



The Summer Guest

Justin Cronin

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**THE SUMMER
GUEST**

THE DIAL PRESS

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for Leslie
and
for Iris

*I'll look for you in old Honolulu,
San Francisco, Ashtabula,
Yer gonna have to leave me now, I know.
But I'll see you in the sky above,
In the tall grass, in the ones I love,
Yer gonna make me lonesome when you go.*

—Bob Dylan, “You’re Gonna Make Me
Lonesome When You Go”

Prologue

North of Boston they followed the sea. A day in January, 1947: the carriage of their train was nearly empty. Just the three of them, the man and his wife with the little boy on her lap, and far ahead, a lone man in uniform, his head lolled forward in sleep. From the window they watched the rough-heaved coast slide by: the great slabs of ice, heaved and broken against the shoreline; the frozen, time-stilled marshlands; the rocky promontories fingering a winter sea. At intervals the conductor passed through idly humming as he announced the names of the towns, his heavy steps sure despite the old rail-bed that made the car sway like a ferry's deck.

While Amy and the baby dozed, Joe rose to stretch his legs. Thirty-one years old: he had been a lawyer, and then a soldier, but now was neither one. He made his way forward through the train, three cars to the engine and back, then paused at the doorway to look down the carriage. The uniformed man sat with his chin propped on one hand, a thatch of brown hair hanging loosely over his forehead as he slept. He was just a kid, Joe saw, eighteen and a day; probably he had enlisted just as the war was ending and had never seen an hour of combat. His other arm was thrown about his duffel bag, which rested on the seat beside him. Had he ever looked like that, Joe wondered, so completely at ease, untouched by life? But then the sleeping soldier turned, extending one leg into the aisle, and Joe realized, with a jolt, that he was mistaken. Between the rows of seats, the boy's left foot rested at a strange and careless angle: a prosthesis. The long hair: he should have known. Joe had grown such hair himself, in the hospital.

He returned to his seat. Amy was still sleeping, her head resting on a folded coat against the window, but the little boy's eyes were open and looking about. Joe lifted him from his wife's lap and placed him on his own. The tang of urine and the thickness of the baby's diaper told him he would soon need changing; before long he would begin to issue the first complaints, the barks and squeals that burst forth randomly like the notes of an orchestra tuning up, a warning that would quickly gather into a wall of sound that seemed to Joe to communicate nothing less than a permanent cosmic sorrow. In any event, his wife would have to awaken soon. He jostled the little boy on his knee, singing a quiet tune under his breath, notes strung arbitrarily together from a dozen different songs. "You'll like Maine," he whispered into the boy's small, sweet-smelling ear. "There's a forest to play in, and a lake where we can swim and fish. I'll teach you, when you're old enough, all right?"

The train swayed and clacked; Joe watched the landscape as they passed. Miles of open coastline and then the small towns pressed close to the water, quick glimpses of life as the train skimmed the fences that guarded the houses and yards. They passed through a railroad crossing, gates down and lights flashing; by the roadside, despite the cold, a group of children were waving from the seats their bicycles. The world from the train window opened and closed like this, like the pages of a book. A simple pleasure, Joe thought, reserved for the living: to sit with his son on his lap, beside him

sleeping wife, on a train taking them away, into a new life they could only guess at.

When the baby began to fuss, Amy awoke to change him, and when she was finished they opened up their picnic basket: sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs, a thermos of coffee, cookies from the Italian bakery where they had shopped for years.

“How long did I sleep?” She yawned into her palm. “I didn’t know I was so tired.”

They had been packing for days, finalizing their arrangements, saying their good-byes. Of course she would be exhausted.

“At least an hour.” Joe shelled an egg into a napkin on his knee. “Sleep more if you want. You need your rest. It’ll be a long ride yet.”

They finished their lunch, and as they were packing it away, the conductor came through the car.

“Portland, Portland is next.” The accent of a true Mainer: not “Portland” but “Paht-land.” As a boy vacationing with his parents in Bar Harbor, Joe had wondered how anybody in their right mind could talk that way—though his own accent, he knew, was different only by degree. The conductor paused by their seats, his eyes scanning the little pocket for their ticket stubs. “Portland for you folks?”

“Augusta.” Joe had taken the stubs with him, when he had gone to look through the other cars. As he handed them to the conductor, he tilted his face, as he had learned to do, so that his good eye lined up with the glass one. The need to do this had troubled him at first, but it had soon become second nature; there was no other way to meet and keep a man’s gaze.

“We change there,” he explained.

“Augusta’s a good ways yet.” The conductor considered the tickets without interest and returned them to their holders on the headrests. On Amy’s lap the baby gurgled contentedly, and the conductor reached down to tousle his hair with a large hand chapped red by the cold. “He’s a quiet one, now. Like the train, do you, little fella?”

“How much longer to Augusta?” Amy asked.

The conductor looked at his watch, a gold disk on a chain that he kept flat against his belly in his vest pocket. “Ninety-three minutes. Could be longer with the snow. Nevah know this time of year.”

“The snow?”

He clapped his watch closed. “Coming down north of he-ah, what they’re saying.”

Past Portland, the first flakes appeared, white streaks that skated by the train window like shooting stars. The houses, the trees, all faded under a fresh coating of white. The train veered inland; to the north and west, mountains rose out of the dense, whirling air. Joe felt the first stirrings of worry; he hadn’t planned on snow. Stupid, but he had never once thought it. If they missed their connection, they would have to spend the night somewhere. Or, they might arrive too late in Waterville to drive the

final fifty miles.

By the time they reached Augusta, it was after two. Joe waited on the cold train platform for the luggage while Amy took the baby inside. They had brought just a few bags with them; the rest would follow later, by truck: furniture and kitchenware, trunks of clothing and books and linens, even Amy's piano. The day's light seemed to drain away into the falling snow; already three inches had fallen. Joe gave the porter fifty cents to cart their bags into the station, where he found Amy seated on a long bench with the baby on her lap. Heat blazed from a roaring woodstove; the floor was slick with melted snow. Joe went to the ticket window to ask about the weather.

"All trains still running." Behind the counter, the clerk, an older woman in a denim workshirt, was absently stamping paper. A lit cigarette hung from the corner of her mouth; the bright red of her lipstick seemed like the only spot of color in the entire state of Maine.

"Is the train to Waterville on time, please?"

"Everything's late, with the snow." The woman lifted her eyes to look at him. Her stamper paused in midair.

"Good God."

It was a relief, he thought, when people were so surprised they could only be honest. And yet he had never learned quite what to say, beyond the simple facts. "I was shot in the war," he explained.

Her gaze was even, unchanged, as was her voice when she spoke the sentence he had somehow known would come.

"My boy was killed."

"Where?"

She gave a small nod, her eyes locked on his face. "Salerno."

"I was near there. In Sicily, with the 142nd." He touched his cheek. "This happened later, though, after Rome."

"Wait here a minute." The woman rose from her stool and disappeared through a door behind the counter. He heard the crank of an old-style telephone, followed by her voice speaking to someone down the line; then she returned.

"Stationmaster in Bosun says thirty minutes."

If the weather held, they would be all right. "Thank you."

She looked past him into the waiting room. "Does your family need anything? While you wait?"

He had grown wary of strangers' generosity, which too often felt like pity. But in this case he said

no reason to turn it away. "A quiet room would be nice," he ventured. "The baby's probably with you again."

She waved him inside. "Come back then, all of you."

She led them into the office—a plain, high-ceilinged room with a huge partner desk and, beneath the snow-frosted windows, a sagging couch with lion claw legs. On the wall was a large chalkboard listing arrivals and departures by their destination or city of origin: the smaller towns up north, around Boston and New York, but also Chicago and even Los Angeles. From this tiny station a person might go anywhere, Joe realized, board a train and vanish down the long corridors of the continent. Amy changed the baby on the sofa, then warmed a bottle for him on the hot plate while Joe rinsed out the dirty diaper in the washroom sink. By the time he returned to the office, the diaper wrapped in newspaper, the woman had made tea. In the wintery light of the room's tall windows her face had taken on a pale glow. She had large, damp eyes and hair the color of dry wood, blond gone not quite gray. She handed him a cup, gingerly, so as not to spill any of it into the saucer. While Joe sipped his tea, from the top drawer of her desk she removed a small framed photo and gave this to him also.

"This is my boy," she said. "Earl junior."

Joe put down his cup and accepted the photo. A young man in an undershirt and jeans, his chest and stomach washboard-thin, with fading stains of acne on his prominent cheekbones: he stood astride a bicycle and was leaning slightly forward, his arms surprisingly muscular where they were draped over the handlebars, his eyes and face squinting in a cockeyed half-smile for the camera. Joe could see something of the boy's mother in his face, the angles of the bones and the slightly too-long distance between his nose and upper lip. His hair, too, was a Nordic blond—the color hers had been, Joe guessed. It was not, on the whole, a degree of likeness that one would notice right off—it was more suggestion than resemblance—though probably people had always said how much he looked like her.

"We called him Skip, so's not to confuse everyone. He never did like that." She shook her head distantly; talking about her son, part of her went someplace else entirely. "I took this in forty-two, the summer before he went into the service."

Joe held the photograph another moment before passing it to Amy, who nodded without expression and returned it to the woman.

"What unit did you say he was with?" Joe asked.

The woman raised her head. Her voice was proud. "Eighty-second Airborne. The 509th."

So, Joe thought, the boy on the bicycle had jumped out of planes. Fantastic, how the war had made such things possible; before those days, Joe himself had never even held, much less fired, a gun. He thought again of the woman's son—how strange it must have been for him, one minute to be diving off the rocks into an ice-cold quarry lake, trying to impress his friends or a girl who sat on a bench nearby; the next to find himself in the belly of a C-47 with a hundred pounds of gear strapped to his frame, the cabin pitching and rocking in the dense, violent air, ready to hurl himself out the door into a sky lit up by anti-aircraft fire, over a country he had read about in social studies but might have gone

his whole life without seeing. And yet he had died there: at Salerno, the 509th had dropped behind German defensive positions, straight into a Panzer Division. Or at least that was what Joe remembered hearing. The ones that had made it to the ground had been cut off for days, some without so much as a weapon. There were always stories like this. In the confusion, Joe had found it best to simply believe all of them.

“I knew some Eighty-second guys. Everybody said they were the toughest.”

The woman returned the photo to its place in her desk. “Well.” She cleared her throat. “I don’t know about tough.” She sat on the sofa next to Amy and the baby. The little boy’s face was watchful and contented, as it always was after he’d been changed. “How old is your son?”

“Seven months,” Amy replied.

Amy had undressed the baby to change him; his feet were bare. The woman bent her face toward him and took his feet and placed their soles against her lipsticked mouth. She pursed her lips and hummed a little tune; the baby laughed, his eyes darting around the room, searching for the source of these wonderful sensations.

“You like that?” the woman asked. She blew, hard, into the soles of his feet. The baby found her with his eyes and waved his arms and shrieked with pleasure. She seized his feet and blew again. “You like that? Is that funny? Is that funny?”

They hadn’t even learned her name. And yet a feeling of closeness had settled over all of them, a kind of shared knowing. Joe thought he would be happy to stay with her forever in her warm office drinking tea and watching his little boy laugh while outside the world was slowly erased by falling snow. The moment he recalled this, months later, he would realize how close he’d come to turning back.

“Such sweetness,” the woman said. She kissed the baby once, and stood. “I remember those days. Whatever else happens, you know, they’re a present you get to keep.”

He remembered only small things from his last days of the war: the hard nugget of a stone in his boot as he walked; the taste of cold coffee and powdered eggs; a view of the sky from where he sat smoking a cigarette under a lemon tree, and the way the smoke from his lungs gathered in a pocket of stillness before the breeze found it. They were pleasant memories; they could have come from another time, another life. His platoon, thirty-six men in his command, was in the Maremma, five clicks south of Magliano, advancing on a cluster of stone buildings hemmed by hills that were now, just a few minutes after dawn, veiled in a ribbony vapor of clouds. Along the left flank at two hundred meters stood an old church, mortared and half-collapsed around its modest steeple, which somehow still stood; and beyond it, curved at the top of a hill, a low stone wall, guarding a grove of gnarled olive trees. It was a Tuesday, a Tuesday in June. Odd, he had thought, how the days of the week had lost a meaning, and yet he knew it was a Tuesday. Rome had been theirs for a week; word was going around that they would be recalled to Anzio in a few days and shipped north to France, where the real war was

still on.

He was finishing his cigarette when the platoon sergeant approached him. At thirty-five, Torrey was the oldest man in the unit, a figure of calm authority that Joe, though he was technically in charge, could never hope to match. The joke was that, before the war, Torrey had been a dancing instructor.

“Supporting fire’s in position.”

Joe tossed the stub of his cigarette on the ground and crushed it under his heel. “All right,” he said wearily. “Tell them to hold fire. This is just a clearing op for now. The S2 says nobody’s home.”

Torrey frowned. “Fuck battalion. I don’t like it. There’s way too much cover on the left.”

“I’ll put it in the suggestion box.” Joe rose and shouldered his weapon. “You take first squad down the right, I’ll take second squad up the middle. Anselmo keeps the third squad in reserve and waits for my signal. And Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell your point man to keep his eyes open. I don’t like it either.”

They moved in two lines of twelve men across the field, the low morning sun behind them. Below them the village lay dormant, no movement at all, not even the sound of a chicken to say that people lived there. Grasshoppers buzzed in the knee-high grass, leaping ahead of their boots as they advanced. The adrenaline of battle usually brought Joe into a vivid awareness of his surroundings, as if he were viewing events from several angles at once, but not this morning. The flicking of grasshoppers, the swishing, dew-drenched grass, the silent town with its old stone buildings and terracotta roofs glowing in the morning sun: all combined to give the scene a feeling of dreamy unreality. He had been a soldier at war for 412 days, 342 of these as a platoon leader, not counting today, the Tuesday in June. It was not so strange he knew these numbers; everyone did. But as the days moved by, the meaning of the numbers changed: all they meant was, I’m not dead yet.

They had approached to within fifty meters of the church when it happened.

“Down!”

The point man, Reynolds, dropped to the ground, his figure instantly swallowed by the tall grass. Everybody hit the dirt.

There had been no shot; it all took place in quick silence, twenty-four grown men flinging themselves to the earth. Reynolds had seen something, Joe knew: a glint of light off a rifle scope, movement behind a window, camouflage being lifted off a mortar emplacement or the swinging barrel of an MG42. He eased up slowly on his palms, his eyes reaching just over the tips of the grass, twisting his head right, found Torrey. Their eyes met, and Joe mouthed the word: *What?* Torrey pointed at the steeple.

“Fuck.” Joe pressed his face to the ground. The job was his: he would have to move forward and

find Reynolds. *Fuck the S2, fuck battalion, fuck fuck fuck.*

Joe had lifted his face a second time to find his point man when the sniper in the belfry—the son of a music professor from Bremen—took him in his sights: the bullet pierced his cheek, blowing fragments of bone and teeth up into his left eye, crossed the damp interior of his mouth, and found the far line of his teeth and sheered them off in a second explosion of bone and silver before blasting through his jawbone. “Lieutenant!” he heard. “Lieutenant!” And then more gunfire, the MGs and the big German 88s opening up and his own machine guns firing in reply, and the thud of mortars all around, but nobody was asking him for orders; his men had pulled back, thinking him dead, and left him alone. His pain was surprisingly vague; he wondered if this meant the end was near, or had somehow already occurred. The first medic who reached him took his dog tags and hurried away; the man with the ruined face, one eye gone under bloody shadow, how could he still be alive? He lay on the grass through the rest of the day, listening to the distant contest for Magliano, looking through his one eye at the flattened sky, and what he thought of wasn’t the war, or the men with whom he’d fought—elsewhere now, pinned down by fire or sleeping on the hard floor of an empty farmhouse or moving through the trees on the far side of the little town—or the people he had left at home in Boston, Amy and his parents and his sister, Eileen, who would learn about his death, he guessed, a week from now or even later. None of these. He closed his one good eye and what he saw behind it was a lake, and mountains, and a river flowing through an open field into woods. Was this heaven? But it was a replacement his mind saw; if he lived, he would find it, and claim it as his own.

They traveled north, and by the time they reached Waterville a gray dusk had fallen. They made the way wearily out of the empty station; at least the snow had stopped. In the lot he found the truck they had come with the bargain, a '32 Ford with a rusted tailgate and bits of straw still in the bed. He searched the cab: no note, but taped to the steering wheel a map to the camp, and above the visor a heavy ring of keys. As Amy took the passenger seat, a sudden fear twisted through him: what if it didn't start? But when he opened the choke and pressed the starter the old engine sputtered obediently to life.

Amy pulled her coat around the baby, who was still, somehow, asleep. “How far is it?”

He unfolded the map over the wheel. “A couple of hours. I guess it depends on the roads.” He had only made the drive in summer, when time did not matter and the weather was good; now he thought only of getting them to the camp before it got too late to travel safely. The road north, he knew, had no towns on it at all. It was entirely possible, where they were going, to lose your way in the dark, to become stranded and wait for hours, even a day, before somebody came along to help. The train had pulled away; the lot around them was empty, devoid even of tracks in the snow. He thought of trying to find a room for the night, but pushed this idea aside: in for a penny, in for a pound. He depressed the accelerator and listened as the engine settled smoothly back on its idle.

“Your new truck,” he said optimistically. “How do you like it?”

“You know, I never expected in my whole life even to *own* a truck.” Amy peered out the window. “All right, where is everybody?”

“Inside, I guess. Keeping warm.”

“Maybe they know something we don’t.”

The roads were clear, and where the plows had not been, the snow was only a few inches deep. The storm had slid south, after all. They drove two hours, arriving at the camp in darkness. Huge drifts lined the long drive, eight miles in from the main road and following the river. The camp had been closed for three years, but the owners had left a caretaker—the same man, Joe supposed, who had plowed the drive and left the truck for them at the station. A dozen cabins sat on the lake, the windows shuttered and boarded up. Beyond them, the main lodge was a dark, uninviting bulk. It was all theirs, and the land besides, two hundred acres along the river and lake; he had purchased it almost virtually sight unseen, for forty thousand dollars.

At the end of the drive Joe parked the truck and turned off the engine. In the sudden silence they stood without speaking, amazed at what they’d done. So many months of planning; now they were here.

He took his wife’s hand. “Let’s get inside.”

The air in the lodge was musty and still, and smelled vaguely of animals. Joe tried the lights but nothing happened. A fuse had blown, or maybe some wires had been nibbled away by mice. The heat was out as well; their breath clouded thickly around them.

“Did something die in here?” Amy whispered.

“I can’t see a goddamn thing.” Joe stepped forward with his arms held protectively before his face. At once his right knee banged into something solid and sharp: the edge of a table. “Shit, shit, shit!” He tried to back away but his right foot tangled with the table’s leg. Something heavy and made of glass thudded to the floor. It rolled away unbroken, but then found a set of steps—steps? he thought; what steps?—and bounced down and away, picking up speed before shattering into pieces somewhere below them.

Behind him, Amy started to laugh.

“It’s not funny!”

“Okay,” Amy said, still laughing, “it’s not.”

“There’s probably a flashlight or candles in the kitchen,” he said. “Stay put.”

“Try not to break anything else on the way there,” she said.

By now his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness; at least he could make out the most obvious obstacles. He made his way into the main room, through the dining area, then farther back through a pair of swinging doors into the kitchen. The smell of animals had grown richer, muskier. Where would the candles be? In the cabinets? In the pantry somewhere? But then he noticed, on the sideboard, a dark shape he recognized as a kerosene lantern. He took the lamp in his hands and shook it: a slosh of fuel. Not much, perhaps an hour’s worth, but enough to get them settled for the night.

“Joe? Joe, where are you?”

“Just a minute! I’ve found something!”

He took his lighter from his pocket and lit the lamp. A small brass wheel adjusted the wick. He turned it down to conserve what little fuel he had, then held the lamp aloft, bathing the kitchen in a flickering glow. Cabinets and shelves, a stove and sink, a wide plank table: all just as he remembered it, from ten years ago. A bag of flour was spilled on the floor, its contents strewn in a wide path that ran to one of the lower cabinets, which stood open. The flour was dotted with animal tracks; pellet-like droppings littered the area around it.

“Joe? It’s dark out here, you know!”

He followed Amy’s voice back to the lodge’s main room—a kind of sitting area, with a sofa and chairs, forming a U around a huge stone hearth. The furniture was draped with white cloths. The check-in desk was positioned by the entrance, and on the wall above it, a calendar, frozen in time to April 1943. By the fireplace, wood lay neatly stacked in a wrought-iron holder.

“We can sleep here tonight,” Joe said. “Let’s get the baby down. We can figure everything else out in the morning.”

They found that the stove was working; at least the propane tanks were full, as promised. The cabinets contained no food at all, but in the pantry Joe found some tins of sardines and, in a tightly sealed jar, cubes of dried bouillon. With no running water—the pipes were drained—they melted snow in a battered pot to make the broth, and heated some canned milk for the baby. While Amy laid out the couch cushions on the floor for the night, Joe retrieved their suitcases and got the fire going; soon the room was filled with a dancing light. Tomorrow he would see about the fuses, turn on the furnace, get the water running, chase down whatever it was that had left its droppings all over the kitchen and pantry. For now they needed sleep.

They got under the blankets. Beside them the baby slept soundly, oblivious. At last they were here and yet Joe lay with his eyes open, his mind swarming with worry. The rigors of travel had kept his misgivings at bay, but now, their long journey accomplished, a flood of doubts seized him. What had he done? What kind of stupid idea was this? He thought of Amy, sleeping beside him. She was a physician’s daughter, educated, a woman with friends and connections. Nothing in her life had prepared her for this: the cold, dark house, the wind moaning in the trees, nothing around them for miles, a landscape as empty as an unpainted canvas—no shops or restaurants, or music to dance to, or women like her. What would she do for friends? Whom would she talk to? She was a pianist, with a good ear and long fingers made to play; she might have gone on to a real career, played before audiences, but had chosen to teach instead, reserving the pleasure of the music to herself alone. Where would she find students up here? In such a place, who would be interested in playing the piano?

In the morning he awoke to dazzling sunlight, and cold so intense it seemed to stop time. The fire had burned down to a cone of popping ash. While Amy and the baby slept, Joe heated a pan of water on the stove and took it to the bathroom to shave. His demolished face: he sometimes wished he could shave with his eyes closed. The depression in his cheek was the size of a dime, wrapped by scars that

whorled around it like the arms of a galaxy; his jaw was half-collapsed, held together by bars of steel. Only his front teeth were his own: the rest were porcelain, fixed in place on a nexus of wires and hooks. He spread the cream on his cheeks, paused with the razor in his hand, and began to scrape his beard away. Then Amy was standing behind him; their eyes met through the mirror.

“Good morning,” he said.

Her face was tired. He wondered if she had been crying. “Joey’s not awake yet,” she said quietly.

“He will be, soon enough.” He finished shaving and dabbed his face dry with a towel. “If you want breakfast, I’ll have to get the supplies in from the truck. We’ll need more wood, too. I saw a pile on the back.”

Something was different about her; he turned from the mirror.

“It will be . . .” He paused, searching her eyes. “It’ll be all right. You’ll see.”

“Kiss me,” she said.

His body missed her, ached for her. Yet he hesitated: his ruined mouth. Even when they made love he kept his face away. It was as if this part of him had not come home from the war.

“No,” she commanded. She put a finger over his lips. “This is nothing. Kiss me.”

He did; they kissed each other. Moments passed; time flowed around them. Then, behind them, they heard the baby’s first fussing, followed by a sharp cry as his lungs filled with air.

“How *does* he know?” Amy joked, and pushed away, laughing. “I’m afraid the two of you will have to share.”

She picked up the baby to feed him, and Joe dressed in his coat and boots and stepped outside. The cold was stunning; at his first inhalation the metal in his mouth hummed with it, plucked like strings by the icy air. And yet, under the strong morning sunlight, patches of snow on the roof were melting, long icicles hung from the gutters, sharp as knives and gleaming with wetness. He carried the box of supplies in from the truck—just a few days’ worth; they would have to get to the store soon—the man stepped outside again. In the shed by the woodpile he found a hammer and wedge and set to work. He had dined in good restaurants, read serious books, argued the law before judges; now he lived in the forest and chopped wood, like a character in a fairy tale. It was, he knew, the very reduction he had come to claim: a pure life, a pure world. His sledgehammer rose and fell: one stroke, two strokes, three—he was through; the wood was dry and split easily. In the hospital he had learned how to aim with his one good eye, making tiny adjustments to gauge the distance and bring his target into the crosshairs. The first time he tried to smoke he had missed the ashtray by almost a foot. But now such tasks came easily. He paused to remove his coat and hat and hung them on a nail on the door to the shed. His muscles ached, his breath steamed in the air around his head, his frame was damp with sweat. His mind was free, uncluttered, cleansed even of memory. For the rest of his life this moment would remain in his mind like a jewel: this glorious hour splitting wood, the taste of Amy’s kiss on his mouth, his new life commencing.

He filled a basket with logs and returned to the house. As he entered, the first thing he noticed was the smell: the dry, dusty scent of old air rising through the floor vents on waves of heat. He found Amy at the kitchen table, Joey nestled on her lap; she was spooning watery cereal into the little boy's mouth.

“How did you . . .?”

She looked up, her lips pressed in a smile she could not contain; he could tell she was delighted with her surprise. “It wasn't so hard,” she said dismissively, and wiped the boy's chin with a rag. “There were instructions on the burner. The oil tank is practically full. And look.”

She rose and carried the baby across the room to the cook's desk; on the shelf above it sat an old cathedral-style radio. The dial was yellowed from years of heat from the radio's tubes. She turned the knob and Joe heard static as the tubes heated up, then, rising behind it like a cloud, a strange and distant music—fiddles, an accordion or hand organ, bells that chimed with a hollow, concussive sound. It was a sort of music he had never heard before. So far north, the station was probably Canadian.

Amy was holding the baby against her chest; she took his tiny hand in hers and, still holding him against her, swayed back and forth, dancing in place.

“What do you think?” she asked the baby. “How about a little dance with your mother?” She looked at Joe, her face pleased. “There was a package of fuses by the box,” she explained. “I guessed which one and got it right.”

He removed his gloves and sat at the kitchen table, stunned. Already the room was warm enough for shirtsleeves. Holding the baby, Amy took three steps across the room in time to the music, turned with a flourish, and took three steps back.

“Well, that's the way to do it, I guess.”

“Don't just sit there with your mouth open,” she said, still dancing. “I'm not a child, you know. What's the matter with Daddy?” she said to the little boy. “Does he think Mommy's a baby? Does he? Are you the baby, or is Mommy? Hmm?”

He laughed and shook his head. Gone so long; of course she would have learned to do such things. He recalled how in one of her letters she had mentioned, casually but with unmistakable pride, that she had changed a tire on the car.

“I'm sorry. I know you're not.”

“Oh, for goodness' sake, save your apologies.” She shooed him out of the kitchen. “Go set us a fire while I make breakfast.”

They had powdered eggs and coffee, and Spam fried up with butter on the stove. They were clearing away the dishes when water began to pour in.

“Ice dams on the roof!” He was yanking every pot he could find from the kitchen cabinets and tossing them onto the floor. “We turned on the heat, and now everything behind them is melting and backing up under the shingles. Goddamnit!” They scurried around the lodge doing their best to catch the leaking water, which seemed to come from everywhere—down the window jambs, along the crown molding, even out of the light fixtures. The problem was more than ice dams, he realized. The roof was full of holes.

“So, what do you know about roofing?” he asked her.

“Heating and electricity only,” she answered, and passed him a pot: it was all a great adventure suddenly, a game without consequences. “The rest, I’m sorry to say, is up to you.”

He went outside into the snow and found a crowbar and an old wooden ladder in the shed. The snow at the base of the eaves was at least a yard deep; he pushed the base of the ladder into it, then stepped on the lowest exposed rung and ascended, crowbar in hand. Amy watched from the ground with the baby in her arms as he banged away at the ice that had backed up over the gutters. Chips flew everywhere, diamondlike bits that gleamed in the sun. He made his way across the front of the lodge hammering off the ice in chunks, then took a shovel up to the roof to push off the snow.

“Be careful, Joe.”

The roof was steeply pitched, but in the soggy snow he found his footing. Whole areas of shingling had rotted away. Here and there someone had covered the worst of it with a tarp, but even this was nearly gone, frayed and ruined from exposure.

“It’s a mess up here,” he called down. “The whole thing will probably have to be resingled.”

“Please, just leave it, Joe. You’ll break your neck up there.”

It was almost funny: after all that had happened, she was worried he’d fall off a roof. He climbed to the apex, where he dared to stand upright, one foot positioned on either side of the roof’s crest for balance. The frozen lake stretched away from him like a huge china platter, the sunlight blazing so brightly off its surface he could barely absorb it; on the far shore, dense woods marched up the hillsides and away, into ice and nothingness, the very top of the world. The cloudless sky was the color of cobalt, so blue he felt he could suck the whole thing into his lungs, breathe it in and out and become a part of it.

“Joe, for god’s sake. Get down from there.”

“It’s spectacular!” he cried out. “Unbelievable!”

“Never mind that, just get down.”

At last he inched down the roof on his backside and descended the ladder, breathless.

“We’ll need to call somebody to fix this. Or at least get the worst of the holes covered.” He was so energized he could barely contain the sensation. Of course he would try to resingle the roof himself.

The hammer in his fist, the tool belt at his waist weighed down with nails, the hours of intense focused labor: each sensation was as precisely drawn in his mind as if it had already happened. Fixing a roof: how hard could it be?

“Amy, you’ve got to see the view,” he said.

“Are you crazy? I’m not going up there.”

He thought a moment. “Maybe there’s another way.” He took the baby from her arms. “Come on.”

He led her into the house and upstairs to the staff quarters, which they had not yet explored. Five tiny bedrooms tucked under the eaves: he selected a door on the north side, facing the lake, and opened it. The room was a disaster. Some small animal, a squirrel or chipmunk or even something the size of a raccoon, had gotten in, leaving tufts of fur and debris scattered everywhere. On the bureau sat an empty whiskey bottle, and beside it, an ashtray full of butts. The mattress was bare and stained. This was the same room where Joe had slept the summer before law school, when he had worked at the camp as a dishwasher.

“What a mess,” Amy said, and wrinkled her nose. A look of alarm crossed her face and she quickly took the baby from him and backed out the door. “Do you think it’s still in here?”

He pointed to the ceiling, where scraps of wood had been nailed over the hole that led, Joe knew, to a crawl space, and above it, the threadbare roof. “I doubt it. Whatever it was, it’s long gone.”

He stepped inside, ducking his head under the narrow eaves of sagging plaster, and over to the room’s only window. Outside was a broad overhang, like a terrace; he had passed countless summer nights there, sitting and smoking, alone or with other employees of the camp, young men like him on the lark between college and whatever came next, talking about girls or their plans for the future or even, as some believed, the coming war. He had even kissed a girl up there once, a waitress at the camp; for a languid hour they had listened to the loons and kissed one another under the stars, like a scene in a movie, but she had a boyfriend in town, and that was as far as things had gone. He had actually convinced himself he was in love with her, and for weeks he had moped about it. But then, in the last days of summer, he had driven with some of the staff down to Blue Hill for a Labor Day dance and spent the night talking at a table with a friend’s cousin, a girl from Back Bay with intense gray eyes who was studying piano at the Conservatory. When he returned the next week to Boston he phoned her, and within a year he and Amy were married and living together in student housing across from Harvard Stadium.

The room had a small desk and chair; he pulled the chair over to the window, opened it, and bent his back low to step outside. The overhang, exposed to the sun, was clear of snow. It was almost six feet wide, and yet the urge to keep his weight low was strong; in his knees he felt the gathering softness of his fear, the absurd belief that somehow he would pitch forward into space. He pushed this thought aside and stood upright, filling his chest with air: below and before him he beheld, once more, the lake and woods, and beyond it, unseen but felt, the border across which had issued the morning’s strange music. He could still hear it in his head, the way the high notes of the fiddle had seemed to dance over and around the bass line of thumping bells. He turned and reached through the open window to hear

Amy up.

She frowned, incredulous. “You’re kidding.”

“Not a bit.”

“You think I’m going out there? I am *not*.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We used to come out here all the time.” The happiness he’d felt all morning was still building within him. It seemed to course through his very veins. He could do anything, anything was possible. “Hand me Joey first. Then I can pull you up with my free hand.”

On tiptoes she lifted herself to peer out the window. At last she groaned in surrender and lifted the baby toward him.

“Please, Joe, be careful.”

He took the baby from her. Their little boy was wearing a blue snowsuit with silhouetted reindeer dancing across it, and a cap that Amy had pulled down over his ears and forehead so that only his face showed. His hands were bare; clipped mittens dangled from his sleeves. Joe settled his son into the crook of one elbow, then lowered himself again to the window to offer Amy his free hand. But she shook her head and bent her back low, as he had done, gripping the window frame to pull herself through.

“Just don’t drop him,” she warned. She blew the air from her lungs and rocked her weight back with one foot on the chair. “This is absolutely the stupidest thing we’ve ever done, bar none.”

He wanted to laugh. “You’ll see.”

She gave herself a pull and at once she was up and outside, beside him. As he watched her, the fear melted from her eyes. In its place he saw the pure radiance of her astonishment.

“For the love of God, Joe.”

The first day, he thought. For all their lives, in hours dark and light, this was the day they would always remember. In his arms, in the bright sunlight, his little boy looked at him inquiringly, as if to say; why am I on this roof?

“For this,” Joe said, and held him high, to show him what was his.

A GIRL CAN
TALK TO HER DAD
ABOUT PEAS

ONE

Jordan

Everybody has a story, so here is mine—the story of me and Kate and old Harry Wainwright, and the woods and lake where all of this takes place. My name: Jordan Heronimus Patterson Jr., son of the late Captain Jordan Heronimus Patterson Sr., USN, both of us Virginia born and bred, though now I live here, in the North Woods of Maine, where I make my living as a fishing guide. My father, a Navy pilot, loved the air, as I love what's beneath it—the sun and light and snow and mountains of this remote place, and the big trout under the water. To meet me, you might think I must be simple, or unambitious, or just plain lazy, a grown man who fishes for a living; that is, a man who plays. When I take a party out on the lake, or downriver for the last of the spawning runs when they'll still take a streamer, the man may ask me, or the woman if there is a woman, "What else do you do?" Or, "Do you really stay up here all winter?" A question I don't hold against them, because I'm young, just thirty, and here is far from anywhere, the hardness of winter plain to see even on the sweetest summer afternoon in the twisted way the pines grow; they're asking about movies and restaurants and stores of course, all the things they love, so it's natural to ask it: What else do I do? So I tell them about taking care of the boats and cabins, and hunting parties in the fall, which I'll do if I have to but don't really care for; and I may throw in a thing or two about college, how I didn't mind going when I was there (University of Maine at Orono, class of 1986, B.S. in economics with a minor in forestry, thank you very much); and the man will nod, or the woman, thinking: Why, here's a man of no account! And for one silent second they're me, and happy because of it, and then they'll ask me where to fish, what pattern to use on the line, and they'll catch something because of what I tell them and go home to Boston or New York or even Los Angeles, and I'll stay here as the snow piles up, something I can't explain to anyone, not even to myself.

And if I sound as if I don't like these people, that isn't at all true. The camp is far north, four hours by car from Portland and tricky to find, and the people who will make such a journey are serious about fishing. They are rich, most of them, a fact they cannot hide; one sees the evidence in their cars, their clothes, the good leather of their luggage and shoes. It's large what's between us, make no mistake, and I know that to such people I am just another body for hire, like the nanny who raises the children, the broker who sells them the stocks that make them more money, the lawyer they retain when they wish to divorce. But because they are rich enough to have these things, they are gracious to me, even respect me, for I know what they do not: where the fish are and what they are likely to take. For this they rent me, body and soul, at two hundred fifty dollars a day, a hundred fifty for the half, a pure bargain as I know about, and dirt cheap if truth be told.

There are regulars, too, people who come up here every year at the times they like best: ear

summer for the big mayfly hatches, or else the long dry days of August, after the blackflies have gone and the days are as crisp as a butterfly on pins, and the fish have wised up and aren't especially hungry besides—not the easiest time to catch them, but that's not why these folks are here, and not why I'm here, either. Which brings me to the last summer I saw Harry Wainwright—the Harrison Wainwright, he of the thirty-odd consecutive summers, the Forbes 500 and the NYSE and all the rest—~~who came up here at last to die.~~

We put on the dog for lifers like Harry Wainwright, which up here is really just a state of mind since there's no way to be fancy. The cabins are identical, rustic and spare, each with a couple of creaky cots, a potbellied stove, and a tippy porch on the water with a view across it to the mountains. What I mean is, we're ready to see him, glad as hell to see him, because lifers like Harry are the bread and butter of a place like ours; we can't afford to advertise, and don't have a mind to anyway, having never bothered to begin with. At the time I'm speaking of, Harry was probably seventy, though until he'd gotten sick he'd aged easily, like the rich man he was. He owned a string of discount drugstores in the South and Midwest (I'd heard it said that if you bought a bottle of aspirin anywhere from Atlanta to Omaha, you probably paid Harry Wainwright for the privilege), and a lot of other things besides, a veritable empire of goods and services in which I had no stake, except for what he paid me as a guide. He hardly needed one; he'd fished this spot since Kennedy was in the White House and knew it as well as any man alive. His tips, always embarrassingly huge, were just another way of expressing his pure happiness to be here.

Did he impress me? Who wouldn't be impressed by Harry Wainwright?

So, the story: In rolls Harry, whom we all knew was dying of cancer, late on an August afternoon in the Year of Our Lord 1994, with his second (i.e., younger) wife, his son and tiny granddaughter, all heaped into a big rented Suburban to haul them up from the airport in Portland with their gear: a beautiful family as ever I've seen. The day's just tipped toward evening, the best time to arrive, and it's late enough in the season that the birches and striped maples are just beginning to turn in bright crowns of yellow and red, set against the blue, blue sky. Harry is stretched out on the second seat, his back propped against the door with pillows, like old Ramses himself; Harry Jr. (who goes by Hal) is driving; second wife Frances is in the passenger seat; January (named for the month of her birth or the month of her conception, take your pick) is tucked into her comfy car seat in the way back; the car cruises down the long drive. Everybody loves the last eight miles: when you finally arrive, it's like you've already done something, like the fun's already started.

We were expecting him, of course. The night before, we all sat down for a meeting, after Joe had taken the call from Hal, saying Harry wanted to come up, short notice he knew but was there space and so on. We met in the dining room after supper: me, Joe's wife, Lucy, who ran the kitchen and took care of the books, and their daughter, Kate, who was a junior at Bowdoin and worked in the summer as a guide, and Joe told us what he knew—that Harry had cancer and wanted to fish. The rest, about dying, was in there, but nothing he dared say. The next afternoon Hal called us from a pay phone in town to tell us they were thirty minutes away, so when the car came down the drive, Kate and Joe and I were waiting for them.

Still, when Hal opened the old man's door, it was a shock, and for a moment I thought maybe we'd all missed something and they were bringing his body up for burial—though a man like Harry

Wainwright should go to his reward in a pharaoh's robes, not the frayed khakis and tennis shoes and ratty blue sweater, all of it looking pale and loose, that he had on. The sight of a rich man dying is one to shake all your assumptions about a free market economy; here is something—life, health, a fresh set of orders for maniac cells run amok—that can't be bought. As Hal swung the door wide we all held our breaths a little, deciding how to be normal, looking at the sneakers, white as the underbellies of two freshly bagged trout. Hal gave Joe's hand and then my own a solid shake—as I said, he's a good-looking man, his hair gone prematurely silver and tied in a hipster ponytail, the skin around his eyes handsomely crinkled from squinting out over the world's warm waters at all times of year—and then he said loudly, to me and everybody else, "Pop? Jordan's here to help us get you out."

Which proved tricky: the cancer, which had started in his lungs, had spread to the bones of his back. The poor guy was stiff as a cracker. Those last eight miles, as bouncy as a carnival ride, must have felt as bad as anything in his life. I scampered around to the rear passenger door; Frances climbed onto the backseat of the Suburban to hold his hands and keep him upright, and I popped open the door and let him sink into my arms. From the other side, Hal and Frances pushed his feet toward me, and as I pulled him out the old guy unfolded like a pocketknife; in a wink he was standing erect, me hugging him from behind, a little unsure if I should let him go or not. He weighed almost nothing, poor bird, although I also believed that if he fell the ground might actually shake, and it would be the worst moment of my life so far.

"Thank you, Jordan."

I looked past his ear and saw that I was supposed to hold him until Frances came around with the walker. Frances was maybe fifty, and I always thought of her as a little mannish, though in a pleasing way: she's a solid woman, her thickness like the thickness of a good book. Fixed to one of the walker's legs was a shiny chrome tank, about the size of a propane canister, with a clear plastic tube that ran to a heart-shaped mask that Frances wedged over Harry's head to ride in the folds of his neck.

"I am, as you see, much reduced, and I thank you."

This was Harry's way of speaking; he liked to use expressions like "much reduced" when he meant sick as a poisoned rat. It's easy to be dumb about the rich, but Harry Wainwright really was different from anyone else I knew. If you've read the articles, you know the story—Harry made sensation out of a copy—a classic all-American bootstraps tale of ingenuity and elbow-grease, the hard lean years and the big idea and then the one-way rocket ride of his amazing life; point being, he was entitled to use any turn of phrase that pleased him. He also cursed a lot, though I could tell it made him happier to curse than it makes most people. When Harry Wainwright called a fish "one whomping badass motherfucker," I knew it really was.

"Sure thing, Mr. Wainwright," I said. "It's great to see you again."

Silence, and I was surprised he hadn't corrected me. For eight summers the joke was always the same: I'd call him Mr. Wainwright, he'd say, *for god's sake, Jordan, call me Harry*, though I never ever did. I wondered if he'd forgotten, and then if maybe he was too sick to remember who I was. But of course he'd call me Jordan. A dumb idea for certain, but still I thought it: How many Jordans could he know? My own father, who died when I was three, was the only other one I've heard of, and him

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