David Crouse

Unpublished story cut from the final version of The Man Back There

Small Town News

A few weeks ago, while standing in the produce section of the new grocery store in Dexter, I noticed someone inspecting oranges the way my mother once did, turning them over one at a time in her hand, like a pitcher finding the threads of a baseball. It was not that this woman *looked* that much like my mother, although she was tall and thin. It was the way she moved--methodically, confidently—and the way she smiled slightly to herself, as if she were remembering something good that had once happened to her. I glanced behind her, expecting to find my father there, sullenly pushing the grocery cart.

For the last six years I've worked at a newspaper in Orono, covering school committee meetings in townships too small to support their own papers. About a third of my time on the job is spent driving. It's the only part of the job that I can say I truly enjoy, and it requires its own set of special skills, just the same as the writing and reporting. I'm good at it. I know where the police hide along the roads, so I can get away with speeding, and because I don't punch a clock, sometimes I simply disappear. I go for a walk, or read a newspaper in my car—whatever I want. That's what I was doing when I saw the woman in the grocery store—the woman who reminded me of my mother. I had a few hours free and I had decided to do some errands, and then there she was, and although she didn't see me, I felt like I had been caught, and I

wanted to leave before she pivoted in my direction. Which is exactly what I did do, stranding my grocery cart in the aisle with a few items inside.

This was not a logical reaction, of course. But the sighting possessed the strange logic dreams have, and as with a dream, I wanted to pass it on to someone else before it was forgotten. The only person who would have understood is my brother, though, and he would have pretended he didn't understand at all--he would have just laughed and said, “Cheryl, you think too much.”

* * * * *

I left home at eighteen, for reasons I’m still sorting out, and worked odd-jobs around the east coast for a few years, first in southern New Hampshire; then in New Brunswick, New Jersey; and then in Lowell, Massachusetts, where I accumulated enough cash and motivation to go to school. My brother Robert was fourteen when I left home, eighteen when I saw him again—the same age I had been when I first left. I didn’t talk to my parents or brother much during those four years, and there was a sense—despite my mother’s occasional phone calls—that one more move might separate us completely. But in the winter of my second and last year in college, I decided that I would return to Maine and visit them. Part of my life was ending and a new part beginning, and I guess I thought my family might help me through the transition. I suppose I was motivated by affection, obligation and maybe morbid curiosity, which is another way of saying I was confused, a mindset I often found myself in then.

The weather was bad the night of my return, and it grew even worse during the half hour I waited near baggage claim, watching out the window for a sign of my brother. "It's the damned snow," he said as an explanation for

his lateness, and he looked out the row of darkened windows at the fat snowflakes falling onto the airport parking lot, as if they needed to be pointed out to me, so that I wouldn't see his excuse as flimsy. Then he seemed to remember something. He smiled. "How are you?"

"A little tired," I said. He wore what looked like new boots and an unbuttoned dungaree jacket. One of the knees of his jeans had been torn out and I could see the gray-white of his thermal underwear through the hole. He lifted my shoulder bag into the trunk of his car and then we stood facing each other. His hair had been cut too close to his head, so that I could see his scalp. "We better get going," I said. “It’s only going to get worse.”

We didn't talk much on that thirty minute drive out to the house. I remember thinking that he must be concentrating on his driving. The wind had picked up and the snow seemed to chase us down the road, spiraling behind the car in a kind of tunnel. "What have you been up to?" I finally asked.

"Oh, you know," he said, "same-old, same-old." He looked away from the road and met my eyes. "I'm wondering something," he said. I watched the shallow ruts where other cars had driven recently. Snow floated and swirled in the headlight glow. "I'm wondering why you decided to come back."

Did he mean to say that he thought I shouldn't have come back, that he wouldn't have remained if he could have helped it? Did he mean to say that he didn't want to see me, that he was angry for some reason? I gave the knee-jerk answer. "To see you and dad and mom, of course."

He grunted in reply and turned the windshield wipers to high. I thought about how I had changed, gained a little weight, cut my hair too. A new pocketbook rested on my lap, and in it there was a few hundred dollars wrapped in a rubber band, some lipstick, too many pictures of an ex-boyfriend, and half a pack of cigarettes. It felt like I had a lot of secrets

in there, although I guess that wasn't true. "Remember when dad used to take us sledding when we were kids?" Robert said, with a glance over at me.

"No," I said.

"Neither do I," he said, "but he does."

My mother had shared many details of their lives during our phone conversations. I knew Robert had found work at a garage, first pumping gas, then helping out on the cars. My father had bought two dogs, pure-breeds, but sold them after a few weeks when their barking kept him up at night. Certain people I had dated in high school married and settled in town. Other people—she called them my friends, I called them acquaintances—moved away. My father built a screened-in porch on the east side of the house. Sitting in the car with Robert, all of these facts seemed insufficient. It wasn't that I thought my mother had kept something from me. She was one of the few people I knew who seemed incapable of deceit. But I also knew she had the ability to ignore things. Looking on the bright side, she called it. I think it was this trait which contributed most to my parents' marriage lasting as long as it did.

Later on, as we turned onto the stretch of narrow access road that cuts through the woods to the house, Robert looked at me. "He's not like you remember him," he said.

* * * * *

I don't know what my father felt about the life he tried to make for us. He was not the kind of man who talked about his past. That job fell to my mother, and she conducted it discreetly, the way she carried out most of her responsibilities. Sometimes, when Robert and I were upset with him, she would take us aside and talk about the house as a gift my father had given us. "You can't imagine how hard he worked on this place," she would say, when she had

found me in whatever room I was hiding in, and then I would feel sorry about whatever I had done to make him raise his voice.

I can imagine him back then as a pretty impressive figure—in his late twenties, a good seven or eight years older than my mother. He had inherited land in Maine from an uncle, and for more than two years he drove up there from Revere, Massachusetts with friends on Fridays after work, where they set up tents, drank, and worked on the house, sometimes late into the night. Then they lay sleeping bags on the unfinished floors and slept, rolled them up on Sunday and drove back home. My mother said he often changed his clothes, showered and had dinner at her parents' house when he returned from those weekends. He told them what he had accomplished—putting up sheetrock in the bedroom, painting a final skim coat, setting down flagstone rag work from the front door to the driveway—as if he was laying the future out on the table for everyone to see. His head must have been full of all kinds of plans he had never been able to act on until then, when the land and my mother both happened into what must have previously been a frustrating life.

He was an amateur carpenter, and friendly, and these two things helped him get all sorts of inexpensive cull—bargain-priced two-by-fours, piping, bricks. He built up debts along with the house, especially for electric and plumbing, which he contracted out, although these hardships, my mother explained, were nothing insurmountable to a couple of strong young people, especially when land in interior Maine was a cheap investment. I think she drew as much solace from these stories as we did. She talked about that time as if it were a fairy tale, but of course I was a young girl then, and every story was told to me as if it were a fairy tale.

"Remember those stories she used to tell about him?" I asked Robert, as we drove slowly up the access road. The car's headlights moved across the trees and then the house. We had arrived.

"Yeah," he said, but I wasn't sure if he was listening.

Although the porch had been finished, it hadn't been painted. It was good-sized though, at least twenty feet square, with rows of jalousie windows. The addition gave the house an off-balanced appearance, and instead of making the whole appear larger, it drew attention to the smallness of the rest of the place. Robert dropped me off and told me he was heading out to his girlfriend's place, that he would see me that night or the next morning. I watched the car make a sloppy three-point turn and head back out where it had come from. No one came out to meet me. The only light glowed from the cellar. It looked as if nobody was home, or that my parents had gone to bed.

Just behind the house I found four thick posts in the ground with chicken wire stretched around them: my father's dog kennel. The farthest side had a window-sized circular hole near the bottom, a flat board next to that. It was like my father come up with an idea and not follow it through, then leave the evidence lying around. At least that was the father I knew—not the man who had built the house, but the man who had driven these four posts into the ground one Saturday on a whim. I wondered what had happened to the dogs.

When I knocked at the side door, nobody answered, so I tried the knob. It was open, and I kicked off my shoes before going in, heading down the stairs, moving in the dark. I had expected the basement to smell like the rest of the house—my father's cigarettes mingled with my mother's cleaning products—lemon-scented soaps, wood oils and aromatic sprays. But the room smelt heavily of smoke and dampness.

My father was sitting in his easy chair watching television with the sound off. When I told him that Robert had dropped me off and gone to see his girlfriend, he laughed and said, "Really? Which one?" He had gained some more weight, lost more hair, but overall he looked healthy, and more or less the way I remembered him. He waved his cigarette at the television, making

circles in the air, as if he were waving a wand. "Would you mind straightening that antenna?" A scotch and ice rested next to him on the arm of the chair, the ice something new for him. "Your mother's in bed. She wanted to stay up, but she has a cold, and she was practically falling asleep standing up. I told her no martyrs." He shook the ice around in his glass. "Want anything to drink?"

"No, thank you," I said. I swept ashes and wrappers into my palm, looked around for a trash can. "Let me clean this up."

"Jesus, Cheryl," he said, "if you want to make yourself useful, start by filling this back up." He held out his empty glass. "And you can get one for yourself." He crushed some ice between his teeth. His smile spread wider. He winked at me. "Damn, it's good to see you." His general attitude made it seem as if he had just told me a secret, the wink his acknowledgement that I would not tell. Maybe sharing a drink with him would have been that secret.

A pool table sat flush against the far wall, the brown-green top covered by pale chalk dust and a couple of stray car odds and ends, an old muffler, a car battery. Something orange had been spilled on the couch. "When's Mom going to clean this place up?" I asked him. I set down my purse, lifted a spark plug off the table, and turned it over in my fingers.

He laughed. "Your mother? I don't let her in here." He held out the glass for me to receive, fill and then return to him. "This is my private room, you know? My special boys-only clubhouse, I guess you could call it. Which means I must really love you to let you in here, into my I'm-fucking-fed-up-and-want-to-be-alone room." He jingled the glass. "Oh, waitress."

I could picture my mother moving softly around the rest of the house, almost floating, moving this vase, dusting that table, then disappearing into another room, like a spirit. But she would always stop at the threshold of

this room and turn back, because my father had said so. I set down the plug and tried to change the subject. "What's up with Robert?"

"What do you mean?"

I rubbed my head. "You know. Everything. His hair."

He ground his cigarette out, still holding his glass with the other hand. "Robert's full of ideas, about traveling, about the army and the air force. He wants to enlist and I guess the haircut's part of that. You should see his room. All posters of fighter planes and guns." He moved forward in his chair, closer. "But you know what? He doesn't really want to. He just wants me to think he's going to." He stopped smiling, and he seemed older all of a sudden. I could see the lines at the side of his mouth and across his forehead as he concentrated on what he was saying. "He's not like you, Cheryl. He's all over the place. I got him that job at the station and every day he talks about quitting. And every day I tell him, 'If you quit that job, you're out of this house.'" The smile came back, wide as ever, and he laughed loud enough that I found myself smiling too. "You should hear us. Either I'm going to break his neck one of these days or he's going to break mine."

He was caught in that state between complete drunkenness and sober lucidity; one more drink and he might be yelling angrily about something, two and he'd be asleep, but right then, with the empty glass in his hand, his words were almost meditative. "He's not like you in that way either. I raise my voice to him and it scares him a little. That never worked with you."

"Water under the bridge," I said.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Cheryl. That's exactly how I feel."

I looked to the doorway. "What room am I sleeping in?"

"Life's too short," he said.

“Dad,” I said, more forcefully.

"You know, there's work to be found around here," he said, looking straight ahead at the television. "You know that." I walked across the room and took his bottle off the pool table. I handed it to him and watched him pour, the tip of the bottle tapping the edge of the glass, then took the bottle back. I screwed the cap on and set it near his chair. "Thanks," he said, "I knew you couldn't hold out forever."

The fold-out sofa upstairs was made up with fresh sheets. On the pillow I found a note written in my mother's wide-looped handwriting. "Cheryl. Hope you had a good flight. Your father's watching television in his cage, but he'll be asleep by the time you get in. Turn off the television if you happen to wander by. Come and wake me and we'll talk."

* * * * *

This is my favorite part. I've just left the office after meeting my deadline, which is about eleven o'clock, since it's an afternoon paper. The roads are empty and I'm hovering in that moment between having just completed something and having to complete the next thing. There's a city council meeting that night, so I have time to kill. I stop for an Italian Ice at a roadside Ice Cream stand. Not a single person knows where I am or even cares to know. I could drive to Bangor and see a matinee movie, or head somewhere for a long, sprawling lunch, but I decide to stay right there.

But as this moment is happening, as it's sort of *unfolding*, it's also unhappening. It's moving away from me, and I'm looking out ahead of it, when I'll be sitting in my usual folding chair at the city council meeting, writing my usual notes, or even when I'm home that night, brushing my teeth and spitting into the sink. Would it be stupid to say that I miss that little

nothing moment *as it's happening*, that I'm already pining a little? I guess it would, but these were always valuable to me.

As a child, I loved rare moments of peace and quiet, when the world seemed to have stopped. Since my father worked construction, the money came in more or less seasonally, and winters were especially hard on all of us—on our mother because that was when she went to work at Sears part-time, and I think my father expected her to still complete all the housework while working twenty hours a week; on my father too, because he felt guilty and inadequate. He didn't tell me this but I knew he must have felt it.

When I say this, I don't mean to place blame on one person. All I mean is that this type of winter was difficult, and I think we would have done just about anything to avoid it. My father worked as much overtime as he could during the summer, sometimes to the point where he all but vanished from our lives. My mother babysat the children of nearby families, kids who called her by her first name. They sold off two acres of land and used some of the money to fill the oil burner. Robert and I even gathered together my father's beer bottles and cashed them in at a liquor store in town.

It was during these winters that my mother sometimes left the house and headed to her sister's apartment back in Methuen. "I'm going on one of my vacations," she would say, and then the suitcases would make their appearance in the front hall, and the next day our aunt would appear in her blue Impala, idling at the side of the house while my mother said her good-byes. I remember watching from the window as she her carried her suitcases, one in each hand, my father, barefoot and coatless in the snow, yelling something at her back. Eventually my father came inside, his face and arms red from cold. I'll always remember what he said to me then. He said, "Don't forget that your mother didn't just leave me. She left you and she left Robert. She left all three of us. You keep that in mind."

While she was gone from the house, I sometimes talked to her at the Sears jewelry counter or at her sister's apartment. She took my hand and said things like "It's tough on Robert and you, I know." But then a customer would come in or her sister would bring something to eat out of the kitchen or my mother would just change the subject. Eventually, she would return, and we'd stay up late eating and telling stories. My father would make jokes we didn't understand, but we'd all laugh anyway, and my mother would talk about how difficult a person her sister was, and how glad she was to be back. "The house looks a little wild," she'd say, looking around, "but I kind of counted on that. I would have been hurt if it had been otherwise."

I thought about her small escapes when I made my own at eighteen, and her returns when I made my way back that Winter. The morning after my plane ride into Maine, I woke to hear her in the kitchen, the gentle clatter of silverware being sorted into a drawer. It was still snowing, and the horizon was hazy, but I could see the tree line where our land became state property from the window. I wondered if my father was planning to sell off a few more acres. There were another five acres behind the house. I pictured him as a man on an island with the tide coming in.

Downstairs, Robert stood at the living room window, watching something. I came over and watched too. It was my father. He wore a green army parka, the color of a faded dollar bill. He had pulled the hood up and zipped the front of the jacket to his neck, so all I could see was his nose and eyes, and those not very well. He had a sled in his hands, one of those plastic disks kids use, and was loading it into the back of the truck. "He wants the two of us to go up on the hill with him," Robert said. "He just put an inner tube and a toboggan in the truck too."

I smiled. "Sounds like fun."

"Not in this weather," he said. "In this weather, it's just a pain in the ass." He put his hand gently against the window and said, “I’m going to tell you something they don’t want you to know.”

The wind hadn't died down from the night before, and the snow slanted out of the sky, which had grown white with diluted sunshine. I could feel the cold through the window, and if I had placed my fingers against the glass—at the point where Robert’s hand rested—I probably would have felt the pane shudder. My father was having a difficult time moving through these gusts; he held his arm just above his face and looked at his feet as he walked. A snow drift piled against the truck had managed to cover the front driver's side tire. Other parts of the ground had been blown almost bare—just a thin layer of ice and snow. Robert said, “He thinks he’s going to die soon, Cheryl. Why do you think mom was bugging you so much to come back?”

“She wasn’t bugging me, Robert,” and I felt stupid for saying it, for saying anything, when what I should have been doing was listening.

“Yeah, well,” he said, and he laughed again, a small noise, resigned, as if he were chuckling at some joke he had heard before, and then he bent down and slid a razor across the sole of one of his boots, making deep cross-hatches. "What's that?" I asked.

"Traction."

"No. The laugh."

"Just like mom," he said. He was ignoring me now, and I turned to the kitchen door.

My mother's hands were deep in the sink, her back to me. Her hair was still mostly dark, although I noticed thick strands of dignified gray. Other than that she appeared almost unchanged. She was still shapelessly thin—boyish, I guess—and taller than me, almost my father's height. "I'm mad at

you," she said, as she turned around. "You didn't wake me up last night when you got in."

"Well, you didn't wake me up this morning," I said. "What time is it?"

She smiled and looked me over. "Come here," she said, and pulled me close for a brief hug.

"Is dad okay?" I asked.

She folded her towel and looped it through one of the handles on the cupboards. "Your father is like one of those tour guides who has to keep things moving all the time. That's his pace."

"That's not what I mean," I said. That had always been my mother's method of dealing with him, using her generosity of spirit as a kind of concealment. It was almost heartening to see it in action again.

"He's fine," she said. "Everything's okay."

"I think he asked me to move back here last night when we were talking."

"You can't listen to him when he's that way. You know that."

"I know. But he seemed serious."

"He's never serious. Especially not lately."

The door in the other room opened and I could hear Robert and my father talking. I softened my voice to a whisper. "He was last night."

"Don't get upset."

"I'm not upset. I'm not upset at all. But you lied to me." I caught myself raising my voice again and took a deep breath. "You're lying to me."

"I didn't lie to you. Everything's fine." I opened my mouth to say something—I'm not sure I knew what—but she pulled me a little closer and spoke into my ear. "It's just a little problem with his kidney, but he's going to dialysis. He's on some waiting lists. It's going to be fine." She let that settle in, and when she continued, she had changed the subject. She

let go of my arm, although she still held me with a hard look. "When he asked you that last night, about moving back, what did you tell him?"

That's when Robert interrupted to tell me my father was waiting in the truck, and that we should get going.

It was easy to see that my mother’s life was difficult, and that my being there might make things more manageable. For the first time since I had left I thought of myself living under that roof, not just staying there for two or three days, but living there as a part of a family again. I could see the deliberate habits I had built up acting as counter-balance to my father's moods. My composure might offset Robert's anger, and I could probably bolster my mother when she wavered. Dad would get better. Things would be different.

In the time it took to reach the driveway, I had dismissed the idea. That's her way of thinking, I told myself.

* * * * *

The three of us traveled thigh-to-thigh in the truck cab, my father driving, Robert at the other window, and me between them. When we arrived at the hill, he pulled up into a turnaround driveway used by maintenance people, parking as close as he could to the footpath that wound up through the woods to the top of the hill. He nodded at a thermos at my feet. I twisted the cap off and sniffed the familiar rum smell. He had a drink, and then he pulled his hood up over his head and stepped outside. "He seems okay," I said to Robert, and then, “What are your plans?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

My father rapped his knuckles against the driver's side window. "Hurry up," I heard him shout, or something like that. Robert slipped on a ski mask, so that I could only see his lips and eyes. Then he stepped out into what by

this time had become a genuine blizzard. I noticed he had left another ski mask on the seat for me, and I rolled it up and put it on like a hat. When I stepped from the truck, my boots slipped deep into a snowdrift. Maybe it was the shock of the cold, but for the first time that day I was afraid. I could hear Robert's voice off to my right, cursing the weather or my father or both, and something metal shaking in the distance, and I did not understand how I had come to be there.

We moved up the hill, our feet tilted a little sideways for traction. We marched in the same order we had sat in the truck, my father ahead of us by at least fifteen paces. He dragged three sleds behind him on ropes. By the time we got to the top, he had slipped open his jacket and was taking a drink from a plastic bottle. He smiled through the bits of snow in his beard. The wind made it difficult to hear, so the three of us didn't say a word. We just stood in a triangle, looking down the hill, the stretch of trees, the road beyond that. Twigs and bare branches stuck out of the white like skeleton hands. My father leaned forward, holding both of us by the shoulders and pulling us down toward him on either side, a quarterback in a huddle. "Who's first?" he said. He was grinning. It was hard to think of him as a sick man.

Robert picked up his sled, a red plastic wedge, and walked away from us, lifting his legs at the knee. After seven or eight steps he dropped the sled. The wind caught it like a kite, and it skidded away. He stepped after it while my father laughed. He finally caught it by a tree, shouted something, and then began his walk back to the edge of the hill. I looked at my father, the expression on his face. He grinned and clapped his hands together twice when Robert grabbed the sled. His eyes widened when Robert almost fell, but when Robert recovered his balance, he smiled again. He seemed proud of my brother, as if Robert were a baby learning to walk. Robert sat cross-legged on the sled, pushing himself with his hands, lurching

forward a foot at a time. I looked again at my father, who was zipping up his jacket. When I looked back Robert was gone. I followed the line of the hill to an inlet of trees, expecting to find him there. Nothing.

My father had picked up his own sled, an under-inflated black inner tube. He stepped once, steadied himself, then took another step. In this way he proceeded to a tree, which he gripped for balance while lowering himself into the tube. He pushed off and skimmed into the white dust, fading into the storm the way Robert had. It was my turn now. I nestled the runners of the sled in the snow, moving it back and forth. Then I pushed off, and ice spattered up in front of me. The nose of the sled rose up in the air, then slammed hard against the ground. My teeth closed on my tongue and I felt a rush of warmth in my mouth. I reached the steepest part of the hill, and I tried to hold on, although not well enough. The sled skidded ahead of me and I sprawled flat on my stomach, snow down the front of my jacket.

I rolled over, breathing hard, and I lay there, looking straight up, a dull ache across the back of my neck. The snow cascaded down in large flakes, melting on my face. I couldn't see the sky, or any clouds, just snow falling. It had been a long time since I had seen a blizzard from that perspective, and for a second it seemed as if I were moving upward through the snowfall. The sky revolved above me. I thought, just stay here, but instead I sat up, cleared my throat, and spat. A red stain formed on the ground, vanishing as the snow covered it. I spat again, counted to two, and watched it disappear.

Rising to my feet, groaning, I looked around for the truck or Robert or my father. The top of the hill had vanished, or rather the top of hill had remained and I had vanished, absorbed into the weather. I sucked on my tongue and felt my mouth fill with warmth again, as if I had just taken a gulp of my mother's coffee. I spat, counted, "One, two," and the blood was gone. A vague

movement flickered in the cloud of snow. I stepped toward it. The shape moved closer, grew more defined. It was Robert. He held his sled like a shield.

We didn't look at each other—lifting our heads would have speckled our faces with snow—but we knew what had to be done. Robert sliced his sled into the ground, covering it at the base so it wouldn't blow away—a marker. We turned our backs to each other and walked in opposite directions. After fifty or so yards I heard Robert yelling. I turned around, retracing my half-covered steps back to the sled, then further in Robert's direction. I found him, kneeling just past a group of trees and looking out into the clear field. My father was stretched out there on the ground, arms and legs thrown wide, as if he were making a snow angel. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the inner tube skid slowly into the patch of trees. Robert reached him first, put his arm around his neck and lifted him into a sitting position. "I'm not sure if you should do that," I said, coming up behind him.

My father kept saying, "I'm fine. I'm fine," which made a good case for him being injured. "What hurts?" I asked.

He folded his arms across his chest. "Nothing hurts."

"You might have broken something."

"Nothing's broken," he said, and he grabbed my shoulder, lifting himself. His hood was thrown back, and his beard and eyelashes were caked with ice, his features partially hidden, distorted.

He fell, rolling onto his side and hollering. For a second I thought he was joking, but he didn't get back up. Robert leaned over and looked at his foot, more to avoid his eyes, I thought, than to actually find out the extent of the damage. My father kept talking. "I'm perfectly all right." I held out my hand, but he knocked it away with a wild sweep. I held it out again and he batted it away, so hard that my mitten slipped off. I picked up the mitten, shook it, and slipped it on. It was full of snow.

Robert had stepped back and was watching us, wondering what he should do, I guess. I held out my left hand this time, but my father looked away, as if he had been offered something repugnant. "I can do it myself," he said, but he didn't make an attempt. I stood there, kicking at snow until I saw specks of frozen dirt. "Give me a minute to catch my breath," he said. If anything, it was beginning to snow harder. At least it seemed that way.

"I think the truck's just a little ways in that direction."

He winced. "For Christ's sake, stop your badgering."

Robert stepped forward. "We're tired," he said, and he closed his hand slowly around my father's. He didn't grab it really, the way someone might catch a baseball. He just extended his arm and enclosed his fingers around the palm. He tugged, not hard. "Come on. We're sick of this." I could tell my father was seeing how much he could pull away from the grip without actually looking like he was expending the effort. Robert's hand was the smaller of the two, but his grip held. He pulled harder. I thought I should say something.

The mitten came off in Robert's hand, and my father fell backwards. His shoulder hit the ground. At first I thought he might be hurt, but he sat up and wiped snow from his pants. "Oh, that was smart," he said. "That was really smart."

Robert threw the mitten away. He gripped my father's hand again, at the wrist. "Hurry up." He dragged him in the snow for a few feet, then stopped, hands on his hips, breathing hard.

My father quickly pulled his hand to his chest. It seemed to fold inward there, curled like a question mark. His face was deep red, almost purple, around his thick cheeks. "You little shit," he said. "Don't think I'm going to forget this." He stopped, maybe waiting for Robert to yell something back, but Robert didn't say a thing. He kept going, his anger slurring the

words. "Don't expect to have a place to sleep tonight. Not under my roof." Robert looked up the hill, then out toward the main road. "And that little job you have, who do you think owns that place? One of my best friends, that's who, prick." He sputtered, looking at the ground. "You prick."

Robert grabbed him by the collar and pushed him back. "You better get up," he said. I knew I should intervene, push Robert away, but I didn't. Robert kept his hold on the collar and hit him on the back with his free hand. Then again. They were small punches, glancing slaps against the bulk of my father's coat. The sound reminded me of my mother beating blankets on the clothesline. My father twisted so that his back protected him.

Robert punched him again, in the shoulder. He fell onto his side and yelled something I didn't hear, maybe not even a word, just a sound. For a second I thought he was going to stand and knock Robert down, but that was impossible. He was an old man, huddled at Robert's feet. Then he said, "Don't just stand there, Cheryl. Pull him off of me."

Neither Robert nor I moved, although Robert's hand hung above my father's back, as if he were getting ready to hit him again. My father coughed. "Cheryl, for Christ's sake, are you just going to stand there and watch this?" His voice grew louder, more shrill. "I was right to kick your ass out. I always knew you didn't give a shit about anyone but yourself. I knew it." He coughed again. "I knew it." He said more, but I wasn't listening, because that's when I took a step, as if I suddenly remembered I could move.

To tell the truth, I thought I was going to help him, offer him my hand again—he would take it now—or calm Robert down. That's why I leaned over him, I think, to help. But I didn't do that. I struck him too, in the small of his back. It must have hurt a little, I think, even through my mitten and his jacket. I felt it, anyway, on my knuckles. Robert slapped him on the back of

the head. I threw another punch, then a third. When we stopped, I kicked some snow at him with the side of my boot.

I've thought about that, the kick, the three punches. Of course, I did it to hurt him, and I'm sorry about that. But I think I also did it because I had to. I knew when I landed that first punch, and maybe even before that, when I took a step toward him, that there wouldn't be any room for compromise anymore. It was a decision I thought was irrevocable, and that's exactly what I wanted then—to go back to Massachusetts and start a new life in which I did not have to worry about my father, my brother, and even my mother.

At the hospital I spoke to an intern. He was obviously tired, with narrow, slumped shoulders and reddened eyes. "What were you doing out?" he asked. The question seemed almost rhetorical. No answer would have been sufficient, so I didn't give him one. Neither did Robert or my father, who sat on the bed, jeans rolled halfway up his calf. He clutched his hand, massaging his fingers as the intern indicated the X-rays. "He has a fracture here, of the tibia, and here, of the fibula." He flipped through several more X-rays of the ankle, always indicating the two broken areas. His gestures seemed rehearsed, scripted. So did our attentiveness. When he was finished he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He spoke very slowly and carefully. "We're going to put what we call a Jones Compression Dressing on his foot. When we're finished with that you should bring your father home, get some food in his stomach, and put him to bed." It occurred to me then that each of us, including the intern, had his own reasons for wanting to get this over with as soon as possible.

By the time we got to the house it had stopped snowing, and the world had that smooth, clean look it only has for a few hours after a heavy blizzard, before cars and plows and kids scratch at the surface of it. My father sat in the truck with the door open, crutches in his hands, while

Robert and I shoveled the steps to the porch. I didn't think anything of it then, but he was already getting some of the color in his face back, and that slight swagger in his attitude. It was apparent in the way he dangled his bad foot out of the truck cab, impatiently waiting for Robert and me to finish, and in the way he drank from the thermos. Later in the day I would find it, empty, on the floor of the truck.

When we finished shoveling a narrow path from the steps to the truck, we walked along with him, one of us on either side. "Look out for that patch of ice," I said, pointing at the place where he had just positioned his crutch. He moved to the left, found a clear spot where he could see the black tar of the driveway, then took a hesitant step. "There you go," I said. When he reached the stairs, Robert and I put our hands under his arms and helped him up to the first landing. After that, when it was clear he could do it himself, we let go of him, although our hands hovered inches from his back, almost touching him, just in case he should slip. Robert held the screen door. I moved the afghan throw rug. My father hobbled into the house.

Robert put the rug back in its place. He leaned his shovel against the wall. "I thought it would feel different." I didn't say anything; maybe I was still confused by what had happened. I handed him my shovel and he put it with his. "I thought it would make me feel better, you know?"

“It’s okay,” I said.

“I’m going to live here all my life,” he said, and his voice broke. “I know it. Dad is going to die and then I’ll become him. I felt that today when I was standing over him. That’s why I hit him the second time. That’s why I couldn’t stop hitting him.” His voice was soft and dull, but his eyes were red. The sun had reached its height, and drops of water were already dripping from around the gutters. By tonight they'd be icicles. Our winter clothes were strewn around the room, coats on furniture, boots tilted on their sides,

small puddles of melting snow around them. My mother was in the other room, pouring my father tea. "The damned sled turned over, and I just fell wrong," he explained as we came into the room, and she patted his hand and stood up as we sat down. She brought out sandwiches, and we ate in silence.

My father did not die that year or the next or even the next. He lived there a long time, in that house. And Robert did not become my father, at least not in the way he expected—in the way he thought he might that day on the snow. He lost his job that spring and joined the army, but left that after about half a year with a dishonorable discharge. He headed to the southwest next—New Mexico, I think—and then Utah. It was difficult to picture my parents alone in that house after he left. Sometimes I talked to her on the phone and asked, "Mom, how are you doing, really?" And she would say something like, "Cheryl, I'm fine," and she'd chuckle at my ridiculous question. I did not talk to my father during this time, except through my mother, and there seemed to be something insubstantial about him, as if he were just one of my mother's anecdotes. I began to expect the phone call telling me that he was gone.

Two years later, it was my mother who passed away in her sleep, and I returned again, for the funeral, and I ended up staying for more than a year. I had lost my job two months before, and someone needed to take care of my father, who didn't work at all anymore. Was it a favor I did for my mother or for him? I'm not sure. I think that during that time taking care of him, I had never been closer to my mother, although she was gone, of course. What I mean is that I found myself doing the things she did—cooking for him, spending my evenings alone while he shut himself away downstairs.

It took two strokes to kill him, one while he walked through the yard, and another, three weeks later, while he slept in his chair in the cellar. I sometimes notice certain kind of men—very old men with knots of muscle in

their shoulders and hard, round bellies. I stand behind them in the check out line of the grocery store as the clerk rings up their beer and lottery tickets, or I walk past them as they sit on park benches. I sometimes talk briefly to them when writing general interest stories about new hockey rinks or the latest election. These are men who might have been my father's friends, who are the right age, the right build, who just have that look about them. I write their words down in my notebook and I smile at them and sometimes they smile back and I think, *he would have looked something like this.*

There is a gravity that surrounds places and people, something invisible that holds us to them. When I am driving home after work, I sometimes think of my mother driving down that same road for the first time, and what she might have thought when the house—the house I live in now—slid into view from behind the trees. It's like I know her then, like her anger is *my* anger. It's like that morning on the hill with my father, and my hands tighten on the steering wheel. But then the moment is unspooling as it spools, and as my hands turn the wheel I know it's only *my* anger I'm feeling.