will be. If I’m here – where I belong anyway – as opposed to some cemetery in Duluth or Grand Marais where you’d come but once every five years, you’ll remember me a little more often.

‘So,’ he said, putting his hands together as if to pray, ‘I’m sorry if it makes you uncomfortable, but a dead man’s a dead man no matter where he’s buried. I want you to bury me here. The lake is more than one hundred and fifty feet deep over by the falls. If you do it there, nobody will ever know.’

Solveig left that afternoon, apologizing and promising to be back no later than Friday, sooner if she could make arrangements for the kids. Noah put her bag in the back seat of her minivan and a box full of the memories their father had unpacked that morning on the passenger seat. She hugged Olaf for two solid minutes, weeping on his chest, before she left.

Noah and Olaf stood shoulder to shoulder in the yard and watched her Mercedes bounce up the road. When it disappeared beyond the last curve, Noah turned to his father and before he lost his guts said, ‘If you’re up to it, why don’t you show me that contraption you’re working on.’

Without a word, as if he’d expected Noah to come around, Olaf led them to the shed.

After Olaf had finished with his plea, while Solveig sat collapsed in the chair and weeping for an hour, Noah had sat wordless, even expressionless he thought, next to his father on the couch. With Solveig’s nasally, nearly silent crying and Olaf’s labored, throaty breath in the background, Noah had admired his father’s appeal. It was, Noah had thought, the most beautiful, most compelling argument he’d ever heard. Even if it was flawed and imperfect reasoning, it still struck him so viscerally, so in the heart, that he changed his mind

about burying him in the lake. He was sure that even though his father had had years to prepare it, years to bullet proof it, it had come straight from the cuff. So rather than feeling duped, he felt a profound sense of admiration and knew that despite his better judgment and his sister's unwavering opposition to it, he was bound to his gut. It's got to be what age buys you, he reasoned with himself. It's what you get after eighty-two years of life: An eternity of your own making. Of course, he'd mentioned none of it to Solveig, only hoped that when his father died, he'd have the words to convince her.

In the shed Olaf explained how the stainless steel tubing was attached to the barrel. He showed Noah how the barrel was meant to rest on his chest while the tubing extended down the length of his legs. He showed him how the chain should cross over his back, under his arms – which would be tied behind his back – and through the tubing.

Noah stood there with his hand on his scruffy chin trying to comprehend the instructions. It seemed, he thought, like a sound enough invention, though he had to admit that any loophole was absolutely bound to escape him. He'd never had much of a mind for things like this.

When Olaf finished explaining, he looked at Noah and said, 'Do you think it will work?'

'What about, like, decomposition? What happens after some time passes?'

'I reckon the water is cold enough down there that it won't be a factor. It's cold and dark.'

'How will I know where to do it?'

'Anywhere over there under the falls will be fine. It's all deep over there.'

'And what do I do, just toss you into the boat and row you over there? Lug you over the side? Between you and the barrel, that's a hell of a lot of weight.'

Olaf pulled something like a section of dock from between the table and the wall. 'This will fit across the boat. You can rest it right on top of the gunwales. Then lay me

across it. When you get over there, you can just slide it right over the side. You keep your weight opposite the side you slide me over and the boat should have no trouble.'

Noah stood there dumb, trying to imagine actually doing it. He thought that when the time came he'd fail, he was almost sure of it. 'What about everything that goes along with it? I mean, what about a death certificate? What about notifying the Social Security office and Superior Steel so they stop sending the checks? What about transferring the deed to the house? What about all of that, how do I take care of all that and still get away with it?'

The elegance with which Olaf had pleaded was getting lost in the crudeness of the details, and with each unanswered question, Noah found himself getting more and more nervous and unsure about it. After the last barrage of questions, to which Olaf only shrugged his shoulders and stammered I-don't-knows, Noah was as indecisive as he'd been when he woke up that morning.

'I've still got to get the other piece of tubing attached,' Olaf said. 'I'll do that tomorrow. Right now I need some rest.'

Noah led him out of the shed and helped him across the yard and into the house.

When they were both inside and sitting opposite each other in the sofa and chair, Noah said, 'What if I can't bring myself to do it, Dad? What if I row you out there and just can't do it?'

'You'll be able to,' Olaf said quietly. 'You'll be strong.'

In 1972, five years after the wreck of the *Ragnarok*, a poet from the Ontario town of Point au Baril on Georgian Bay and a woodcut artist from Duluth collaborated on a short book to commemorate the anniversary of the disaster. The book was called *The Darkest Place in the Night*, and unless you were a friend of either artist, or a librarian from the Duluth public library, or a fringe aficionado of the Superior shipery, you never would have heard of the book. That is, you wouldn't have heard of it until five years later, in 1977, when the Herald ran a feature on the ten-year anniversary of the wreck. Rather than leading with the customary, now famous photograph of the washed-up survivors – the same photograph that hung in the museum – they printed one of the woodcuts and the last two lines of one of the poems. The woodcut had a different title, “The Boat of Hymir,” – each of the dozen cuts had their own title, though each corresponded to a poem on the opposite page – and was an abstract of three men clutching the icy gunwales of a life boat in portentous, black, fine-lined seas. It was, Noah thought, a striking image. The most striking in the book. The lifeboat was riding up the crest of a wave, and each of the three faces diminished into the abstraction so that only the first was clearly a face at all, one meant to exude the nightmare. The character whose face was plain was wielding a giant, Thor-like hammer that he had raised above his shoulder, about to strike the ice from the gunwale.

The poem itself, not a very good poem in Noah's opinion, became something like a belated anthem for the wreck, became the standard epigraph for anything written about it after 1977. Noah could remember portions of it in at least two of the books on the subject, and it invariably appeared in newspaper and magazine articles following the lead of the Herald during the last twenty-five odd years. It was strange, Noah thought, watching his father sleep difficultly on the sofa in the wake of Solveig's leaving, how a single, obscure expression like the poem or woodcut, could become so automatically associated with the



unimaginative fact of the disaster, but it had. Enough so, in fact, that even for Noah, the famous quotes and the wreck had become linked in some irrevocable way. In the five minutes he'd been looking at the book – and it surprised him that his father even owned it – he'd managed to memorize the last couplet and was singing it to himself:

*The slaves of survival beseeching the light*

*Adrift in the maw of the dark of the night.*

After Solveig left and Olaf and Noah finished in the shed, Noah held his father by the elbow as he tottered across the yard and back into the house. Without lunch or something to drink or a word of any sort, Olaf had put himself to bed on the couch. Noah, at a loss again, tidied the house, stoked the fire, refilled the wood box, and took the thawing cash from the Mason jars and put it in his duffle bag. His plan was to deposit it first thing in the morning. He should have been shocked by both the sum of his inheritance and the manner in which Olaf had presented it, but the fact of the matter was that nothing surprised him anymore. Five days had cured him of his wonder.

'That guy came to visit me once,' Olaf said, startling Noah, who had almost dozed off himself.

'The poet or the woodcutter?' he asked, flexing his arms like a dog stretching his forepaws.

'The poet. He said he wanted to make sure he got it right.'

'What did you say?'

'I told him I didn't know what the hell his poems meant, that I was more of a plainspoken sort.'

Noah tried to imagine the Poet's horror in confronting his father. 'At least you didn't toss him out of the house, right?' he said.

'Of course I didn't. He was a nice guy... A little on the feminine side, but an awfully nice guy nonetheless.'

‘I prefer the woodcuts to the poems,’ Noah said. ‘I like this one.’ He showed him the page opened to “The Boat of Hymir.”

Olaf looked at it over the rim of his glasses and shook his head in agreement. ‘Whatever I thought of the poems and the art – which wasn’t too much – I have to admit I liked the title. It was a good title for the book.’ He propped himself up and was massaging his belly again. His voice was still croaky, still fading.

‘The other night you know, you never finished telling me about the wreck. You never told me about what happened after you decided to get off the ship.’

‘I ran out of gas, didn’t I?’ Olaf said.

‘I think we both did.’ Noah stood up and got a glass of water from the kitchen. He drained it in a couple gulps and poured himself another. ‘You want a glass of water?’

Olaf looked over at him. ‘Nah,’ he said.

‘Are you warm enough?’

‘I’m fine. Just fine.’

Noah sat back down. ‘Why do you think it’s a good title?’

‘A good title?’

‘*The Darkest Place in the Night...*’

Olaf shook his head. ‘Ah, the book, sure. You know, it’s been a long time now, a long, long time, but the thing that I still remember the most is the darkness. Maybe that’s because it’s so easy to imagine pitch darkness. I mean, you don’t need much of an imagination, especially up here, to bring it to mind. But it’s what I remember anyway. The darkness.’

‘You remember the other stuff too, right? I mean, I suspect it’s hard to forget something like that.’

‘Oh, not so hard when you’re as old and broken down as I am.’ He smiled, almost pouting. ‘But I remember other stuff, too. You’re right.’

Noah sat expectantly.

Olaf tipped his head and looked squarely at Noah. 'I can't believe this stuff interests you. Aren't kids supposed to grow out of their fascination with their parent's work by the time they reach your age?'

'It's not like you were a real estate agent or a garbage man, Dad. I couldn't have lost interest in what happened even if I'd wanted to.'

Olaf shifted in his seat and cleared his throat again.

'We were at the mercy of a whole lot of elements back there. We had an inferno blazing beneath us, a snow squall filling the air around us, and wind and seas that were still washing up over the main deck. The thought of launching one of those lifeboats, even as bad as things were, seemed, in a way, like the greater of two evils. I mean, those things were made for Sunday afternoon picnics, not all-nighters on a stormy Superior. They had no real keel, no cover, they were just big rowboats with a few flares, a couple pumps and a tool kit. I'll tell you, it was awfully damn hard to imagine rowing that thing across the spit between Isle Royale and the north shore.'

'Where did you put that chart?'

Noah stood up. 'Here,' he said, fetching it from the shelf and unrolling it on the coffee table.

'We were here, remember?' Olaf said, pointing to the black X. 'I more or less knew our position, knew what neighborhood we were in. What I figured on doing was simply making our way across the lake, I figured we'd end up in Thunder Bay or some spot just south of there. In all the commotion though, I forgot to factor in everything that'd be working against us. A tremendous oversight, no doubt, but even after I decided to launch one of the boats, I didn't think about what an ordeal we'd have ahead of us until we were actually in the process of dropping one.'

'Anyway, we set to work on launching the thing. You probably know this, too, but it was set to two davits that were attached to two cables that you lowered using two winches.'

A very simple operation. Very simple. Unless, of course, the whole goddamn thing is coated with six inches of ice. And it was, it might as well have been set in concrete.'

'What did you do?'

'Unbelievable as it sounds, I actually tore a rung from the ladder on the stack and started to hack away at the ice on the davits while Luke and Red and Bjorn set to work on the winches. Between the three of us we'd loosened it enough in five minutes that we could get it dropping. It's amazing, you know, what pressure can do to you, how it gets your adrenalin churning, how the adrenalin gives you strength to do things you normally couldn't. Well, we had it, the three of us. Make no mistake about that. You could have put that goddamn ship on our back and had us carry it and we wouldn't have faltered, we were so goddamn riled up and frantic.' He paused. 'Far cry from now,' he said, rubbing his bicep as if to show his flagging strength.

'I suspect you're still stronger than you think,' Noah said, remembering the barrel in the shed, how the old man must have lifted it onto his workbench.

'Anyway, the point is that people have a reserve of something in times like that, a hidden strength that they can call on when they have to. We were all four tapping into ours, no doubt about it.

'After we got the davits and the winches free, I ordered Luke and Bjorn into the boat. I cut the tarp off, they climbed in, and Red and I started to lower it. Usually two men would've been on each winch, but I wanted a couple of 'em in the boat so they could manage it once it was in the water. By then the ship had kind of half come about in the storm so that the port side of her was taking all the seas. That created a kind of lee on the starboard side, which was good and bad. Good because it gave us a calmer spot to load the lifeboat, bad because we'd have that foundering son of a bitch right on top of us when we got in the water.'

'Wasn't it dangerous to lower the lifeboats with guys in it?'

‘No more dangerous than anything else that was happening. It’s true that if we’d been launching the lifeboat in a harbor, say, or in calmer waters, we’d have dropped it empty. But I figured that there was an awful lot that could go wrong with the boat and if there were a couple guys in it, they might be able to manage whatever problems came up. It was a gamble, sure, but we were so short on goddamn odds anyway that I thought a few options were better than none.’

‘What did you and Red do after the boat was in the water?’

‘We scuttled our asses over the side of the boat and down the ladder, that’s what we did.’

‘That must have been hairy.’

‘It wasn’t the most fun I’d ever had, no. On top of the fact that the whole goddamn thing was coated with ice and twisting every which way in the gale, we’d have the added nightmare of trying to get in the boat once we’d gotten down. Imagine that: Hanging over the side of burning, sinking ship on an icy ladder twisting in the wind, trying to get into a boat that’s bobbing all over the water. It was like each step of surviving was getting more and more difficult. Each goddamn nightmare piled on top of the one that came before it so that sum of ‘em seemed impossible. But we had to keep at it.’

‘Did you, um, did you see Red...?’

‘Did I see Red what, go into the water?’ He looked away with a surprisingly sudden jerk of his head. An expression Noah had never seen before flushed across his face; it was a look of panic mixed with culpability, a child’s look.

‘Yeah, did you see anything?’ It was well documented in the annals of the wreck that after Olaf sent Red over the side of the ship, he wasn’t seen again until his body washed ashore on the rocks on the beach at Hat Point. The only scenario ever suggested was that he fell from the ladder, that he somehow managed to grab a rope that’d been dangling from the lifeboat, that he’d managed to attach himself to the rope, and so been towed behind it.

Olaf's expression had turned dour beyond description. 'I did not see him fall,' he faltered. 'I didn't hear a splash, nothing.' He let out a soft moan.

'I'd sent Red over first thinking the sooner he was in the lifeboat the safer he'd be. I thought it was some kind of bravery, some unwritten rule of my rank to get him off of there first.'

'It's not like what happened was your fault,' Noah said.

Olaf peered at Noah, his eyes clear now. 'Red missed the first step. As he started over the edge, he lost it on some of the glaze. His face hit the deck as if he'd fallen ten feet. Maybe he was knocked out, I don't know, but as I went to reach for him he lost his grip on the ladder and went over.' He closed his eyes and set his chin on his chest.

Noah tried to imagine the sight of a man being lost in the darkness and hell of that moment. There was no context for it though, nothing to measure his imagination against.

Olaf stood up shaking his head and walked to the kitchen. For a long time he stood balancing against the counter. Finally he coughed and said, 'I got right over the edge of that ship. I remember climbing down that ladder – rung by deadly fucking rung – and passing the main deck, passing the engine room decking. I remember the smell and the little burst of warmth from the fire. I thought of all those guys in there, cooked, and I felt *greedy* for being on the ladder, greedy for being so close to getting away, even though I had no confidence that getting away from the boat meant surviving. Just the fact of being there, so close to the lifeboat, I wondered why in the hell I'd been given a fighting chance. I still wonder. It had to have been more than luck, you know? But for as many thousand times as I've replayed it, that's all I can come up with, that's what the whole thing boils down to... dumb luck. I was lucky Jan sent me. I was lucky to get across the deck. I was lucky not to have been washed over the back of that ship once we got there. I was lucky I didn't fall from the ladder like Red. For fucksake, it was all a bunch of rotten luck.'

'Jesus Dad, what's wrong with a little luck in a situation like that?'

‘Oh hell, there’s nothing wrong with it, I was damn glad for it. But when it comes time to add it all up, it’s just not a very good explanation.’

‘Maybe there’s no need for an explanation. Maybe there *isn’t* one.’

‘Maybe there isn’t, but it’s been impossible for me over the years to not try finding one.’

‘Did you ever see him again?’

‘Did I see him again?’ Olaf said, his eyes turned up towards the ceiling. ‘Jesus fucking Christ did I see him.’

‘When I got into the boat Luke and Bjorn were already bailing the piece of shit. I told them that Red fell, that I thought he was unconscious, that if we didn’t find him immediately he would die in the water.’

‘Could you see anything?’

‘It was too fucking dark at first. Besides, it was taking everything we had just to keep that boat from capsizing.’ He paused; clearly he was exhausted by the memory.

‘Why don’t you sit down Dad?’ Noah got up and helped his father back into the chair.

‘He was there, Noah. In the water I mean, next to the boat. I saw him.’

‘Was he dead?’ Noah was shocked. His father had always denied ever seeing him once he went overboard.

‘No. I had the flashlight pointing out into the lake. Ten, maybe twenty feet to starboard, between the lifeboat and the ship. Bobbing like a mother fucking buoy. I hollered to him Noah, I saw his eyes blinking and his hand go up for help.’ He stopped.

‘I can’t believe it. Why didn’t you ever tell anyone this?’

‘Tell ‘em what?’

‘That you saw Red alive.’

He looked away. ‘It’s my fault he died. I should have saved him. Instead of jumping in after him I tossed him a lousy fucking line. He probably had broken bones, he

was probably hypothermic already. All he saw was the fucking light from the flashlight and a goddamn *rope* coming towards him. I should have done more, I could have done more.'

'That's crazy Dad. You couldn't jump in that lake. It would have been suicide.'

Olaf wasn't listening. 'Instead I throw him a rope.'

'Dad, he wouldn't have survived anyway.'

Olaf shot him a cold stare. 'We survived.'

'But you weren't all busted up, you hadn't fallen into the lake. There's no way he could have gotten through the night.'

'That's bullshit. His soul is on me.' He got up again and walked outside without saying anything. Noah followed him to the door and watched him go to a tree and piss.

My god, Noah thought. What do you do with a lifetime of that on your mind?

When Olaf came back in Noah steered him to the chair.

'And I bet you thought you couldn't think less of me,' Olaf said.

'What are you talking about?'

'Letting Red go like that.'

'It's not your fault, you've got to understand that Dad.'

'You're wrong,' he said finally.

'Why is Red more important than any of the other guys? Why are you lugging his ghost around and none of the other's?'

'Don't you see, none of the others had a chance. Red had a chance – I was his chance – and he didn't get to use it.'

They sat silently in the flotsam of his father's confession for half an hour or longer. The evolution of his Olaf's face in those minutes was like watching a police artist's sketch coming to life. Did he feel differently knowing what he now knew?

'Anyways,' Olaf finally said, breaking a silence that was as tangible as the walls in the house.



‘It doesn’t change anything,’ Noah said.

‘It’s not supposed to.’

They fell silent for another minute. ‘I’ve got to know about the others. Why didn’t they ever make a run for the lifeboats? Why did they just sit up there hoping for the best?’

Olaf didn’t look like he could say another word, but he did. ‘Do you know the story of the *Mataafa*?’ Olaf said.

‘It rings a bell.’

‘In 1905, in maybe the worst storm ever on Superior, a ship from the Pittsburgh Steamship line steamed out of Duluth. It wasn’t long before she came about in the awful weather. Other ships had done the same thing, started only to stop and reenter the harbor, but this ship, the *Mataafa*, who was also tugging a barge, got stuck on the rocks just outside the harbor. There were nine men on the aft end of the ship, the rest of the crew was in the bow decking. Half the population of Duluth watched as some of the men on the stern attempted to cross the deck. Three of them made it. One of the guys was washed over a couple of times but managed to get back onboard each time. I suppose he was scared out of his mind, and he went back to the stern rather than pressing on. Well, the storm was a blitzkrieg, and none of the Coast Guard boats could even get out of the harbor. Here’s a ship, sitting literally only a couple hundred yards off the shore at Canal Park, and nobody can help her.

‘All night the storm rages on, the temperature falls, the snow piles up. Hordes of people are lining the shore to see what happens with this ship and her crew. At dawn the seas have settled enough that a rescue boat is dispatched. They make a pass and rescue something like fifteen men on the bow. When they head back out to get the guys out of the stern decking, they’re all encased in ice. Nine guys dead. Froze to death, you see? They probably could have smelled the bonfires on the shore that had been burning all night. That’s what Superior can do to you.

‘So you ask about the rest of the crew and the answer is simple – I don’t know what happened to them. I don’t know why or even if they thought it would be best to stay put. I realize it’s easy to second guess them if they did, to say it’s crazy they didn’t at least try getting off that son of a bitch, but I can’t say as I blame them either, if they didn’t. Maybe Jan had a plan. Maybe he thought there would be a rescue attempt and the odds of surviving were better if he’d just wait it out. Hell, maybe they *did* try and get back to the lifeboat and just simply lost the battle. It’s impossible to say. But whatever happened, it happened in a goddamn real-life nightmare.

‘All I can say for sure is that I was off that boat. So were Bjorn and Luke. And Red, somewhere in the water. We were a mess all over again. Hysterical we were, hopeless, so goddamn out of control that I thought of just jumping in after Red, knowing what that would mean. It’s a good thing Luke was there, he kept me and Bjorn together. All we had for light were two of the flashlights we’d left the pilothouse with. We searched the water with them, but I knew.’ He shook his head. ‘There was still some light from the *Rag*, but mostly it was just the three of us hollering and hoping he’d bob up.

‘You’ve got to understand that we were fighting to keep ourselves aboard that little piece of shit lifeboat ourselves. It’s not like we could stand up on one of the seats and scan the water. Even if we could have, it was so dark and snowy that we never would have seen anything anyway. On top of everything, one of us had to at least try and maneuver that thing, so Bjorn was at the tiller and with the wind behind us, it didn’t take long before we were a fair distance from the ship.’ He looked reflective as he stopped talking and stared down at the chart on the coffee table.

‘It seems impossible to me now to think that the whole night he was riding behind us like a goddamn anchor. How he got himself hooked onto that line I’ll never know. I mean, why it didn’t snap? How in the hell did he come crashing up onto that rocky beach in the morning?’

‘It must have been horrifying, seeing that I mean.’

‘It was,’ Olaf said, ‘the cherry on top of the most terrible night of my life.’

‘What did you *do* out there? How did you manage in that storm?’

‘Believe me, we managed nothing. I remember sitting in the lifeboat and watching the *Rag* from a distance. We were working like crazy. Right away I put both Luke and Bjorn to work on the pumps. Within seconds we were up to our ankles in water. Not just water, but Superior water, water so cold it would’ve hurt to drink, and it was coming in faster than we could get rid of it. I was trying to row that thing between the troughs so that we’d take a little less, but there was no hope for that, there was just too much water, too many waves coming from every direction. With Bjorn at the tiller and Luke trying to hack off some of the ice on the gunwales and manage a pump himself, and me trying to guess where the next twelve footer was coming from; and the cold, wet darkness on top of it all, it seems like it should have been impossible for me to notice the glow behind us. But I did.

‘It was like a ghost already. In the darkness and snow squall and sea-spray, I could see just a hazy light where the ship was, maybe a hundred or two hundred yards behind us. It must have been a combination of the flames and the onboard lights. It was flickering, and it came in and out of view as we rode up and down the waves. As we got farther away from it, the light got fainter and fainter until it was gone. Just like that, we rode up a wave, I looked, and *poof* – nothing but the night. Simple as that.

Noah had scooted to the edge of his chair in order to hear better. Olaf’s voice, as it had been for days, continued to weaken with each word he said. By the time he said “poof,” there was almost no sound at all, just a little flap of his lips and a weak-armed, indiscriminant wave of his hand. Despite the ebbing and softening of his voice, or maybe because of it, the image of the receding light of the sinking ship struck Noah as especially important, especially huge. He’d never struggled to see the mythos of the thing – of the wreck and the night aboard the lifeboat – but he’d never seen it so simply, either. The ship was drowning, and the three men aboard the lifeboat were under the stress of the next impossibility – the rest of that dark night.

‘The wind felt like it was coming from every direction, so did the water,’ Olaf continued. ‘We were soaked from the word go. Every thirty seconds a wave would wash over the gunwales and swamp the boat. Sometimes they were huge waves and I thought we’d sink right under them, but sometimes they were easier and we managed to somehow keep it floating. I don’t really know how to describe it, Noah. It was like the water wanted us but the darkness wanted us more. Sounds ridiculous, I know, but that’s how it seemed. There were times when I couldn’t even see the other guys on the boat, when I’d yell as loud as I goddamn could and they didn’t hear me six feet away. Somehow we managed though. We kept the gunwales as clear of ice as we could, we kept ourselves from freezing solid, managed to stay in the boat despite the bull ride. I don’t know.

‘I mentioned luck before, and let me tell you, the luckiest, most unexplainable part of that whole goddamn mess was staying alive that night and the next morning.

‘It really is a miracle, isn’t it? That you survived the lake and that night?’ Noah said.

‘Here’s the thing,’ Olaf said, coughing to clear something in his throat that wasn’t there, ‘it’s a whole lot easier to look back and be awed about it now than it was at the time. Maybe that seems obvious, maybe not, but the fact is, for those eight hours it was like we weren’t even really there. It was impossible that it could be so cold, that we could be so fucking wet, that it could be so goddamn dark. During the battle we lost our flashlights, we had no matches, no lighter, no nothing. Even though each of us was working our ass off, I suspect that we were each just waiting to die, too. I know I was.

‘I’d spend ten minutes off in la la land thinking about you kids and your mother all tucked under your quilts at home without realizing that my hands were so cold I could hardly grip the oars. When I’d snap to, it was like I’d been shot. All the pain would surge up and I’d be miserable. But just as quick, I’d fall back into some other trance, think about something like my mother getting ready for church back in Norway when I was just a kid.

‘And the whole time, we were frantically rowing and hammering and bailing and keeping each other up. The jobs never ended, even though it seemed like the most hopeless exercise I’d ever known. I think I could conjure up all the memories of you and your sister, of my mother and yours, because I was so certain that any minute the boat would buck me out into the lake and that would be it. That would be the end.

‘I’ll tell you, it’s amazing the things you can come up with when you’re right there, ready to die. It’s amazing the way you can call up every little thing you’ve forgotten for forty years. That stuff, those memories, it’s all in you. It’s there all the time.’

‘You thought of us?’

‘I spent hours thinking about you and your sister and your mother. Hours. It was easy in a lot of ways, being so close to death. At a time like that, when you know the gigs about up, it’s not hard to forget all the clutter in your head. On a night like that, black as tar, you’ve got a clean slate, nothing but time, and all those memories coming together, hurrying up for one last thought. Seems like I should have learned something, don’t you think?’ He looked at Noah as if he were expecting an answer.

‘What do you do instead?’ Olaf continued. ‘What you do is end up making it. You end up wrapped around a goddamn tree growing out of the rocks and you forget everything just as quick. You forget what being out there should have taught you. You get selfish. You become your old self again as quickly as you were transformed. You start to wonder, *why me?*’ He pointed feebly at his own chest.

‘Maybe you’re being a little hard on yourself, Dad.’

‘You end up as the line in a poem,’ Olaf continued, pointing at the book open on the table. ‘You end up as the face in a woodcut, from someone else’s imagination. And meanwhile, all your crewmates are dead and your wife is fucking the moron across the street, and your kids can’t stand you and what do you do? You just keep letting the snowball roll. You give up, you let it sit in your craw and eat-up your reason and you drink at shit hole bars. Holy shit do you drink. And you disgrace yourself. Try living with that.’

‘Jesus, Dad.’

Olaf shook his head in disgust. ‘That’s what happened out there, Noah. Sorry as it is, that’s what happened. We washed onto the beach at Hat Point and my mind went blank. All I could do was hate everything – that fucking lake, how dead all the guys were, the cold, the wind. All I could do was hate.’ He looked like a ghost.

I wonder if he’s dying right now, Noah thought, almost as if he actually expected him to. I imagine this is what it looks like.

‘The morning was breaking and the three of us sat there, soaked right to the bone, staring back out at the lake. It’s another miracle we didn’t die right then, right on the cold spot. Do you know the temperature was below zero? And we’re sitting there like we’d just been for a swim, soaked through. We thought about trying to build a fire, but the only thing to burn was the boat, and it was covered with ice and we didn’t have any matches anyway. So we moved around instead, beat as we were we pulled the lifeboat up off the rocks, we tried to figure out where the hell we were.

‘It’s weird, but had we been out on the lake, on a clear day, passing Hat Point, I would have known exactly where we were. But pressed up against the cliffs and rocks like we were, hazy as the morning was, I wouldn’t have guessed it in a million years. We looked for roads or a house up in the forest on the hills, but there was nothing. Just the wilderness. After a little searching we gave up. We were all frostbitten, Bjorn had a broken arm, a broken shoulder. We were delirious, hallucinating. In the boat, in one of the stows in one of the seats, a blanket had managed to stay more or less dry and the three of us climbed under it and waited to die again. That waiting, it had become like a routine for us.’

‘How long was it?’ Noah said. ‘How long before they found you?’

‘I don’t know how long it was. Seemed like days, that’s for sure, but the simple fact that we didn’t die tells me it wasn’t that long. We didn’t have time to freeze to death. The last stroke of luck.

‘First a plane circled above us a couple of times, then a cutter off shore a little while later. I wanted to get up and wave my arms, to signal them, but I couldn’t. I was going into shock, losing it. Things went blurry, there was ice all around my eyes. I couldn’t talk, none of us could, and we could hardly to acknowledge what we were seeing, could hardly shift our eyes to look at each other. A little while later an army of highway patrolmen and paramedics and Coast Guard rescuers all come through the woods and up the beach. Goddamn they were a sight.

‘They got us out of our clothes, bundled us in blankets and parkas and whatever else they could swaddle us in and got us off that damn beach and into ambulances. They took us to a lodge first, a place in Grand Portage, where they started working on us and ordered the helicopters to airlift us to Duluth. It all happened so fast and felt so out of my control. Just like that we were back in Duluth. Just like that the whole thing was over.’

He looked away from Noah, down to the chart spread across the table. ‘Or maybe,’ he said, ‘it wasn’t over.’ He leaned forward, traced a line from the black X off Isle Royale to Hat Point. He did it again, going backwards. Noah wanted to say something but he couldn’t. After a few minutes Olaf looked up at him again.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘for thirty years I used that night as an excuse. Not because I wanted or needed one, but because I had no control over what it did to me. I should have. Hard as it would’ve been, I should have.

‘I never told anyone any of this before. Never told your mother, even though she deserved to know, never told your sister, never told it to any of the guys down at the Freighter, not even on my drunkest night. Never told it while I was on the bridge of any of the ships I sailed later. Hell, I never even told the NTSB or the brass from Superior Steel. Everything I just told you, it’s been rotting in me for all this time.’

‘Why,’ Noah said, his own voice faint and weak now, ‘why did you tell me?’

Olaf looked up at him, leaned towards him, and took off his glasses. 'You asked me, Noah, that's why. And you deserved to know. Aside from your mother, you deserved it more than anyone.'



**PART FIVE: *Dead Reckoning***

The drive up to Grand Marais took half an hour. There was nobody else on the road until he pulled into town, and even then the Monday morning rush hour traffic wasn't exactly clogging the streets. There were a couple of pick-up trucks at the Ranger station, two cars filling their tanks at the Holiday gas station, and a smattering of cars making their way through the streets of town. At the only stoplight, he pulled up next to a white-haired woman in a Chevy who looked at him, smiled elfinly, and drove off slowly.

The bank was on the north end of town, and except for two raccoons, its parking lot was empty. He looked at his watch to make sure he hadn't misread it earlier. When he saw that it was a few minutes past nine, he hopped out of the truck, grabbed the duffle bag, and walked into the bank. All morning he'd been feeling self-conscious about hastening off to the bank with the money, and though it was exhilarating in its way to think about the sudden boon of a quarter million bucks – how could it not be? – he also thought that anyone looking objectively at his situation would label him a money grubber. The fact of the matter was, he assured himself, that he'd never once thought of the possibility of an inheritance from the moment his father had called him until he pulled the first wad of cash from the jar. The reason he was at the bank the first thing in the morning is the same reason his father would have been thirty years earlier: Because it was insane to have that kind of money in a virtual shoebox under the mattress. He wouldn't be able to function until the necessities were taken care of. Getting all this dough into the bank was suddenly necessity number one.

The air in the bank smelled like graham crackers. There were two tellers behind a stand-up counter, a receptionist sitting at a desk on the right, and three or four empty offices on the left. He walked towards the teller, passing a table with jumper cables and coolers piled on it and a sign hanging above it enticing people with a free gift if they opened a

checking account. There were other signs dotting the walls and hanging above the teller's heads offering low interest rates for new car and home equity loans. It struck Noah how tough it must be for a bank like this to stick it out in a little community like Grand Marais; how, with people like his father living in the hills above town, people who hadn't taken out a loan or made a significant deposit in decades, all the signs plastered everywhere probably did very little good. As he weaved his way through the maze of stanchions set-up to manage a line he could never imagine, it dawned on him that he might need more than a teller to help him with his deposit, that he probably should have asked to talk to the manager.

'Good morning!' one of the young girls behind the counter said, her name was Ellsie according to the tag she wore on her chest. She was about one degree off in every direction, Noah thought, starting with her shrill voice and unnaturally cheery disposition.

'Hi,' Noah said, bracing for the worst. 'I don't know if you can help me or not...'

'We can sure try!' she said.

He looked at her, smiled, said, 'my father is a customer here. I guess I am too, though neither of us have been here in a long time, I've never been here.'

'If you're a customer here, I can help you!' Her enthusiasm, though already annoying him, was not disingenuous.

'Great,' Noah said. 'Here's the thing, I have a lot of cash to deposit.'

'Have you filled out a deposit slip?'

'Actually, is there a manager or supervisor here, it's *a lot* of money.'

'I'm the lead teller!' she said and smiled so proudly Noah decided he was stuck with her.

'Okay, great,' he said and clapped his hands. 'I have somewhere in the neighborhood of half-a-million bucks in my duffel bag here, and I was hoping you had a private room or office somewhere here where I could, you know, get it ready to deposit.'

‘Wow! That *is* a lot of money, sir! It’s not everyday someone makes a transaction like that! All the same, it’s no problem! Why don’t you step back here,’ she said, taking a key ring from her pocket. ‘This is an empty office, we can get it ready in here.’ She led him into the room.

‘Put the money in stacks of one hundred, okay? I’ll get you some rubber bands and a counting machine and the IRS forms we need to fill out, and we’ll get it all set. Oh,’ she continued twirling around, she was on her way out, ‘why don’t you give me your account number, too, and we can make sure it’s all in order.’

For the next hour and fifteen minutes he counted the still-damp hundred dollar bills. He counted four thousand nine hundred and eighty of them to be exact. When they were finished, Ellsie double checked everything and prepared the deposit, all the while regaling Noah with stories of her Caribbean honeymoon. After she’d probed every nook and cranny of his childlessness, after she’d offered him coffee no less than ten times, he was finally free and ready to leave. Ellsie had taken the cash to the vault, and when she returned with a receipt and the documentation for the IRS, Noah figured he better make clear that Solveig had access to the cash, too. The whole pile of loot was starting to feel like an albatross.

‘You’re all three listed as owners of the account, so it won’t be any problem for any of you to access the funds!’ Ellsie assured him.

‘Great,’ Noah said, and though he felt sure that something in the transaction was bound to have been mishandled, felt surely that it was somehow incomplete, he thanked her, took his empty duffle bag, and turned to leave.

‘We certainly appreciate your business Mr. Torr! And tell your father hello from all of us!’

He smiled, shouted thanks over his shoulder, and walked out. A couple blocks east of the bank there was a place called the Blue Sky Café and he drove over for something to eat. He was ravenous.

The Duluth Herald was for sale next to the cash register. He bought one, found a seat in one of the booths next to the window that overlooked Main Street, and ordered a cup of coffee from a good-old-fashioned waitress whose gray hair was up in a bun and whose apron was starched stiff. When she brought him the coffee, served on a plate with sugar cubes and a little pitcher of cream, he ordered the number one breakfast special.

‘How do you want your eggs?’ she said.

‘Over easy, please.’

‘Pancakes or toast?’

‘Pancakes.’

‘Buttermilk or buckwheat?’

‘Buttermilk.’

‘Steak or chop?’

‘Steak.’

‘How do you want that cooked?’

‘Medium, please.’ He was taking sips of his coffee between questions.

‘Bacon or sausage?’

‘Bacon.’

‘What kind of juice?’

‘Orange juice, please.’

‘Anything else, hungry Jack?’ she winked.

Noah pointed over his shoulder towards the bakery case under the cash register.

‘Can I have one of those caramel rolls with the pecans, too?’

‘You want that heated?’

‘Please,’ he said and sat back, anticipating his full belly.

‘That’ll be ready in just a minute,’ she said, smiling and taking the menu from him.

He dug Solveig’s cell phone from his jacket pocket, dialed her number, and waited as the phone rang in Fargo. Seated around a horseshoe-shaped counter were ten or twelve

men in orange hunting hats, drinking coffee and smoking unfiltered cigarettes. He'd noticed them when he came in, but avoided their deprecating gaze. As Solveig answered the phone, and Noah said hello, he could feel their stares settle on him again. It's the cell phone, he thought, I bet they hate people on cell phones. He turned his back to face the window so they wouldn't be able to ease drop on his conversation.

'Hey, it's me,' he said.

'Speak up,' Solveig said. 'I can barely hear you.'

'I can't talk too loud. I'm in a diner in Grand Marais, the local deer hunter's union is having their daily meeting across the aisle. They're sizing me up. I think it's a cell phone thing.'

'They're not used to you city boys,' she said.

'You made it home okay.'

'Smooth sailing,' she said. 'But winter's on its way.'

'What do you mean?'

'They're forecasting snow, lots of it. How's Dad?'

'Same as yesterday. Maybe a little worse. He was still sleeping when I left this morning.'

'What are you doing in Grand Marais?'

'I deposited the money. I feel dirty.'

'You feel what?'

'Never mind. It was four hundred ninety-eight thousand bucks. It's all in the bank.'

'Thanks for taking care of that. I was feeling weird about it.'

'That was weird wasn't it?' Noah said, peeking over his shoulder. None of the deer hunters were staring anymore. 'I mean, that he'd have all that dough? That he would keep it in the *freezer*?'

‘Think about it,’ Solveig said. ‘Going to the bank means having to talk to people, it means having to leave his little cave up there. He doesn’t like doing either of those things.’

‘I guess,’ Noah said, checking over his shoulder again. ‘And he never spends anything either. He’s been driving the same car and wearing the same shirt since I was in high school. He only eats oatmeal and whatever he catches in the lake. And I suppose he’s got a nice little pension.’

‘Very nice pension,’ Solveig said. ‘That I know for a fact.’

‘Even so.’

‘I don’t suppose you heard from the doctor yet.’

Noah looked at his watch. ‘Solveig, it’s not even eleven o’clock. They probably haven’t sent the stuff off to the lab yet.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘And I know we already *know*. I just hate waiting, even though I don’t know what we’re waiting for.’

‘How soon can you come back? I can tell he really wants you here. I can see it in the way his face brightens every time either of us mentions you.’

‘I think Tom’s sister can take the kids starting Wednesday. She’s such a help, she really is. They can stay with her until the weekend, then Tom can take care of them. How are you holding up, Noah? Are you doing okay? How long can you stay? It’s not fair all of this is falling on you.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, you’ve been taking care of him for the last ten years. Anyway, I can stick around for a while. If it gets to be too much longer, Nat might come for a while.’

‘Oh that’d be fantastic. You know, I was thinking about it on the drive home, I wonder if her having lost her job might not, you know, help.’ Solveig was always very uncomfortable about the subject of their infertility problems, she never spoke about them directly.

‘Maybe.’

'I'm sorry.'

'There's nothing to be sorry about.'

'Anyway, I should be there on Wednesday night or Thursday morning. I'll call you as soon as I know when. Leave the phone on, okay?'

'I will.'

'And call me as soon as you hear from the doctor, okay? The second you hear.'

'You don't even need to ask. I'll call right away.'

'And say hi to Dad. Tell him I love him.'

'I will.'

'And take care of yourself, too.'

'Don't worry about me.'

'Can't help it.'

'Okay then,' Noah said. 'I guess that's it.'

'I'll talk to you soon.'

'Hey Sol'...'

'Yeah?'

'Nothing, never mind. I'll call you when I hear from the doctor.'

They hung up and Noah continued staring out the window onto Main Street. Everything was gray: the sky, the trees in the dull late morning light, the buildings across the street, even the green car parked on the curb right outside the window, it was all gray. There was so much to be glum about, so much to doubt, so much to sidetrack him... and yet, looking out onto the deserted, windy street, the stink of griddle grease and cigarette smoke and bad coffee permeating the air, the thought of his father's cancerous tissue at a lab in Duluth, his wife at home, infertile and unemployed, despite all of this he felt a gigantic sense of relief. It was unspecific – like everything up here had been – but it began to overwhelm him, this feeling of relief. He smiled first, looked back at the motley deer hunting crew at the



counter, then laughed. Not at them, but at the great big, imprecise contentment that was overtaking him.

When the food came, all three plates of it, he ate like a wolf. He drank four or five glasses of water, his juice, and was finally brought a pot of coffee all for himself after the waitress got tired of refilling his mug. He buttered the pecan roll, salted the steak, and drowned the pancakes in maple syrup. He ate the strips of bacon whole and sopped everything in egg yolk. When he was finished – and it wasn't long – he ordered a glass of milk, the largest size they had, and guzzled it down without taking a breath. He pushed the plates to the other side of the table, unbuttoned his pants under the table, let out a huge, silent burp, and unfolded the newspaper in front of him.

He skipped over the election information – politics bored him beyond words – and read a feature on the economic doldrums gripping the steel and shipping industries. Everything was down: taconite production, ship traffic, grain shipments, coal, imports and exports. There were problems with the stevedores union, with the railways, with the mines – everything was in the tank. The economic implications were far-reaching and grim, the forecast even grimmer. The mayors of Duluth and Superior – in reelection mode no doubt – were both calling for tariffs on imported steel products. It was, in other words, the same song and economic dance the port towns went through year after year. Political posturing, economic gamesmanship, sagging iron range prospects, they were all part of the problem. He thought, it never changes. All this shit about hard times and new urgencies. It never will change.

When the waitress stopped by to clear his table, he asked for the check. The grand total was \$10.29. He put a twenty on the table, rolled up the paper, and walked a couple of blocks back towards the bank to a hotel called the Poplar Inn. It was a nice place, a Holiday Inn style hotel with a fake fire burning in the lobby fireplace and more fish mounted on the wall. The kid behind the desk was enormous. Eighteen years old and easily four hundred

pounds. He had dandruff and eczema and was reading a sci-fi novel with a busty alien killer on the cover.

‘Good morning, sir,’ the kid said, a cold sore unfolded from the corner of his mouth. He set the book down gingerly. ‘Can I help you?’

Everyone’s so polite, Noah thought. In the background, there was an industrial sounding hum, the heater, maybe, or the indoor swimming pool’s filtration system. It almost vibrated.

‘I need a room,’ Noah said. ‘Please.’

‘For how many nights?’ The kid’s voice was dainty, unbelievably dainty coming from his giant face.

‘No nights, just for an hour or so.’

The kid blushed, a billboard of pink face, and looked away. ‘We don’t, um, rent rooms by the hour.’

‘Of course not,’ Noah said, realizing just then how his request must have sounded. He laughed a fake, embarrassed laugh. ‘No, not that. I’ll pay for a full night. I just need a place to clean up. A place to take a shower.’

The kid looked suspicious. ‘Our single room rate is forty-nine dollars.’

‘Okay.’

‘Smoking or non smoking?’

‘Non-smoking. Any room will do as long as it has a shower and clean towels.’

‘Sir, all of our rooms have showers and clean towels.’ The kid blushed again.

‘Of course they do.’ He felt like an idiot.

‘How will you be paying, sir?’

‘Credit card,’ Noah said, handing him his Visa. His gut was bursting and he couldn’t wait to get out of his pants.

The kid handed Noah an electronic key after he processed his credit card, told him the room was right around the corner, and picked his book back off the counter. ‘Let us know if there’s anything else we can do for you,’ he peeped.

Noah nodded thanks and went to the room. It was nice – queen sized bed, two nightstands, a television on a hutch, pictures of loons on the wall, an air conditioner under the window. The bathroom was small but clean, and there were half a dozen rolls of toilet paper on the rack above the toilet.

He untied his boots, took off his jeans and sweatshirt, and unrolled the sports page from the newspaper. The Vikings had lost the day before, so had the professional hockey and basketball teams. The UMD Hockey team was mired in an early season slump, and so was the East high school team, if an opening season loss to a suburban Minneapolis powerhouse could be considered a slump, and it could, at least according to the Herald’s high school beat writer who had already written off the season. On the back of the sports page, the forecast called for continued colder than normal temperatures with a good chance of snow, possibly heavy, by mid-week. The thought of it appealed to Noah. Twelve inches, he thought. A foot of snow to brighten things up.

The hotel soap smelled like almonds, the shampoo like a fourth rate barbershop. He took a long, scalding shower, washing and rinsing and washing and rinsing until the soap disappeared in his hand and the miniature bottle of shampoo was empty. He would’ve liked to have shaved, but there was no razor, and he didn’t want to call the kid at the desk. So he shampooed his face with suds from his hair instead. When he got out of the shower, the mirror above the sink was dripping with condensation and he could actually see the steam wafting into the room. He toweled himself off, flushed the toilet, and wrapped the towel around his aching waist. The number one breakfast was still having trouble finding a resting place.

In the drawer of the nightstand there was an Arrowhead County phone book. He turned to the yellow pages in the back half of the book and looked up piano tuner. There were two listings, both in Grand Marais.

The voice on the other end of the phone answered with a grunt.

‘Hello?’ Noah said. ‘Is this Nelson’s Piano Tuning?’

‘It is.’

‘I need to have a piano tuned. It’s in pretty bad shape.’

‘Whereabouts?’

‘Just outside of Misquah,’ Noah said. ‘Ten or fifteen minutes up the hill actually.’

‘When are you thinking?’

‘As soon as possible, I guess. I think it’ll need several new strings, maybe some new hammers too. It hasn’t been used in years.’

‘Nine o’clock tomorrow morning?’

‘Sure,’ Noah said. ‘Nine o’clock is fine.’

‘Directions?’

Noah gave him directions.

‘Lake Forsone,’ the piano tuner said. ‘Gottcha. I’ll be there at nine.’

‘I’ll keep an eye out for you.’

‘Umhum,’ he grunted, and then the phone went dead.

There were only two television stations that came in clearly so he alternated between a local craft show and a midday news report from the ABC affiliate in Duluth. Most of the hype was about the early season snow storm that was aiming directly for the arrowhead, but there were intermittent digressions about the elections and a local burglary ring that had just been busted. As he watched the television, it struck Noah that the programming looked ten years old, and he snickered to himself when the woman on the crafts program suggested that people pick all their pine boughs for Christmas wreathes now, before everyone else beat

them to it. There were millions of acres of pine trees in Minnesota, the thought that they might not be enough – suggested even tongue in cheek – killed him.

He finally turned the TV off, got dressed, looked at his watch – it was just past noon – and decided he should get back and check on his father. As he was checking his pockets to make sure he had his wallet and keys and Solveig’s cell phone, it began to ring. His gut dropped in an instant, his full feeling emptied, and he answered the phone sure of the news on the other end.

‘Is this Noah Torr?’ a woman’s voice asked.

‘It is.’

‘Mr. Torr, this is Dr. Talakson from St. Mary’s hospital in Duluth. Have I caught you at a bad time?’

Noah sat on the bed, ran a hand through his wet hair. ‘No, not at all. Now’s fine.’

‘Mr. Torr, as you probably know your father was here to see us this weekend. Your sister told us to contact you at this number with any information concerning your father’s test results. Is that correct?’

‘Yes it is. I’ve been expecting your call.’

‘Good. I’m calling you sooner than I expected. Not all of the lab results are back, but we have been able to make a preliminary diagnosis based on the colonoscopy we performed.’ She paused; Noah could hear paper shuffling in the background.

‘And?’

‘I don’t want to alarm you, Mr. Torr, but your father has cancer. Well-advanced cancer. The biopsy on the polyps we removed are malignant. They’re also very large. Are you at all familiar with colorectal cancer, Mr. Torr?’

Noah’s mind was wandering in twenty different directions.

‘Mr. Torr?’

‘Yes. I know something about it. My wife’s father recently died of cancer.’

‘I see. I’m going to explain to you what we’ve found. I want you to stop me if you don’t understand or if I’m covering ground you don’t need me to, okay?’ She didn’t wait for a reply. ‘As I said, your father’s cancer is well developed. While he was here, we performed, among other tests, a colonoscopy. I’ve mentioned that already.’

‘I’m familiar with the colonoscopy,’ Noah said.

‘Good,’ the doctor said. ‘Very good. During the exam, we removed several polyps using a procedure called a polypectomy. The results of the biopsy from those polyps are what I have. As I said, the polyps are malignant. This means that they are cancerous. Usually, under more normal circumstances, the next step would be to determine the spread and degree of the cancer elsewhere in the body, and we’ve done blood tests to help determine that, though we don’t have any of the results back yet.’

‘Now, as I said, I don’t want to alarm you, but I do want to make clear your father’s situation. Based on my experience in diagnosing and treating cancer – I have more than twenty years experience – I can safely tell you without the results of the blood tests that your father’s sickness has reached what we call Duke’s D, or Stage Four. What this means is that your father’s cancer has been developing for some time and I’m sure it has spread from his bowel into other parts of his body – most likely his liver.’

‘Once a patient reaches this stage of development, all of the usual methods of treating them – radiation therapy, chemotherapy, surgery – those methods of treatment are no longer viable options. The cancer is too developed, has spread too much. Are you following me Mr. Torr?’

Noah stammered yes.

‘Good. In cases such as your father’s, where the cancer has already developed to the extent that it has, we pursue what is called Palliative therapy, and it’s aim is generally to make the patient more comfortable.’

‘How do you do that?’

‘The therapy varies greatly, Mr. Torr, and we’ll need to see your father again soon, after we get the blood work back, in order to determine the best course of action. But this is not a therapy designed to cure anything, it’s designed to improve the quality of his life.’

‘So what, you put an extra pillow under his head and feed him Popsicles?’

‘It’s not quite that simple, Mr. Torr, but it’s not that far from the truth either. Though surgery or radiation or chemotherapy may remain options, more than likely it’s a matter of finding the right medication and making sure that your father is surrounded by people that love him.’

‘Have you already prescribed some of these drugs? Is that what he came home with the other day?’

‘The drugs I prescribed for your father are pain relievers, yes, and he should be taking them because I assure you he’s in pain. But there may be other options, too. We’ll have to determine all of that when we see him again.’

‘Mr. Torr,’ she continued after a pause. ‘I understand your father doesn’t live in Duluth, but how soon before you can bring him back to see us?’

‘You know, it’s a miracle he went at all. He’s very pigheaded, very indignant about not wanting to see you. That’s why the cancer is so far along, I’m sure, because he’s been ignoring it for who knows how long? But I don’t know the answer to your question. I don’t even know *if* I’ll be able to get him back down there.’

The doctor clucked her tongue. ‘Mr. Torr, your father probably doesn’t have very long to live. I can’t urge you enough to bring him back here. There *are* things we can do to help both he and you and your sister.’

‘I’ll try,’ Noah said. ‘I’ll really try. He’s just so damn difficult.’

‘Tell him what I’ve told you.’

‘I will. Is there anything – aside from coaxing him in to getting down there to see you – that I should be doing?’

‘Your father has reached the stage of his illness where, I’m afraid, the best you can do is accommodate him. Make him comfortable, *do* prop a pillow under his head and give him a Popsicle if he wants one. Spend time with him, try to get him to eat, and to drink a lot of water. Use common sense.’

‘Okay,’ Noah said.

‘Mr. Torr, I’m very sorry to have called you with this news. I’ll be able to tell you more, much more, when the rest of his lab work comes back.’

‘Okay.’

‘And feel free to call me if you have any questions. This is a very complicated time for both of you, for all three of you. I understand that.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Alright,’ she was saying as Noah hung up the phone.

The truck didn’t handle the sharp curves of Highway 61 very well at high speeds. It would lurch and slide and grumble when Noah braked hard mid-curve, and sputter and moan when he’d step on the accelerator coming out of a turn.

After he’d hung up the phone with the doctor and hurried out of the hotel under the suspicious eyes of the obese receptionist, he’d jumped in the truck, nearly flooded the engine, but managed to get it started. Though he’d been expecting news of this sort – was in fact sure of it – it had still struck him as both shocking and horrible, and he felt like a complete heel for what suddenly seemed like a frivolous morning.

As he rounded a steep, uphill curve in the road, the battlement of cinder colored clouds broke, and the sun reflected off the galloping waves of Lake Superior in a million different directions. The lake was well below him, down a granite cliff, and the distance eclipsed the reflections. He could stare directly down onto them. It was a beautiful, muted sight, one that lasted only for a minute or two.



The Doctor's news had only confirmed what Noah was already certain of, but hearing it from the expert's mouth gave him a new sense of proportion, a new authority where his own messy emotions were concerned. Just an hour ago, at the Blue Sky Café, he'd felt fuller, more alive, and happier than he had in years. As he analyzed himself now, bouncing along the rutted highway in his father's truck, he wondered at first if it was the thought of all that money in the bank that had, in effect, put his mind at ease. Though it had instantly made a million things easier, the sense of fullness he felt was much more elaborate than that. It was visceral, the kind of thing that made you feel like running as fast as you can for a month at a time. The news from the doctor; that was more likely it. He thought of it as something like a note of excuse. Everything that had been building over the last week, everything about being back with his Dad that was stumping him, all of the uncertain inclinations, the pangs of forgiveness and the still-deep resentment suddenly made sense. He wouldn't, he was sure, rush back into the house and embrace his father, it wasn't that sort of solution. It was something that seemed much more enduring. The news was like permission from the oracle of his faithlessness to live the rest of his life. Not just to live it, but to live it on the full foundation of his past. That huge, teetering part of him that had for years been resting on his resentment could be replaced with the whole story now, bitterroot and all.

Leaning into the last curve in the road before Misquah, hugging the gravel shoulder with the balding tires of the Suburban, he let it all sink in with the gravitational force of the turn. He couldn't wait to get back to the house, couldn't wait to size up this expansive new sensation in the company of his father. He drove past the blood stain from the deer he'd hit, past the dead stand of pines his father had pointed out as a landmark when he gave Noah directions to get back home what now seemed like ages ago, and finally turned right onto the gravel road that led to Lake Forsone.

'Oh god you're home,' Olaf rasped when Noah walked in the door. He was still lying on the couch, the blankets and quilts knotted up in his long legs.

‘Jesus, Dad, are you okay?’ Noah said, hurrying to Olaf’s side, bending down to untangle the blankets. Olaf put his hand weakly on Noah’s shoulder. ‘Dad, what’s going on?’

Olaf moaned.

‘Dad,’ Noah said clearly, enunciating each of his words with loud clarity, ‘are you okay? What’s happening here?’

Olaf dropped his head on the pillow, coughed a pathetic cough. ‘Where have you been?’

Noah could smell something now, very faintly, like the stink of a paper mill town ten miles before you reach it. ‘Dad, I want you to talk to me. Help me out. What’s going on here?’

Olaf reached into the front of his union suit and tried to twist it around. His eyes were rolled back, his lips were desiccated and cracked, and his pillow was covered with wiry, silver strands of hair.

Noah pulled Olaf’s hand out from the union suit. ‘Did you have an accident? Huh? It’s okay, don’t worry. We’ll take care of it.’

‘Where were you?’

‘I went to Grand Marais,’ Noah said, getting the blankets untangled from Olaf’s legs. He tossed them on the chair. ‘What’ve we got here?’ He rolled Olaf onto his side.

‘I couldn’t get up,’ Olaf said, his voice practically inaudible. ‘It just happened. I just woke up.’

‘I told you not to worry, Dad. We’ll take care of this.’

‘Where were you?’

Noah stood up and started towards the kitchen. ‘Just a minute, Dad. I’m right here. I’m right here, not going anywhere.’ He grabbed three towels from a drawer beneath the counter. He wetted two of them.

Olaf was on his back again, breathing heavily enough that his moustache fluttered. Noah smoothed his father's hair before he rolled him back on his side. 'We're going to get you cleaned up, okay?'

He unbuttoned the soiled flap on the backside of the union suit.

'I had to go,' Olaf said.

'We all gotta go.'

'You weren't here.'

'I'm sorry, Dad. I should have been here. You're right.'

He wiped as much as he could through the flap. When he was done, he unbuttoned the front of the union suit and eased it over his father's bare shoulders and slid it down his legs. All he had on under the red suit was a pair of stretched out, worn-thin, dingy BVDs and red wool socks. His hairy legs and stomach were gruelingly thin, bones were jutting out everywhere, and the stink of urine and shit lingered as if it were in the dust, not soaking into Olaf's old, leathery skin.

'It's goddamn cold,' Olaf said.

'Sit tight,' Noah said. 'I'll get you bundled back up in a minute.'

He wiped Olaf's thighs and belly with the second rag. Then he helped him up, slid his underwear off and dropped them in the garbage, and wiped the old man's genitals and backside again.

'Stand here for a minute, okay? Can you stand here for just a second?' Noah said, as he steadied his father and went quickly to Olaf's bedroom. He reappeared in a flash with a clean pair of underwear and a white v-neck t-shirt. 'Put these on, okay? Do you need a hand putting these on?'

Olaf nodded helplessly.

None of the blankets looked soiled, so Noah spread one across the chair. He was moving quickly, with authority, even instinctively. He took Olaf by the elbow with one hand and put the other one around his waist. 'We'll clean you up better in a minute, okay?'

Right now I want you to sit here. I'll get the fire stoked and we'll make some hot water to scrub you down with. Does that sound good?'

Olaf nodded. 'Goddamn mess,' he said.

'Don't worry about the mess. The mess is all cleaned up.' Noah put his father's feet up on the ottoman and wrapped him up in the blankets again. 'You going to be okay for a few minutes while I get the water going and clean things up a bit?'

'I'm fine,' Olaf whispered. 'Messy shit.'

The work kept Noah's mind clear. He put a kettle of water on the stove and then found a five-gallon soup pot and filled it with more water to warm. He dropped the messy rags in the garbage can and retrieved a couple towels from his bedroom. He added more wood to the fire and checked with his father every couple of minutes. Olaf just sat in the chair with a stare as vacant as the woods around them.

After the water in the kettle started to boil, Noah mixed it with cold water and soap and set to work scrubbing the sofa. It didn't appear that the mess had managed to seep through to the cushions, but Noah scrubbed it hard anyway. Every couple of minutes he'd look at Olaf and make a lighthearted comment.

When he was finished with the sofa, he dumped the water out the back door and readied another bucket using some of the water from the soup pot, which hadn't started to boil yet but was getting warm. He unswaddled Olaf's legs and gave them a more thorough washing, helped Olaf up again, washed the rest of him, and finally redressed him in a pair of long johns and turtleneck he'd found in Olaf's dresser. The whole thing had taken an hour, and by the time Olaf was back on the couch and resting peacefully, the old man had regained some of his sensibility.

'You okay now?' Noah asked. He was sitting on the coffee table only inches from Olaf's waxen face.

'I'm okay.'

'What happened here?'

‘Couldn’t get up.’

‘Jesus I’m a schmuck.’

‘You’re a schmuck because I’m a goddamn invalid?’

‘I’m a schmuck because I wasn’t here to help.’

Olaf struggled to ask, ‘what am I going to do, Noah?’

‘Don’t worry about that, Dad. I’m here now. I won’t leave you alone anymore, okay?’

Olaf didn’t say anything, just laid there with a toothless scowl on his face, pale as dust. Noah thought of telling him about the call from the doctor, about the trip to the bank, about his conversation with Solveig, but finally settled on the weather.

‘It’s going to snow,’ Noah said.

Olaf’s lips flapped. ‘Of course it will.’

‘I mean it’s in the forecast. We might get socked.’

‘Socked,’ Olaf said, searching, Noah thought, for the meaning.

‘It might snow a lot. They’re saying we could get socked.’

Olaf nodded.

‘What do we do about getting the road plowed if we do?’

‘Laksonenn,’ Olaf said.

‘Laksonenn?’

‘Laksonenn plows.’ Every word from the old man was a triumph of will. It was amazing what a couple of days had done.

‘Someone named Laksonenn plows your road?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Do I need to call him or anything?’

Olaf shook his head no. During the next two minutes, Noah watched the old man’s lips puckering and his face twitching, as he fell back to sleep.

Standing above him, Noah cried.

Noah kept the fire blazing and made sure that the blankets stayed wrapped around his father. For an hour or so he'd just sat there watching the old man, his mind as blank as the sky outside was dull, trying to keep himself together. By the time it got dark, he'd managed to straighten the place up and make a visit to the outhouse. He thought of going out to the shed to work on the anchor, but decided instead that he ought to be at his father's side should anything happen again.

Olaf slept, but it was a sleep unlike anything Noah could ever have imagined. He would grunt and hiccup and sigh while his face twisted and folded in a hundred unnatural ways. His lips twitched, his nose crinkled, his eyelids disappeared in the painful looking sack of his face. And all the while, his hands were fidgeting, his arms were tearing at the blankets, and his feet were keeping time with some song in his head. Twice over the course of the afternoon Olaf's eyes plunged open and he'd stared hard at Noah, but just as quickly as they'd opened, he'd close them again and be right back with his fitful dreams. It struck Noah that maybe he was playing peek-a-boo with death.

At five o'clock Noah ate a few crackers and half a jar of pickled herring. He thought of waking Olaf to see if he wanted anything, but he finally looked like he was sleeping peacefully, so Noah called Nat instead and left his father to rest.

'Guess who,' Noah said.

'Paul Bunyan?' Nat's sweet voice said.

'You got it. How's my girl?'

'Just missing you.'

'That makes two of us.'

'Are you at your father's house? You sound like you're in a tunnel again.'

‘I’ve got a mouthful of herring, maybe that’s the problem,’ he said swallowing.  
‘Yeah, I’m here. What are you up to?’

‘I spent the whole day down at the shop with Ed. It was loads of fun. He taught me everything.’

‘You’re a quick learner.’

‘I’m on to you,’ she teased. ‘I know how the two of you fill your days now. He bought me a sandwich from that deli the two of you order out from everyday. I know what goes on down there.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You don’t ever have any work to do, Ed told me as much. There were two people in that store all day. Ed only had to wrap up two things to mail off. He told me to tell you about one of them, something about a Braha manuscript. He said it sold, that you got what you wanted for it.’

‘Wow, I never thought I’d sell that.’ Before he left, Noah had left firm instructions on what to do with the manuscript, the centerpiece of his current inventory. Ed was to accept no less than the asking price.

‘Some guy from Holland bought it.’

‘The bourgeois,’ Noah said. ‘How’s everything with Ed? Is he holding up? I’m the absentee owner of the year.’

‘You know Ed can take care of that place. It’s in good hands. I’m sure he misses lunch with you, but he’s got the radio to keep him company.’

The phone went dead for a second. ‘Hello? Hello?’ Nat was saying as it reconnected.

‘I’m here,’ Noah said. ‘Just lost you for a minute. What were we talking about again?’

‘Ed. The shop.’

‘I wonder if Ed has the kind of money to buy that place from me?’

'I thought you loved your musty little hovel.'

'I do, I'm just ready, I don't know, for something else.'

'That makes two of us, huh?'

'Maybe,' Noah said.

'You sound blue all of a sudden. Is anything the matter? How's your dad?'

'Not well.' Noah looked at him, his breathing was steady, a good sign. 'Not very well at all.' The facts were the facts.

'Worse than before?'

'I don't think there's better or worse anymore.'

'What do you mean?'

'He shit his pants again today. He couldn't get up by himself – *couldn't get off the couch* – and I wasn't here to help him, so he shit his pants.'

'My god.'

'No kidding. And he's spent most of the day in some bizarre dream world, coming in and out of consciousness. Like a madman.'

'What's he doing now?'

'Actually, for the last hour he's been sleeping pretty peacefully.'

'Where were you earlier, when he couldn't get up?'

'If you're not sitting down, maybe you'd better. I went to Grand Marais this morning. Are you sitting?'

'I'm sitting.'

'I went to Grand Marais to deposit my father's fortune. Half a million dollars.'

'*What?*'

'It's got me feeling dirty all over,' Noah said.

'Hold on. Are you telling me your father has half a million dollars?'

'Half of it's ours.'

'I thought he lived in a hut in the woods.'



‘That’s half the reason he’s loaded, I’m sure.’

‘And you had to what, deposit it? Like in a bank?’

‘He had it in jars in the freezer,’ Noah said.

‘Half a million dollars?’

‘Unbelievable isn’t it?’

‘We could adopt five kids with money like that,’ Nat said.

Noah hadn’t thought of it like that. ‘For starters,’ he admitted. ‘Or it could pay for your elementary education degree. And support us while you went.’ He glanced over at his father, felt a walloping sense of shame for celebrating his inheritance, and quickly amended himself. ‘God, I’m a greedy shit. He’s sleeping ten feet away from me and I’m talking about the money like he’s already dead.’

‘You’re not greedy, Noah. It’s a remarkable thing, that’s all.’

‘I have this feeling like someone’s watching me, marking down these transgressions. But I never even thought about money before yesterday, I never thought about a single penny. I don’t care about the money.’

‘No one’s watching you.’

‘This whole damn thing,’ Noah said. ‘I just don’t know.’

‘Every time I talk to you you sound so overwhelmed, like you’ve got way too much on your mind. Which doesn’t make sense because it always sounds like you’ve got everything under control, too.’

It wasn’t that simple. ‘Solveig’s gone. She took him to the doctor on Saturday. The doctor called me back today. He’s bad, can’t even be treated. He’s shitting his pants. He wants me to bury him in the lake. He had half a million dollars in the freezer. Everything... it’s just so goddamn much. It’s like everything that’s supposed to happen over ten years is being compressed into one week. Rather than watching my father grow old, I’m watching him *die*. You see how that’d be overwhelming?’

‘I’m not saying it isn’t, or that it shouldn’t be. What I’m saying is that you’re doing okay.’

Noah wasn’t listening. ‘And there’s you. There’s us.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Your job. The whole baby saga.’

‘Sweetie, we talked about all of that, remember? That’s all covered and taken care of for now. You’re supposed to be worrying about your dad. I’ll take care of me.’

‘Easier said than done.’

‘It doesn’t have to be.’

‘You know,’ he was lightheaded, ‘I’m up here, I’m so far out of my element in every respect, and I just keep getting this feeling, I’ve had it all day, I don’t know how to describe it, this feeling like despite everything it’s all fitting together and I just don’t get it.’

‘Don’t get what?’

‘*Everything*. But even though I don’t get it, I *get it*.’

‘You just said you don’t get it.’

‘That’s the thing,’ he said. ‘Isn’t it stupid? It’s like I’m drowning in all this emotional shit, and that’s just the way it’s supposed to be. You know?’

‘It makes sense because it doesn’t make sense?’ She was confused herself now, he could tell.

‘Yes. That’s it, that’s what I’m talking about. You know, I was driving home today in my Dad’s truck. I’d just got off the phone with the doctor who told me it’s over, stage four, untreatable, I’m all broken up about it, I really am, and I start to feel this calm. I can’t figure it out. It makes no sense. And I get off on this little dream about living here. About living in Duluth and it all comes together.’

‘I’d live in Duluth,’ she interrupted.

‘Are you kidding me?’ Any conversation they’d ever had about the possibility of moving back to Minnesota, much less Duluth – and they were few and far between, usually

after Noah had been stuck in an especially horrendous rush hour or delayed for six hours getting into Logan – had always ended with emphatic, sarcastic laughter and ridicule from her.

‘I would.’

‘Since when?’

‘What? I could go to one of the universities there, get a teaching certificate. When I finished I could teach on an Indian reservation. I’d love to do that.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Why?’

‘You’ve laughed in my face every single time I ever suggested the *possibility*. Now you *want* to move here?’

‘So?’

‘*So*?’

‘So people change, Noah, their priorities change, their perspectives change.’

‘Yeah, but this is like converting the pope to atheism. I mean, you’d rather live in Alabama than Duluth.’

‘I could be convinced.’

‘You’re lying. You’re absolutely lying,’ he said. ‘Anyway, how did we get off the subject?’

‘We’re not off the subject. You said you thought about living there. You had a vision or something. I’m saying that I’d consider it. I’m also saying that it’s all part of this thing with your father. Even though you’re having a hard time piecing it together, you’re doing a good job. And maybe if you’d spend a little less time trying to be perfect, you’d actually see that.’

‘That, too, is easier said than done, the part about taking it on faith.’

‘You’re a big, smart, strong boy – give yourself the benefit of the doubt.’

‘The benefit of the doubt,’ he said suspiciously.

‘That’s right.’

‘Nat, what about this business of burying him when the time comes? What in the hell am I supposed to do about that?’

‘I hate to cop out, especially after I told you it was okay in my opinion the other day, but this is between the three of you.’

He didn’t want to hear it, but she was right. He told her that.

‘I will tell you this much, whatever decision you make, I’m sure it will be the right one.’

‘That makes one person with confidence, and she’s two thousand miles away.’

‘Do you want to tell me what the doctor said?’

‘There’s nothing to tell. She wants to see him again, I’m sure he won’t go, he doesn’t have long.’

‘How did Solveig get him to go?’

‘She could always charm him into anything.’

‘I suspect you charm him too.’

‘Who don’t I charm?’ Noah said.

‘You charm me. That’s a fact.’

‘And I guess that’s all that really counts, huh?’

‘Don’t you forget it,’ she said. ‘Will you keep me up to the minute? Call me tomorrow again, okay?’

‘I will. In the meantime, get your application into St. Scholastica.’

‘What? To where?’ she asked.

‘St. Scholastica, it’s a college in Duluth.’

‘I might just surprise you.’

‘You always do.’

They said goodbye.

There were hundreds of photographs in the shoebox. Noah had thumbed through most of them by the time he found himself staring at his parent's wedding picture. The man asleep on the couch would never have been mistaken for the stalwart, stoic giant in the black suit and tie and patent leather shoes in the photo, but his mother, whose impossibly blond hair and pouty, Nordic lips and big, sleek eyes never changed. She looked exactly like the photograph that Noah had on his mantle back in Boston, the one of the two of them, arm in arm, at his high school graduation. She was, he'd always thought, the epitome of ageless grace. There was no denying that.

No denying that she was strikingly beautiful either, and the thought that his father could have boarded a ship two days after the wedding snapshot was taken, could have left a bride so beautiful, was a mystery all its own. Noah always remembered – when he was remembering fonder times – the playful dinnertime conversations when he was a kid, and the harmless jabs his mother would take at the then still human head of the table.

'Never make your girl second fiddle to a boat,' she'd say, winking at Noah.

Olaf, chewing on a piece of pork chop, would say, 'don't listen to her son. If you've got a girl, she's going to want things. You'll need a job.'

'Just give her a honeymoon, Noah. She'll love you better that way.' And again the wink.

Noah could hardly believe it had all happened in the same lifetime as this, could hardly believe that words as innocent as these had ever passed between them. Nor could he believe that there was such a thing as love so simple. He set the picture down on the lid of the shoebox and got up to go outside to take a piss. When he came back inside, Olaf was holding the picture up to the light. His eyes were dopey and glazed.

'She was beautiful,' he whispered with his cottony voice.

'Always,' Noah said. 'How are you doing? You were having some sleep there.'

Olaf was staring at the picture. 'She never got old.'

'It's funny you say that, I was just thinking the same thing.'

‘She was the love of my life,’ Olaf said.

Noah could hardly believe his ears, though he’d always suspected as much. Nothing else could have explained the flaming mess of years. ‘She was the love of my life, too. For a long time.’

‘She broke my heart,’ Olaf said. The words were like something whispered by a bird. The contrition, the sadness, it was impossible.

‘There were a lot of broken hearts back then.’

‘There still are,’ Olaf said, looking Noah square in the eyes. ‘But I guess it’s a small price to pay. Everyone pays it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘A small price to pay for the memories, broken hearts or not.’

‘You want to know what scares me more than anything? That I’m going to end up, way down the road, without Natalie. Sometimes I don’t care about anything but making it to sixty with her. I see old folks in restaurants or walking down the street and I get terrified we’ll end up apart. I can’t explain why, it just happens, these moments, and I’m overwhelmed.’

‘I used to think that too, when your mother and I were young. But our lives changed; those thoughts of mine changed. Hers too, if she ever had them.’

‘I was looking at all these pictures,’ Noah said, taking the shoebox from the coffee table. ‘A lot of things I’d forgotten about.’

‘I wanted to show you those that morning at the lodge,’ Olaf said. ‘I guess we ran out of time.’

‘We made other use of it,’ Noah said, thinking their words had taken on extra meaning.

Olaf forced a smile.

‘Can I ask you about it?’ Noah said.

‘About what?’

‘You and Mom.’

Olaf closed his eyes and set his chin on his chest again. ‘Your mother was smart as a whip,’ he began, seemingly in the middle of a thought on the subject already. ‘She was so much smarter than me. It was impossible sometimes. Smarter on everything but choosing a husband.’

‘What do you mean?’

Olaf wedged himself up so that his feet were on the floor. It was not an easy task for him, and when Noah got up to help, he waved him off. Once he was upright, and he spoke again, his voice was even fainter and farther away than it had been before. ‘She didn’t so much choose me as she got stuck with me, I guess.’

‘I don’t know if I believe that,’ Noah said. He didn’t believe it at all, in fact. ‘She loved you.’

Olaf was trying to wrap himself up in the blankets again. He couldn’t get the afghan over his shoulders, so Noah did it for him.

‘Your mother was pregnant when we got married. In the middle of her second month.’

‘She was *pregnant*?’ Noah was trying to do the math in his head. It didn’t add up.

‘She miscarried two weeks later. Per Olaf Torr. Go to the Forest Hill cemetery on Woodland Avenue in Duluth, there’s a gravestone. Wasn’t even a fetus, really, just a little dot, nothing, but your mother insisted.’

‘Wait a minute. Mom miscarried at two months and *buried* him? Gave him a *name*?’ It was sheer craziness, a two-month-old miscarriage with a gravestone? Impossible, Noah thought. He’d had two-month-old miscarriages and Nat would have sooner buried their aquarium fish than the suctioned-out fetus of a two-month pregnancy.

‘I wanted it to be your name when you came along.’

‘What was it?’ Noah was still incredulous.

‘Per Olaf.’

Noah tried to imagine himself as Per. 'This is something.'

'I wanted to tell you when you told me about Natalie, but I didn't think it was the best time.'

'I don't, I don't know...' Noah had gotten lost in the memories of his own tragic pregnancies. That there was something like a pedigree in the family was both startling for its unexpectedness, but also pleasing for the immediate attachment he could make to fate.

'I was passing through the Soo when I found out about it. July, 1958. I was never so confused in my life.'

Noah had given up. 'Why confused?'

'I somehow thought that the end of that pregnancy meant the end of our marriage. You see, your mother was so damn pretty, such a damn good person, and I thought that the only reason she settled down with me was because she got herself pregnant.'

'*You* got her pregnant,' Noah said.

Olaf smirked. 'We'd met at a dance of all the goddamn places, back when people still danced. She told me right off the bat she didn't want a sailor boy, that she could tell I was one but that she couldn't help herself. Underneath all that prim and properness, she had a bit of the devil in her.'

'*Mom?*'

'Sure. She was like a hawk, right from the get go. We danced and danced. She smelled like rosewater, she always did, had on a white dress and white sweater, and with that blond hair, it was like she had a claim on half the purity in the world.' He shook his head. 'Of course, she knew what she was doing. Light as a lamb, pure as one, too, but there was something else too, a mind like... well, it was just unfair, that's all.'

'So you were just a defenseless old dope, huh?'

'Anyone would have been defenseless, that's the truth. That's what I'm getting at. Believe me, had she been playing me for the fool or not, I would've bought it all. But I don't think she was. She was too smart for those games.' A broad smile crept across his



face. 'My god did we dance. At the end of the night I walked her back home. She still lived with her parents over on the west end, by Wade stadium. Cool summer night. At the door she said it was a pleasure to meet me, but that she didn't want a sailor for her main squeeze. Said it was a recipe for getting old before your time.'

'Well, I know it didn't end there. Something must have happened between then and September, between then and what, August come to think of it.'

Olaf's smile seemed to widen and disappear at the same time. 'I was only home for a weekend then, had to ship out on Monday.'

'So?' Noah said.

'So Sunday morning I'm walking back to my apartment from the diner on the corner and I get there and your mother is sitting on the stoop outside my building. I said, "I thought sailors were off limits" and she said "you're not really a sailor" and I told her she was wrong about that.'

'Why'd she think you weren't a sailor?'

'She knew I was a sailor. It was her version of cat and mouse. She thought I could be the exception.'

'And you were, obviously,' Noah said.

'With a vengeance, from that Sunday morning on the stoop to my next layover three weeks later, to the day of our wedding, to the day at the Soo when I got word of her miscarriage. That must have been when she realized that her first instinct was right, that she'd gotten less than she bargained for.'

Noah couldn't believe his father thought this was true. He was having a hard time following the logic of his father's narrative, too. Unlike the telling of the wreck and his survival, which had been so automatic and impulsively told, so honest and so seemingly rehearsed, his recounting of the early days of his love affair with his mother was more like watching a twittering bird that had been let out of its cage and was terrified to be flying freely. The memories, Noah thought as he looked at the old man whose attention was on

the wedding picture again, had crept up on his father. Maybe it was the sickness, certainly the last twenty-four hours had been more difficult, or maybe it was simply that the lid had been blown off the kettle of his father's memory. Probably it was both, but whatever the case, Olaf didn't know the story nearly as well as he did that of the wreck. Maybe he'd taken it for granted all these years.

'She loved you,' Noah said, snapping out of his daze and interrupting the lull that had overtaken them. 'If you'd have seen her the morning of the wreck, you'd have known.'

Olaf looked up at him. 'I knew, but it was different for her than it was for me.'

'What was?'

'Our marriage. How I felt about her.'

'How?'

'I was practically an old man when we met – thirty-eight years old – and your mother was no spring chicken, especially not by the standards of 1958. She fell in love with me – or ended up with me – because twenty-eight year old girls weren't single in Duluth back then. You see?'

'I, on the other hand, fell in love with her like a kid. I was stupid in love with her.'

'I don't believe she didn't love you,' Noah said, firm in his conviction, he'd seen too much evidence to the contrary to believe what his father was saying.

'Ah, she might have grown to love me, but not how I loved her.' He set the picture down on the shoebox and laid back down himself. It took a gallant effort to get himself back prone, and when he did, finally, he was out of breath and wheezing badly. When he was situated and covered back up with the blankets, he closed his eyes and looked like he was going back to sleep. But after a minute he raised both his arms and started tapping the air with his fingertips.

'That day,' he continued, 'that Sunday in July, right after I met her, she invited me out for a glass of lemonade or a sundae. She said I had my pick. So we walked down to

Wahl's, sat at the counter, and sipped our lemonade. She told me everything about herself – then she plied me with questions. Where did I grow up? Did I miss Norway? Did I wish I lived there? Why did I work on the boats? Why wasn't I married? What about girlfriends? Did I like my job? What kind of parents did I have? Did I love them? Did I want to have kids? On and on. It was like a goddamn deposition. Usually, a woman starts on that, I would have got up and left, but there was something about her – I knew it.

'At the end of the afternoon, I walked her home again. I told her I was leaving the next morning and that I wouldn't be home for a few weeks, but that I'd like to see her again when I did get back. We were standing on her porch and she said, "My parents are in Minneapolis, why don't you come in?"

'Jesus I was stuck. I didn't know what she had in mind, but I knew what *I* was thinking about. That's why I said nope. I told her I had too much to do before shipping out, I left it at that.' He closed his eyes, started to fiddle with the air in front of him again.

'So you were smitten,' Noah said.

Olaf nodded.

'You've never struck me as the smitten type.'

'No?'

'You've always been pretty tough to crack.'

'Well your mother never had any trouble in that department.'

'Just the rest of the world,' Noah said.

'Your sister's never had any trouble, either.'

Then it's just me, Noah thought. Though he was no longer bitter.

'She was waiting for me when I got back. Like a bird, sitting on the stoop in front of my apartment when the cab dropped me off. She came up, we listened to the radio and sat next to each other on the couch with a fan blowing rosewater all over the place. I had no goddamn chance.'

'So it was what, still July?'

‘Early August. We were married September 28<sup>th</sup>.’

‘And you think she was only in it for the husband?’

‘Ahh, what the hell do I know?’

‘A lot more than I thought,’ Noah said.

‘What does that mean?’

‘I’ve never seen this side of you, that’s all.’

‘I don’t wear it on my sleeve,’ Olaf said.

Noah thought, that might be the biggest understatement ever. ‘How did she break your heart?’

‘Phil Lovelace.’

‘That was fifteen years later. What happened in between?’

Olaf rolled over and looked solemnly at Noah. ‘How about a glass of water?’

Noah got up and poured his father a glass of water. He helped him sit up and Olaf drank it.

‘What happened in between?’ Olaf said, wiping his lips on the sleeve of his turtleneck, ‘was life. Your mother got pregnant, we got married, she had a miscarriage, she got pregnant again, we bought the house on High Street, you were born, your sister was born, the *Rag* sank, *I* sank, your mother and I sank, Phil Lovelace took over for me while I kept the Freighter and the Tallahassee, and the Nickel Tap in business. That’s about it.’

‘A little simplified, isn’t it.’

‘No,’ Olaf said.

‘So there was no cause and effect? No regrets? No nothing?’

Olaf wiped his lips again. ‘There was nothing *but* cause and effect and regret.’

‘It’s just that simple?’ Noah said. For twenty-five years he’d been scratching his head over all of it, trying to see it from every possible angle, to measure his disdain in proportion to the events that formed it. ‘Mom’s fucking the dope across the street while

you're sopping up every drop of gin in town, and meanwhile your kids are stuck figuring it out, that's it?'

'If you're asking for answers, I don't have them. I can tell you three things – this is all I know: I hated myself, I hated your mother, and I hated what all that hate did to the two of you, to the four of us.'

'Mom didn't want Mr. Lovelace. Mr. Lovelace was your fill-in, like you said. The cat in the goddamn yard.'

'You're in some position to know that,' Olaf said. 'You were a kid.'

Noah stood up and went to the wood box. He took a couple pieces and put them into the fire. 'I grew up awfully fast, Dad.'

'And you were an expert on infidelity?'

'I didn't have to be an expert on infidelity. I heard Mom crying herself to sleep every night, I saw her sitting in the living room window watching the harbor, I watched her in the hospital, holding on for a last look at you.'

'That's all very romantic.'

'That's the truth.'

'It's hard to see from here,' Olaf said.

Hard to see? Noah thought. I'm sitting right here, what's hard to see? His hackles were back up, his mother was sacred ground. Dying or not, making amends or not, the one thing that didn't fly – would never fly – was disparaging comments about his mother. 'I don't know why it should be,' Noah said. 'It all seems pretty simple even now.'

'Nothing's simple.'

'You should have been home for her funeral. That's simple.'

'I'll admit it's hard to take stock when you're face down in a puddle of bad gin, hard to come to grips with anything, much less your cheating wife's death. Things had been bad between us for years. I mean bad to the point where we hardly ever spoke to each other. Hard hearted – hell hard headed – as I was, we never had a chance to work things

out. When I got word that she was in the hospital, that she was probably dying, I panicked. I guess I always thought there was a chance we'd get everything ironed out, that *I'd* get everything ironed out and we could make amends. When she was dying, I figured I was too late and there was no point.'

'So you sat in a bar for three days? She was still your wife, after all. And she was *dying*. Shouldn't that have been cause enough to put the goddamn drinks down, to rise above the... whatever it was, the animosity?'

'We were already dead, though, you see? I hate to sound like some goddamn Pollyanna, but your mother was done with me, she'd put her stock in the insurance man.'

'That was hardly her fault.'

'Hardly her fault?' Olaf said, his voice gruff and strong for an instant. 'You're just plain wrong about that. As wrong as you can be. I may have checked out, your mother might've wanted more – hell, she always did – but she shouldn't have done it the way she did.'

Touché, Noah thought, and he could feel some of the deep, long seeded ire dripping away. Of course, he still wanted to know where in the world it was supposed to go, what in the world he was supposed to do with the facts, but his father was right nonetheless: His wife, Noah's mother, was not the angel of Noah's boyhood memories. Letting the insurance man from across the street into your house, letting him romp naked on your husband's bed, letting him piss and shit in the toilet your husband installed because you asked him to, were true in spite of how they complicated things. Now it was up to Noah to figure it out on his own, his father had told him enough. He was sorry enough.

The old man's fingers had fallen on his chest, the wheezy snore, the twitching legs, they all started up again in the next half hour. Noah made sure Olaf was tucked in and warm and went to bed himself.

At first Noah thought it was a cat, inexplicably stuck in the crawlspace beneath the house, or a raccoon or possum more likely, fending off some danger. He didn't know what it was, but the longer he laid there, and the stiller he tried to be, the fainter the cry became until it disappeared altogether. Awake now, he curled up under the quilt and dreaded the thought of trying to get back to sleep.

He'd already spent the better part of an hour staring at the dark ceiling, parceling out blame in the newest, most unexpected twist in his lifelong grudge. It had literally never occurred to Noah that his mother ought to be held accountable for her three-year tryst with Mr. Lovelace. That is, it hadn't occurred to him until a couple hours earlier when thirty years of his father's stoicism came tumbling down to expose a wound that Noah had likewise never imagined. He'd always taken his mother's infidelity for granted, always saw it as her reward. And just as he'd assumed it was her right, he'd assumed his father didn't care, or was at least too drunk to see it otherwise himself.

*A broken heart*, Noah wondered, balling himself up under the quilt now, his mind replaying their conversation over and over again. *She shouldn't have done it*. Was it really so simple? Was the old man right? It struck Noah as somehow unfair that more than twenty years of certainty on the subject could so easily be dispelled.

A few minutes passed and he heard the whine again, louder this time and less distinct. Noah sat up in bed, cocked his head, and finally took the covers off, stepped out of bed, and went into the living room. Olaf was struggling with the blankets again.

'Dad? What's going on?' Noah said, fumbling his way to the lamp and switching it on.

Olaf's eyes cringed shut, his big hand went up to shield the light, and the moan went baritone, as if the light alone had changed his pain. 'Goddamnit,' Olaf said, his speech slurred and weak. 'Goddamnit, goddamnit.'

Noah helped him with the blankets. 'What is it, Dad? Are you too hot?'

'Shit,' Olaf strained.

'It's okay,' Noah assured him, though he had no idea what the problem was.

'*Shit*,' Olaf repeated.

'What?' Noah said, his confusion and concern getting the better of him. 'Tell me what you need.'

Olaf's shoulders crumpled, his chin fell, and his eyes and arms went limp. He was sitting upright now, his feet on the floor, his lips crusty and shuddering. After a minute he managed to say, 'I have to go, Noah. *Shit*. I have to go. Last one.'

There were dramatic, unintended pauses between his words that put Noah on edge. Each word he spoke caused Noah to react, as though he were anticipating Olaf's needs. When he finally got it all out, when Noah finally understood, he was deflated to the point of being immobilized. He sat there on his heels, his hands on Olaf's knees, too paralyzed by his sense of responsibility and inadequacy to help right away.

'Can you help me?' Olaf said. 'I'm sorry.'

The apology shamed Noah enough that he could have cried again, but he managed not to. 'Of course, Dad. That's what I'm here for. Let's get you dressed.'

Olaf was already bundled in a full layer of under clothes, so Noah needed only to find a pair of pants, which he did on his father's bedpost, and a coat and boots. He helped him dress and got him off the couch and outside.

The going was slow. Olaf could hardly keep his balance, and after only a few steps, Noah gave Olaf the flashlight, picked the old man up, and carried him up the path to the outhouse. Once there, Noah helped him get his pants down and steadied him on the seat. The night was as raw as wet leather, and Noah, helping his father stay upright on the stoop, shivered with each cold gust of wind that wound itself into the outhouse. In his haste to get the old man ready, he'd forgotten to put on socks, and the air was rushing up his pants.

For fifteen minutes Olaf sat there while Noah held him steady. Every other minute Noah was tempted to ask his father if he was okay, but each impulse was squelched by



some inherent sense of privacy or decency that was already so completely plundered that Noah could only shake his head while he looked away.

When Olaf finally went for the coffee can with the toilet paper, Noah was shivering. Olaf ripped a piece of damp, dappled paper from the roll and wiped himself. A couple more passes and Olaf looked up at Noah.

‘You done?’ Noah said.

Olaf shook his head.

‘Alright, let’s get you all hiked up and back into bed. You feel better?’

Again Olaf nodded.

‘Put your arms around my shoulders,’ Noah said, setting the flashlight on the bench. Except for one corner of the outhouse, the whole place went dark.

Olaf clutched haplessly at Noah’s arms.

‘Like this, Dad,’ Noah said, demonstrating with his own arms what he wanted his father to do. ‘Pretend we’re dancing.’

Olaf got his arms around Noah’s neck, a grip so feeble that Noah simply could not believe it. He pulled Olaf’s pants up, zipped up the coat, and helped him out of the outhouse. When they got back inside, Noah undressed him to his long johns and turtleneck and straightened out the blankets and quilts on the sofa.

Olaf, who was sitting in the chair, looked better, like the worst part of the night was over. ‘Maybe the bedroom, Noah,’ he said as he caught Noah’s eyes.

‘You want to sleep in the bedroom?’

‘It’s not so cold tonight.’

‘Okay,’ Noah said, buoyed for some reason by the suggestion. ‘That’s good, you’ll be more comfortable in there.’

Noah fixed the bed, and helped Olaf into it. When he was all set, his head deep in the pillow, Noah covered him with an extra quilt and the afghan and asked him if he was

okay. Only a dim slant of light from the kitchen shone into the room, and Noah could see him nod.

‘Good,’ Noah said. ‘If you need anything, shout. I’ll be in the room next door.’

He knocked on the wall adjoining the two bedrooms. ‘I’ll be right over there.’

‘Goddamn baby,’ Olaf said. He was drifting off to sleep.

‘Who’s a baby?’ Noah said.

‘Goddamn baby,’ Olaf said again.

‘On the contrary, Pops,’ Noah said.

‘Shit myself,’ Olaf said, almost asleep now.

‘Not this time,’ Noah said as he stood up and patted the quilt. ‘We got you all taken care of. Sleep tight.’ Noah knew he was talking to himself.

Olaf was already fighting off the bad dreams.

Noah was up at five-thirty to stoke the fire and check on his father. When he saw that Olaf's chest was still rising under the mound of blankets and that his lips were still puckering and flapping, he crept back into the living room and put water on for coffee.

He checked on Olaf every half hour. When it got light out – it was another sunless, sooty morning – Noah took a cup of coffee with him as he went out to the shed. Though he couldn't imagine standing face to face with the question of how to bury his father, he at least wanted to make sure that abiding by the old man's wishes was an option. The truth was he hoped that Solveig would be there to make the final decision for him – he was counting on it – or, failing that, that some sagacious impulse would seize him in the moment of truth.

Noah inspected the bolts that fastened the first piece of stainless steel tubing to the barrel. As far he could tell, all he'd have to do to get the other piece attached was screw two dozen bolts into a series of holes that had already been drilled into the side of the barrel. After the second piece of tubing was attached, Noah reckoned, he'd figure out how to finish rigging the chain through the contraption.

He worked for a couple hours, managing to secure the second piece so it was as firmly attached as the first. And although it took him several tries, he managed to figure out how the chain was meant to lace through the contraption. It startled him to think that he was working on it at all, much less that he'd figured out how the whole thing went together, but he had. It looked, he thought as he stepped back to inspect it, like a nineteenth century torture device. The idea that he might be able to attach his father's dead body to it, row him across the lake, and toss him over the side of the boat was starting to seem virtually impossible.

On the other hand there was, nestled in the seldom-checked recesses of his conscience, a sense of duty that kept trying to assert itself. The old man had, after all, thought it all out, and in some spiritual sense, Noah understood and wanted to carry out his wishes. Olaf had spent so much of this long life here, or wishing he were here, that spending eternity at the bottom of the lake, in such close proximity to the cabin, was certainly natural enough. The thing that kept pricking Noah's reasoning wasn't that there was something gruesome about it, though certainly there was, but that it was so unconventional, so poetic, and therefore so outside of his experience. When he stopped to think about it, stopped to *really* think about it, the idea's weirdness was also its charm, and he kept reminding himself of his father's wishes. The fact was, when all the rights and wrongs were sorted out, he was simply afraid of his own cowardice. This he knew, too, though he hated to admit it.

He went back into the house to check on his father again. The old man hadn't moved, but his chest was still rising, if slowly, though now his mouth was hang jawed. He looked like something from a wax museum. Noah stoked the fire again even though it was plenty warm, made sure the blankets were tucked in around his father, and poured himself another cup of coffee before he went back out to the shed. He'd reminded himself, unwittingly, about his mother's ashes, and he wanted to find them. Though again, what he'd do with them once he did as a matter he hadn't yet resolved.

He turned the shed upside down. For fifteen minutes he looked through boxes and the shelves on the wall; he turned over the mattresses leaning against the wall; he looked through the cans of evaporated turpentine and rusty nails; he went through the drawers of the hutch that sat under the window; he looked everywhere but couldn't find them. He imagined them in some sort of modest urn, nothing fit for a museum or royalty, but not a coffee can either. He started to go through everything again, but as he opened the top drawer of the hutch, he looked out the window and saw a truck with a big red piano painted

on the passenger side door. He'd forgotten all about the piano tuner, and he hurried out to meet him.

He was an ox of a man and a slob. His shirt was un-tucked, his fleshy haunches exposed, his shoes were untied, his hair looked oily from across the yard, and his black pants were flecked with something, perhaps paint, that gave them a clownish appearance. He had a toolbox the size of a suitcase and the sinewy long arms to carry it. When Noah came out of the shed and the door slammed behind him, the oafish man looked over his shoulder and returned Noah's hello with a wave.

'I almost forgot you were coming,' Noah said, hurrying across the yard to meet him. 'Did you have any trouble finding the place?'

'Not a bit,' he said. 'Nice spot here. Quiet, peaceful.'

Noah raised an eyebrow, one of his father's gestures, and said, 'That's one way of looking at it.'

There were crumbs on his cardigan sweater and nicotine stains on his cuticles. He'd thrust his hand forward to meet Noah's. 'Gordy Nelson. It's a pleasure to meet you.'

'Nice to meet you. My name's Noah.'

'This your place, Noah?' Gordy said, scanning the woods around the house.

'It's my father's house,' Noah said. 'He's not doing very well, cancer. He's asleep inside.'

A look of genuine concern spread across Gordy's face. 'I can come back another time,' he offered.

'Oh, no, no. Thanks, but it's not necessary. He's had a good night's sleep, he'll be fine. He probably won't even know you're here.'

'My brother had cancer a few years back,' Gordy said as they stepped onto the porch. 'He beat it, but it wasn't easy.'

‘I doubt anyone here will be beating it,’ Noah confided. ‘He’s untreatable now, too advanced.’

‘Well golly, I’m sorry to hear that.’ Again the look of genuine concern. ‘Maybe a little music will help him feel better.’

‘That’s the idea,’ Noah said. They were inside now.

‘Whew!’ Gordy said, taking a swipe at his brow with the back of his hand. ‘You’ve got it cooking in here.’

‘Sorry,’ Noah said, he was walking across the living room to shut his father’s bedroom door. ‘He gets cold – he’s always cold – needs it warm like this.’

Gordy was taking off his cardigan while he examined the piano. His shirt was wet under the arm pits and smattered with stains. The look on his face spoke volumes about the state of the old Acrosonic.

‘It’s been out of commission for the better part of twenty years,’ Noah explained as he stood next to Gordy, whose look of disappointment was getting even more serious. ‘It’s been sitting out on the porch, which I know is bad, but my father doesn’t play. It’s just been sitting there.’

Gordy lifted the lid and was shining a flashlight down into the soundboard and strings. ‘This thing doesn’t need a tuning,’ he said gravely. ‘It needs a pyre.’ He chuckled.

‘Can you fix it?’ Noah said.

‘It’ll take me all day.’

‘Do you have all day?’

Gordy looked at his watch. ‘I’ll get started and see where I end up, how’s that?’

‘Fair enough,’ Noah said. ‘I just want to get the damn thing fixed.’

‘Any more light in this place?’

Noah went from lamp to lamp turning them on. ‘I’m afraid that’s it.’

‘That’ll do.’

‘Can I offer you a cup of coffee?’ Noah said.

‘That’s kind, I’d love one.’

‘Cream or sugar?’

‘Black’s fine.’

Noah got it for him and sat down on the couch. ‘Is there anything I can do to help?’

‘Nah, I’ll just get cracking here.’ And he did.

For a couple of hours Gordy worked on the piano, pulling busted hammers and rusty strings from the open top, looking over his shoulder at Noah with a wrinkled brow and pierced lips as if he were a customer at a restaurant pulling a long black hair from his plate of spaghetti to show his waiter.

He hummed while he worked, and talked about all manner of things, but mainly about the weather, specifically the foot of snow that was in the forecast. It was going to start that night, he assured Noah. ‘Unless you’ve got a trick up your sleeve, or one of those cars out in the yard can fly, I’d get ‘em up onto the county road or you’ll be buried down here for the next five months.’

‘Thanks for the advice,’ Noah said, seriously considering it. ‘It’s awfully early for a foot of snow, isn’t it?’

‘We’ve had less snow the last few years, but we can still get walloped,’ Gordy said, pulling another steel string from the piano. ‘They’re talking about one of those El Nino winters again, which means warmer but wetter weather. I guess the little Mexicano wants to get a jump on things.’

Noah had no idea what Gordy was talking about, but he smiled anyway.

During a lull in the conversation, Noah got up to check on Olaf, who hadn’t made so much as a peep all morning. The curtains were drawn in the room, but Noah could see that Olaf’s eyes were open, his arms folded across his chest.

‘Hey, Dad,’ Noah whispered. ‘How are you?’

‘Okay,’ Olaf rasped, not convincingly. ‘Need some water.’

‘I’ll get you a glass,’ Noah said, and stepped back into the kitchen to fetch it. The little spout on the ten-gallon drum spat out half a glass of water but that was it. Noah brought it back to Olaf. ‘I’ll have to get more. This is all that was left in the jug.’

‘Pills,’ Olaf said.

‘You want your pills?’

‘Doctor’s pills.’

‘Okay,’ Noah said, setting the glass of water on his father’s nightstand and looking through the bag of pills for a painkiller. He took two from one of the plastic jars and brought them to Olaf. ‘Sit up and I’ll help you with this,’ Noah said. He helped him sit up.

‘It’s happening fast,’ Olaf said as Noah put the pills in his father’s hand.

In the living room Gordy dropped something heavy on the floor, a hammer or pair of pliers, something loud enough to be heard in the bedroom. Olaf looked out, startled but so slow of impulse that it looked more like a delayed reaction. His eyebrows knitted up.

‘It’s okay,’ Noah assured him. ‘There’s someone here fixing the piano. By the end of the day you’ll be hearing my very best *Mary Had a Little Lamb*.’

Olaf craned his neck to see.

‘It’s okay, Dad,’ Noah repeated. ‘Let’s take the pills. Are you feeling worse?’

Olaf collapsed back onto his pillow. ‘I think I’m going.’

‘Where are you going?’ Noah said. ‘From the look of things you’re not going anywhere.’

‘I can feel it,’ Olaf said. ‘It’s eating me up.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Noah said, taking great care to make sure his voice didn’t give away its sadness. He had another impulse to tell him about the conversation he’d had with the doctor the day before but he resisted. ‘Let’s take these pills.’



Noah picked the glass of water off the nightstand, took the pills from Olaf's cold hand, and put them into his mouth. He raised the glass of water to his father's mouth and coaxed the old man into swallowing. Half of the water dribbled into his beard, but the pills went down, gagging Olaf.

'Good work,' Noah said. 'Are you hungry? Cold? Is there anything you want?'

Olaf put his hand on Noah's arm. 'You're good,' he said, 'good for helping me.'

Noah patted his father's arm back. He was on the verge of tears. 'Do you need anything?'

'Think I'll go back to sleep.'

'I'll check on you again in a little while, okay?'

Olaf nodded as he settled back into bed.

Gordy was still ripping things out of the piano when Noah came back into the living room. 'You want another cup of coffee?'

Gordy paused, wiped the sweat from his forehead with the damp sleeve of his shirt, and asked for a glass of water instead.

'I have to refill the jug, be right back,' Noah said, grabbing the plastic jug from under the sink and sliding back into his boots.

The spigot was behind the shed on a little cement slab. The green paint was chipping and the exposed steel was rusted. Noah pumped it twenty or thirty times before the first rusty water spat out onto the slab. Another ten pumps and it was flowing clearly from the spout. He put the ten-gallon jug under it and kept the water flowing for a full minute before the container was full. When it was, he capped it and lugged it back across the yard. Inside he got it back on the shelf beneath the sink and poured a glass for Gordy.

'Thank you,' he said, standing up and wiping his face with his sleeve again. He swallowed the water in three gulps. 'Is it getting colder out there?'

Noah hadn't noticed, but said it was.

‘Sixty-one is a hell of a road in a blizzard, I’ll tell you that. Especially where the highway is exposed to the lake. You can get some pretty tough drifts. Got to watch out.’

‘Luckily, I don’t have to go anywhere,’ Noah said.

‘True enough,’ Gordy said. ‘You mind if I have another glass of that? You’ve got me working in a sauna here.’

‘Absolutely,’ Noah said, and fetched him another glass. When he brought it back to him, Noah peered down into the hollowed out piano. ‘Are you going to be able to finish today?’

Gordy looked at his watch, patted his giant, jiggling belly, then looked up at the ceiling, apparently doing the math.

‘It doesn’t have to be perfect,’ Noah said.

Gordy finished calculating. ‘I’d say I’ll have it restrung in a couple hours. Get the new hammers on there, get it in tune, I ought to be done in four hours or so. Is that going to work for you?’

‘Perfect,’ Noah said.

For all of his ambling around and small talk, Gordy worked quickly and with apparent precision. He never had to correct something he’d already done, and was always moving with certainty and ease. An hour after he’d started restringing the piano he was done, despite what seemed to Noah a thousand questions on everything from Nat to the engine size of the Suburban.

‘What did your father do that he could get away with living up here?’ Gordy asked as he sorted out the felt tipped hammers.

‘He worked on the oar boats,’ Noah said. ‘This was his father’s place before his.’

‘No kidding,’ Gordy said. ‘What did he do on the boats?’

‘He retired a Captain,’ Noah said. ‘About ten years ago now. He worked for Superior Steel.’

‘Ain’t that something?’ Gordy was already busy putting the hammers in. ‘What about you? You work on the boats?’

‘God no,’ Noah said. ‘No way. I live in Boston. I have a small business out there.’

‘What do you do?’

‘I sell antique maps of all things.’

‘Boy, a couple of interesting guys you two are.’

‘It’s not so interesting, really,’ Noah said.

‘Sure it is,’ Gordy said earnestly. ‘How many antique map sellers you know?’

‘Quite a few actually.’

‘Heck, how many antique map sellers do *I* know, that’s what I mean. There aren’t many of you, that’s what I’m getting at. Not too many piano tuners or oar men either.’

‘You’re right about that. And fewer and fewer of each all the time.’

‘Man’s got to make life interesting for himself, that’s what I always say. Make life interesting and be good to your kin. Two mottos.’

‘Good mottos,’ Noah said.

‘And obviously you’re good to your kin.’

‘Only recently,’ Noah said.

‘Any good is good enough.’

Noah shrugged. Maybe he was right.

‘I suspect that your old man thinks having you hear is the cat’s meow.’

‘It’s good to be here, that’s for sure.’ Noah found himself wanting to confess his whole sordid family history to Gordy, whose entire shirt back was wet with sweat now.

‘My grandpa worked on the docks in Two Harbors. He was a stevedore. Died on the job when I was in Kindergarten. Fell right into a cargo hold and was crushed by a basketful of iron ore.’

‘Are you kidding me?’ Noah said.

‘Nope. Happened a long time ago, though. Crazy story.’

‘My father survived the wreck of the *Ragnarok*,’ Noah said.

‘Your father was on the *Rag*?’ Gordy said, stopping what he was doing and looking seriously at Noah. ‘My old man used to load the *Rag*. Can you believe that?’

It was a small world up here, Noah had no trouble believing it. ‘That’s amazing.’

‘So your father was one of the three.’ It wasn’t a question so much as a statement of awe. ‘I was in high school then. I remember it like it was yesterday.’

‘So do I,’ Noah said.

‘He kept sailing after that?’

‘For almost twenty years.’

‘And he wasn’t shaken up? I’d have been a mess. Petrified. No way you could of gotten me back out on that lake after what they went through.’

‘He could hardly stay on land,’ Noah said, nodding in the direction of his father’s room.

‘He’s a celebrity, sort of.’

‘Don’t tell him that. He’s not fond of talking about it.’

‘You ever get the real story?’ Gordy said, sidling up to Noah as if they were in cahoots on the scam of the century.

‘Sure,’ Noah said. ‘But it’s no different than any of the books that have been written. They all got it right.’

‘Well golly, I can’t wait to tell my son about it. He loves all that ship stuff.’

‘A lot of people do.’

‘*Survived the wreck of the Ragnarok*. Amazing.’

‘It certainly is,’ Noah said, then went in to check on his father who was still asleep.

Gordy finished an hour earlier than he said he would. After he shut the lid of the piano, he pulled up the bench, cracked his knuckles, and launched into an astounding rendition of *Rondo Capriccioso*. He played like a maestro, his gelatinous stomach and

haunches bouncing with his ecstatic playing. Noah stood with his mouth open, amazed that such a back country rube could be so magnificent behind the keyboard.

When he was done, the air literally vibrating with the last notes of the diminuendo, Noah clapped his hands as if he were at Carnegie Hall applauding the soloist from the Boston Pops. 'That was my mother's favorite,' Noah said. 'She played it all the time.'

'My favorite too. I play it after every piano I tune.'

'I hope my father heard it. He's going to be stuck with *Chopsticks* from me. Maybe you could belt off another piece?'

Gordy cracked his knuckles again, let his fingers hover over the keyboard for a minute, and finally looked over his shoulder and said, 'Vivaldi?' Then launched into a song before Noah could even respond.

Beautiful, Noah thought, and he clapped again when Gordy finished. He slid off the bench, packed up his toolbox, and got ready to leave.

'You're an amazing pianist,' Noah said. 'I'm no expert, but I know one when I hear one.'

'It's what I do,' Gordy said. His modesty was as genuine as his look of concern for Olaf had been when he first arrived. 'Not much use for it, but it's what I do.'

'The world would be a better place if more people could play like that. How much do I owe you?' Noah said.

Gordy was writing up a receipt, tallying the parts and labor. 'Make it an even two hundred dollars,' he said. 'I'll give you a deal.'

'Don't give me a deal,' Noah said. 'I want to pay full price so you stay in business. In case I need your services again.'

'Make it two fifty then, and next time you get the coupon deal,' Gordy smiled.

Noah took the cash from his wallet. It left him with six dollars.

Gordy looked up at the sky when he stepped outside. 'Oh yeah, it's coming,' he said. 'Look at that sky.'

Noah looked up, then looked at his watch. It was awfully dark for two o'clock. 'A foot you say?'

'Anyway. Remember to get these cars up onto the road.'

'I will,' Noah said, waving from the top step. 'And thanks again.'

Gordy nodded and ducked into his truck. It sounded like a motorcycle as he revved the engine and put it into gear. Noah watched as the truck curved up and out of sight.

Back inside he heard Olaf in his bedroom. It sounded as if he was moaning in pain, but when Noah opened the door and turned on the lamp, his father was pounding the air with his fingertips and humming something that sounded vaguely like music. The smile on his face belied his voice, which was clotted and out of tune, so Noah just stood in the doorway and watched for a minute, spellbound. As Olaf finished humming the song, he set his arms down and made a smooching sound and said something about love before he dove back into his sleep.

For a couple hours, until it was dark out, Noah worked on one of his piano lesson standards. It must have cut quite a contrast to the effortless playing of Gordy, and when he heard his father coughing during a break between bars, he got up and went back in to his bedroom. Olaf was awake again, his eyes sunken, his cheeks sunken, too, and clumps of hair in his hands.

'You okay Dad?' Noah said.

'Is your mother here?'

'No, Dad, Mom's not here.' Noah walked in and sat down on the edge of the bed.

'I heard her playing the piano,' Olaf hissed. 'She was playing my favorite song.'

'That was the piano tuner, Dad. He's gone now.'

'Tell her I'd like to see her,' Olaf said, looking up into Noah's eyes. The look was both empty and full of *something*.

'You'll see her soon,' Noah said, though he had no faith in heaven, nor any in hell, and he didn't believe what he was saying.

‘I’ve got some things to tell her.’ He put his hands up and began to play the air again as if it were a keyboard.

‘Tell me and I’ll tell her for you,’ Noah said, tears in his eyes now, his lips were trembling and he bit down on them to make them stop.

Olaf began to hum *Rondo Capriccioso* again.

Noah closed his eyes, sobbed silently, and listened to the tuneless humming of his father.

Mid-song Olaf stopped, took Noah’s hand, and said, ‘Tell her I’ll be home soon. Tell the kids, too.’

‘You’re already home, Dad. I’m here, I see you.’

‘Good,’ Olaf said, then shut his eyes and fell asleep.

Noah sat there for an hour, looking down at his father, remembering their better times.

Solveig answered the phone on the second ring, her kids were bellowing in the background. ‘It’s me,’ Noah said.

The tone of his voice must have given away his mood because Solveig asked right away if Olaf was dead.

‘He’s not dead, no,’ Noah said. ‘He’s asleep in his bed.’

‘Why do you sound so sullen then?’ she asked. ‘Is anything the matter?’

‘I think you should come as soon as you can,’ Noah said.

Solveig began to cry. ‘I *can’t* get there, not for a couple days anyway.’

‘You have to. I don’t think he’ll make it a couple more days.’

‘I can’t Noah.’

‘Bring the kids, do anything.’

‘It’s not the kids. The highways are all closed here. They say there are drifts eight to ten feet high on some of the interstates.’

‘Eight to ten feet?’ Noah said.

‘Drifts.’

‘Can you get a flight here?’

Solveig laughed sarcastically. ‘A plane, Noah. I don’t think so. The airport here shut down at noon today. It won’t open for a couple days anyway.’

‘What are we going to do? Are you sure you can’t make it on back roads or something? You could take Tom’s four-by-four.’

‘Noah, the roads are closed. There’s no way I can get out of Fargo. Even if I could, it’d be suicide. The storm is heading straight east, I’d be in the middle of it all night. What’s happening anyway?’ she said.

Noah told her the story of the piano tuner and what their father had said afterwards. ‘He’s been asleep now for an hour. Who knows what’s going to happen? And when?’

Solveig was crying.

‘Listen,’ Noah said. ‘I’m sure he’ll keep himself together until you get here. He’s not going to die until you do. He wants to see you too much, he loves you too much.’

‘He can’t control when he dies, Noah. He’s going to die if he’s going to die.’

He knew she was right. ‘Maybe he will.’

‘Oh Christ,’ Solveig said. ‘Can I talk to him?’

‘Sol’, he’s a mess, he’d probably think you were Mom. He’s completely out of it, completely gone.’

‘Is he taking any of the medicine?’

‘I gave him a couple of the painkillers earlier today, he actually asked for them. But nothing more lately.’

‘The doctor told me they might cause hallucinations,’ Solveig said. ‘Maybe that’s why he thought Mom was there.’

‘Maybe. Or it could have been this guy’s playing.’



‘Give him a couple of the big horse pills, they’re supposed to do something to abate the cell movement. Maybe that would help.’

Noah knew that anything the pills might do would be ephemeral at best, and that it would be almost impossible to get the old man to swallow them anyway, but he said that he would.

‘Do you think he’s in pain?’ Solveig said.

‘Of course he’s in pain,’ Noah said, realizing as he said it that he should have lied. ‘He’s in pain but he seemed okay, despite the hallucinations. He seemed almost happy.’

‘I can’t bear to think about it.’

‘When Nat’s father was at the end, he used to go in and out of it. Maybe Dad will come around again. If he does, I’ll call you, you can talk to him. How does that sound?’

She didn’t say anything and they sat there in silence.

‘What if he dies and you’re not here?’ Noah finally said.

‘What?’

‘If he dies, what do I do?’

This sent Solveig off again. Noah could hear, between her sobs, the wind rocking the house.

‘I think the storm is coming,’ Noah said. ‘The whole house is creaking. It came out of nowhere.’

‘Just don’t do it, Noah.’

‘Don’t do what?’

‘Don’t put him on the bottom of that lonely old lake.’

She’d answered him before he could even ask.

The morning was blazing bright, sunny and white and windless. Before he'd gone to bed the night before, he drove his car up onto the county road at Gordy's suggestion. Even though his father had told him the road would be plowed, he wanted to be sure that if anything happened, he'd be able to get out. As he walked back down the road to the house in the cold, whorling wind, the snowflakes began to fall. Now, looking out the window of his bedroom, the whole world was muffled in white. The pine trees were hung with snow, their bows bending under the weight of it; the ground was pristine with it; even his father's truck was barely visible under the drift that had gathered around it.

Noah kept dialing his number at home even though the message on the cell phone screen said that no service was available. He could only imagine that the tower was buried in snow like everything else, and despite the fact that he wanted to hear Nat's voice, to tell her how beautiful everything was now that the snow had engulfed the world, he was also thankful that he couldn't get through. For the first time in thirty-three or thirty-four years, he was happy to be alone with his father.

Olaf was still asleep in his bed. As far as Noah knew, he had been for the better part of fifteen hours. At one point Noah thought of waking him, but finally he just let him rest, the rising and falling of his chest growing slower throughout the night and morning.

Goddamn astonishing, Noah thought, how quick it had worsened.

At about ten o'clock Noah heard his father turning in bed and went in to see if he needed anything. He looked better, like the long sleep had done something to whittle away at his dying, and when Noah asked him how he was doing, his response was coherent, if not practically inaudible.

'You seen the dog?' Olaf asked.

Noah hadn't even thought of the dog since his bath in the lake three days ago. 'I haven't,' he said.

‘Usually comes calling after it snows. Builds a den under the steps.’ Noah had opened the curtains.

‘He’s not around, not that I’ve seen.’

‘Maybe he ran off with the wolves,’ Olaf said. ‘That’d be the smart thing to do.’

‘Like in *The Call of the Wild*.’

‘Your favorite book as a kid.’

‘Isn’t that every kid’s favorite book?’ Noah was thrilled that his father was back with him.

‘Get out there in the woods and stay.’

Noah nodded as he sat down on the edge of the bed. ‘Do you want something to drink? Maybe another of those pills?’

‘I want a hat.’

‘Like a stocking cap?’

‘Something to keep my goddamn head warm.’

‘I’ll stoke the fire for you. Find you a hat.’

When he came back into the bedroom, an orange hunting hat in one hand and a glass of water in the other, Olaf asked for another painkiller. ‘I hate to turn into a junkie so late in life, but this is killing me.’

‘I don’t think four pills makes you a junkie,’ Noah said. ‘You deserve them for what you’re going through.’

Olaf closed his eyes and looked to be going back to sleep. Noah watched him, a pang of happiness rifling around in his own stomach.

‘What day is it?’ Olaf said.

‘It’s Tuesday.’

‘In the morning?’

‘It’s ten o’clock. A little after.’

Olaf opened his eyes again. ‘How much did it snow?’

‘More than a foot,’ Noah said. He knew because he’d gone outside to pee. ‘Must have been windy as it gets too, your truck is buried in a drift. There are drifts all over the place. And it’s *cold*, like North Pole cold.’

‘The high after the low,’ Olaf said.

‘I called Solveig last night. She said the interstates were closed around Fargo. She was going to call this morning with an update, but the cell phone is dead.’

‘I’m glad she’s not here.’

‘Why?’ Noah said, stepping back to the bedside and hoisting his father up to take his pills.

‘I’ve got to be a sight,’ Olaf whispered.

‘You won’t be winning any beauty pageants,’ Noah said.

Olaf smiled.

‘Here,’ Noah handed his father the pills. ‘Take these.’ Noah put the glass of water to his lips and tipped it. Olaf swallowed the pills, but then coughed and spit them back up, gagging on them on their way back out. It sent him into a fit of hoarse coughs. When he got control of himself, his eyes were glazed and his face was purple tinged. There was a little river of drool running from the corner of his mouth.

‘You want to try that again?’ Noah said, sobered.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘How about just a sip of water? You must be parched.’

‘No, no water.’

Noah set the glass back on the nightstand. ‘You had quite a sleep,’ he said.

‘I feel better when I’m asleep.’

‘You feel okay now?’

Olaf raised his eyebrow. ‘I’m dying.’

‘No you’re not.’ Noah could feel his eyes glass over.

‘I think it got all my stomach. I feel hollow.’

‘So you don’t eat.’

‘No, I don’t.’ He finally pulled the stocking cap on.

‘Better?’

‘Better.’

‘Anything else you want?’

‘Just sit in here with me.’

The words thrilled Noah.

Olaf started to hum again, this time more tunefully than he had the night before. Midway through the song, he looked up at Noah and smiled, though it was hard to tell that his baggy lips and slack jaw were really smiling. Noah smiled back, put his hand on his father’s, and failed to say what he wanted.

After a minute, Olaf said, ‘Your son, name him after yourself.’

‘I don’t have a son,’ Noah said.

Olaf smiled again. ‘I know that. I mean when you do.’

‘If I do,’ Noah corrected.

‘You will.’ He went on humming, his fingers playing across his lap now instead of into the air. ‘When you do, love him for me too.’

Noah choked on his own breath, put his fists to his eyes and pressed back the tears. ‘I will,’ he stuttered in a voice as faint as his father’s.

‘Tell you what. Take all the love that I never got a chance to give you, that I always felt but never gave, and heap it on your child. Maybe you’ll remember me a little more kindly that way.’ He picked up his tune right where he left off.

‘You don’t have to worry about me remembering you kindly, Dad.’

‘Love him for me just the same.’

‘I will,’ Noah said.

‘Can you call Solveig?’

Noah got up and looked at the phone. It still said no service but he dialed her number anyway. Just static.

Olaf looked at him. Noah shook his head.

‘Then tell her that I love her, too.’

‘I will,’ Noah said again.

‘Is it November yet?’ Olaf said.

‘It’s November third.’

‘Always November,’ Olaf said as he looked out the window. ‘Sit down for a minute, would you?’

Noah did, and Olaf reached up to touch his face, he wiped away the tears, then pulled Noah’s face to his and kissed him on the cheek. ‘Love your son better than I loved you. Love him like I did, but *show* him.’

Noah wept into his father’s ear. He wanted to say more – to tell him that he got it all, that his father’s love was cruel but also the kind that made him who he was, that he loved him better for it, that he simply loved him back – but when he tried, he couldn’t say anything. He could only let his father hold him.

‘I’m going to get some rest,’ Olaf said. ‘I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad you came back.’

‘I love you, Dad,’ Noah said after a minute, but when he looked up, Olaf was sleeping.

The next morning, still unable to get a signal on the cell phone, he dressed warmly and trudged a path down to the lake. It was a giant black mirror reflecting the infinity of white back on itself. It wasn’t until he stepped onto the snow-covered dock that he realized there was a thin layer of ice that extended midway across the lake in a crescent shaped arc. Beyond the ice, ripples would flair up under the easy breeze, and Noah felt a momentary reprieve from the task at hand. The lake was frozen after all.

But as he stepped back across the dock, the ice cracked under the sway of the posts, and he realized that it was paper-thin, that the rowboat could easily break through it. As for the rowboat, it was buried like everything else under a foot of light, white snow. He'd have to shovel it out.

He'd discovered his father only an hour earlier, when he got out of bed to check on him. He stood in the doorway, waited to see the heave of his chest, and didn't. For several minutes he stood there in the door, convincing himself that he just couldn't see it, that the light was too dull or that his breaths had become so short they couldn't *be* seen. When he finally walked over and touched his neck to check for a pulse, he didn't even need to find it – he was as cold as the windowpane would be. He simply pulled the blankets up over his face and knelt down beside the bed. Anyone passing by would have thought he was praying.

Back in the shed, which he had had to burrow his way into through the snowdrift, he found a shovel in the mess and cleared a path outside the door. Though the sun was shining beneath the tree line, it did little to warm him, and his fingers and toes got cold despite the hard work. After he'd cleared a path, he slogged his way back across the yard and pulled the wheelbarrow from yet another drift, though this one wasn't quite as deep. As he lugged it back towards the shed, he realized what an idiotic idea it had been to use it haul the anchor down to the lake. It would be easier to put it on a sled, which he did when he remembered that there was one in the shed's rafters.

Once he got down to the lake, he went back up for the platform that his father had fashioned to sit on the gunwales. By now he could bite the ice chunks from the short moustache that he'd grown since he'd been there, and the sting of the cold on his face was drawing his skin tightly around his cheekbones. When he finally went back inside after getting the platform down to the lake and on the boat, he looked outside the kitchen window at the thermometer. It was an even zero degrees.

He stood in front of the stove for a few minutes, blowing on his hands and bouncing on his toes, trying to decide if he should dress his father or just roll him up in a blanket or the tarp he'd found in the shed. He checked the cell phone one last time, thought of trying to get into Misquah to call Solveig, but decided against it, and went into his father's bedroom. It smelled faintly of urine. Noah couldn't tell if it was the stink of death, or if his father had wet himself at some point in the night. When he peeled the covers back, the smell became stronger, and he could see a wet spot on the old man's long johns. Noah wanted to ask him if he was okay, wanted to put on a kettle of water and scrub him down again, but he reckoned that the next thousand years in the lake would take care of that.

He finally settled on a canvas tarp with eyelets around its edges to wrap his father in before he brought him down to the lake. When he pulled the tarp from beneath the table in the shed, he saw a box he hadn't seen before. He pulled it out, set it on the tabletop, and ripped it open. The only thing in the box was a plastic container, meant to resemble marble, with a fake brass handle and four fake brass legs. It was wrapped in tape, and without needing to think, Noah recognized what he had found. He sat there for a few minutes holding it in his mittened hands before he took the urn and the tarp back into the house. He set the urn on top of the piano, and stood to warm himself by the fire again. He left her sitting there while he rolled his father's corpse in the tarp.

He couldn't believe how light his father felt when he picked him up and set him over his shoulder, bent stiffly at the waist. His father had grown emaciated, especially in the last week, but it was hard to imagine that a man of his father's frame, even if he were only skin and bones, could weigh anything less than a hundred and fifty pounds. But as he slid his way down the hill to the lake, he suspected it was less than that, even with the canvass tarp wrapped around him.

On the beach he unrolled his father, fastened the barrel to his chest, and rolled him back up. It was amazing how well the contraption worked, how well it fit his body and how secure it seemed to be, and Noah felt a sense of accomplishment for having a small part in



putting it together. Once his father was fixed to it, Noah rolled him back up in the tarp and dragged him onto the dock before he made another trip back to the shed to fetch the shovel he'd forgotten. Back at the boat, he cleared it of snow, set the platform on the gunwales, and managed to get his father onto the boat before stepping in himself and untying it from the dock.

The oars broke through the ice easily. Between pulls, the bow of the little boat could be heard cracking the ice before it. Midway across the lake, the ice cleared and he was in the open water. His back was facing the direction he was heading, and he used the dock in front of him as his point of reference, knowing that if he kept going in a straight line at a forty-five degree angle from the post on the right, he'd end up abutting the cliff in the deep water he needed.

As he rowed across the lake, the wind nipping at his neck and wrists and pouring through his father's old pea coat, he couldn't help but cry. His tears froze as they washed down his cheeks, and when he stopped rowing to wipe the ice from his eyes, he looked back towards the house. He was a couple hundred yards away, but he thought he saw Sancho sitting on the end of the dock, his nose raised to the wind. When he wiped his eyes to clear his vision, he was gone. If he was ever there at all.

When he got to the spot in the lake where they'd been fishing just a week before, Noah set the oars in the boat and stood up to look around. The sun had crept up above the tree line now, and it only made the whiteness more blinding. Except for the gentle slapping of the water on the hull of the boat and the momentary gusts of wind, it was as silent as anything he could imagine. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he couldn't find it either. He thought of his mother's ashes on the piano back in the house, he thought of his sister's plea not to sink him, and he thought of Nat's conviction that he'd be able to do what was right when the time came. None of it made sense until he remembered his father's last words, that he should love his son, when he had one, with the heart of two men:

his own and his father's. He sat back down, turned the rowboat around, and sculled back across the lake, thankful for the blinding whiteness.

## EPILOGUE

The next spring Nat and Noah moved to Duluth. They bought an old Victorian house up by Chester Park with a view of the ski jumps from the kitchen window. Nat applied to the teaching program at the state college in Duluth and would start classes in the fall. Noah, though he brought his map collection with him and would operate from a third floor attic office, was more intent on refinishing both the new house and the cabin up in Misquah, the later of which he started on first, in early April.

There were still pockets of snow on the ground when they wound their way down the road to the house. Some of the trees already had spry buds poking out of their highest branches, and the grass in the yard was starting to turn green. Natalie sat on the edge of her car seat looking out the window like a kid. ‘This is it?’ she said, a wide smile flirting with her look of astonishment.

‘This is it,’ Noah said. ‘That’s the shed there,’ he pointed to his right. ‘I’d like to finish that too, make it a guest cabin. That’s the path down to the lake,’ and he pointed ahead.

They got out of the car and Nat turned her head to the sky, spinning around like a little girl amusing herself with the sun, which was shining through the tree boughs above them. ‘It’s *beautiful*,’ she said.

‘Wait until you’re stuck down here with a foot of snow,’ Noah said. ‘Then you might not think it’s so beautiful.’ Though of course, he thought, it’s beautiful even then, maybe more so.

They walked down to the lake, which was still covered with a porous crust of ice that was smattered with glaring puddles of snowmelt. The rowboat was upside down on the beach, just as he’d left it, the wooden hull splintered and warped.

‘That thing is safe for the water?’ Nat said, pointing at it. ‘If you think you’re going to row me around the lake in that trap, you’ve got another thing coming.’ Her aspect had changed so much in the last six months.

‘I’m going to buy a canoe,’ Noah assured her. ‘A nice wooden canoe. There’s a guy in Misquah who builds them. I’ll name it the Olaf Torr.’

Nat had walked up and put her arm around his waist. They were standing with their toes on the shoreline.

‘We can use that for kindling.’ He pointed at the rowboat.

‘It *is* hard to believe that thing was safe to use. Look at it.’

Noah smiled, even laughed, and took her by the arm to lead her up the beach. At the base of the hill where the ski jump’s landing hill was, he stopped, and showed it to her.

‘It’s so big!’ she said. ‘No kid of ours is ever going to go off of *that*.’

‘Oh yes he will,’ Noah said, wrapping his arms around her waist and resting his chin on her shoulder, they were both facing the hill. ‘He won’t start out on something this big, but by the time he’s ten, at the latest, he’ll be going off it.’

‘*Ten?*’ she said skeptically.

‘I was eight.’ He felt like a ham, a braggart, but then realized how modest the boast was.

‘Should we, you know, spread them?’ she asked, turning to face him, their arms still around each other.

‘I guess we should.’ They walked back up the hill.

In the trunk of the car, a grocery box covered with a picnic blanket sat wedged between their suitcases. In the box were two urns; he took them out. ‘I was thinking we should do it on the lake, then it won’t be a total act of defiance.’

‘Is the ice safe? I mean, can we walk on it?’

‘We can toss them off the end of the dock.’

Last November, on the morning his father died, after Noah lost his will, he rowed the boat back across the lake and carried his father back up to the cabin. He put him back in bed, covered him with a blanket, and took the shovel with him up to the county road, a trip made insufferable by the deep snow. When he got to the car, cold like he'd never been, he shoveled it out from under a pile of snow that a plow had heaped on it. A couple hours later, sweating like mad, he got in the car, drove into Misquah, and called the sheriff's office. Then he called Solveig. Then he called Nat. Within a half hour everyone was on their way.

The sheriff's deputy arrived with an ambulance and two paramedics, and Noah walked them down the snow-covered road to the house. He offered Noah condolences, but when they reached the house, went right to work documenting all of the facts in a hand held tape recorder. After an hour or two, intent that nothing fishy had happened, the paramedics - with help from Noah and a sheriff's deputy - lugged Olaf's corpse back up the road on a gurney.

By then highway 61 was wet with salty slush, and Noah followed the ambulance too closely. When they reached Grand Marais, Noah was out of windshield washer fluid and he could barely see the road in front of him. They took Olaf to a morgue nestled back on a Grand Marais side street. The coroner asked Noah if he wanted an autopsy. He declined. When the coroner asked what he wanted done with the corpse, Noah said he wanted him cremated.

After everything was squared away, Noah went back to the house, waited for the fire to extinguish while he packed his duffle bag, and cleaned everything up. He made sure the windows were all shut tightly, that the electricity was turned off, that there was no food in the refrigerator, no garbage in the garbage can, and that everything was packed up and put in its right place. He locked the door behind him on the way out, took his mother's ashes from the shed, and locked it up too. Then he made the trek up the road to his car and drove back into Grand Marais, where he waited for Nat and his sister in a room he took at the

Poplar Inn. A few days later he was on his way back to Boston with Nat, both urns of ashes in the back of his wagon.

They stopped for gas at the Old Colony gas station on Washington Avenue in Minneapolis. It was a cold evening, and a familiar one. To the south he could see the skyline with its gunmetal glass shunning the wind. It was one of those hard Minnesota twilights when the air gets caught in your throat and reminds you that winter's here. When the tank was full, he went inside to pay. There were lewd hotdogs cooking on a metal rotisserie, and walls of cola and bottled water in glass refrigerators. The woman behind the counter sat transfixed in front of a flickering black and white television. He asked for the key to the toilet, and walked into a room festering in the piss and shit of the city's degeneracy. He rolled his head away from the stink and thought, I'll piss behind the building. And that's when he saw, behind the buildings, what he hadn't taken the time to see in the eight years he bought gas at that station while he was in school – a whole civilization of rusted steel scrap yards, tangled and twined in a heap of decay.

When he got back in the car, Nat was sleeping with her head on the window. He turned right out of the parking lot and drove up and down North Second Street. The American Steel Company, Krupp Metal Co., Sam Bloom Iron Co., Garelick Steel all sat derelict in the shadows of the sky scrapers, nudged into the recesses of his favorite city with their cranes and fences rusted and worn, the interstate to the west, the Mississippi river two blocks to the east. In one of the yards, a three-story-tall pile of mangled girders sat steadily behind a toothless, overalled man in a greasy cap. There was a big Siberian Husky beside him, its swollen teats irrefutable evidence of a new junkyard progeny. The man spit, turned from the wind, and disappeared, the dog on his heels.

Three or four miles down the interstate, Noah was pulled over for speeding. As the trooper, uncomfortable looking in his too small, heavily starched uniform and ill-fitting broad brimmed hat, complete with the brass adornments of the state patrol academy, asked him what the hurry was, Noah simply said, 'I lost track of things.' The truth. They were

back in Boston two days later, setting everything in motion for the spring, which was upon them now.

They stood at the end of the dock. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to give Solveig another call? A last chance to come?’ Nat asked.

‘She was adamant about not wanting to be here. She thinks it’s grisly to be dumping ashes in the lake.’

‘What does she *want* you to do with them?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘This is best,’ she assured him.

‘I agree.’

Noah took his mother’s urn first, uncapped it, and waited for a breeze to pick up. When one did, he flung the ashes into the air. They seemed almost weightless, suspended in the sky like snow. After a minute, he took his father’s, waited for another gust, and repeated the motion. For a long time they just stood there without saying anything, their arms around each other, the empty urns sitting at their feet.

After a while Nat said, ‘Is that it?’

And Noah said, ‘Yeah, let’s go up to the cabin.’

They spread a blanket across the floor, poured two glasses of cocoa from a thermos they’d packed before they left Duluth, and Noah started a fire. The air in the cabin was cold, but crisp, and breathing it was like a tonic. He told her how hot his father had kept the house that week he was here, and how breathing the air back then was like trying to breath underwater, it was that stifling. She said it was nice now, that the air seemed purer here, better suited for living than the polluted air out in Boston. She was happy to be here. Everything worked out. ‘Like it always does,’ she said, and leaned in to kiss him.

The fire had already taken some of the chill out of the air, and she didn’t resist when he unbuttoned her blouse and laid her back. They made love on the floor in front of the pot



bellied stove, a perfect, passionate lovemaking that left them both breathless and clutching at each other when they were finished.

She whispered I love you and he whispered it back and as they drifted off to sleep, he could feel the world change. Literally, like the air had changed in the cabin when Gordy Nelson performed *Rondo Capriccioso* after he finished repairing the piano. There was the same sort of reverberation.

## VITA

Peter Geye was born and raised in Minneapolis, where he still lives with his wife. He graduated from the University of Minnesota with a B.A. in English. His fiction has appeared in *The Wayfarer*, a literary journal of the University of Minnesota.

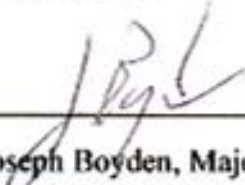
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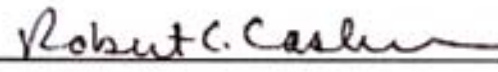
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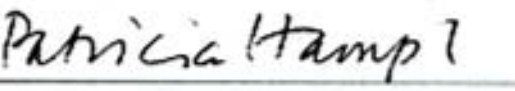
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Joseph Boyden, Major Professor & Chair

  
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Dean of the Graduate School

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