

Beyond the window of my father's shop, midwinter light skims the snow. My father stands, straightening his back.

'How was school?' he asks.

'Good,' I say.

He puts his sander down and reaches for his jacket on a hook. I run my hand along the surface of the table. The wood is floury with dust, but satin underneath.

'You ready?' he asks.

'I'm ready,' I say.

My father and I leave his workshop in the barn and walk out into the cold. The air, dry and still, hurts my nose as I breathe. We lace up our snowshoes and bang them hard against the crust. A rust color is on the bark, and the sun is making purple shadows behind the trees.

From time to time the light sends up a sheen of pocked glass.

We move at a good clip, dodging pine boughs, occasionally catching a shower on the back of the neck. My father says, 'I feel like a dog let out to exercise at the end of the day.'

The stillness of the forest is always a surprise, as if an audience had quieted for a performance. Beneath the hush I can hear the rustle of dead leaves, the snap of a twig, a brook running under a skin of ice. Beyond the woods there's the hollow road-whine of a truck on Route 89, the drone of a plane headed into Lebanon. We follow a path that is familiar, that will end at a stone wall near the summit. The wall, square on three sides, once bordered a farmer's property. The house and barn are gone, and only the foundations remain. When we reach the wall, my father will sometimes sit on it and have a cigarette.

I am twelve on this mid-December afternoon (though I am thirty now), and I don't know yet that puberty is just around the corner, or that the relentless narcissism of a teenage girl will make walking in the woods with my father just about the last thing I'll want to do on any given day after school. Taking a hike together is a habit my father and I have grown into. My father spends too many hours bent to his work, and I know he needs to get outside.

After the table is finished, my father will put it in the front room with the other furniture he has made. Fourteen pieces in two years isn't much of an output, but he's had to teach himself from books. What he can't learn from manuals, he asks a man called Sweetser down

at the hardware store. My father's furniture is simple and rudimentary, and that is fine with him. It has a decent line and a passable finish, though none of that matters. What matters is that the work keeps him busy and is unlike anything he has ever done before.

A branch snaps and scratches my cheek. The sun sets. We have maybe twenty minutes left of decent light. The route back to the house is easy all the way down and can be done in less than ten. We still have time to reach the wall.

I hear the first cry then, and I think it is a cat. I stop under a canopy of pine and listen, and there it is again. A rhythmic cry, a wail.

'Dad,' I say.

I take a step toward the sound, but as abruptly as it began, it ends. Behind me snow falls with a muted thump onto the crust.

'A cat,' my father says.

We begin the steep climb up the hill. My feet feel heavy at the ends of my legs. When we reach the summit, my father will judge the light, and if there's time he'll sit on the stone wall and see if he can make out our house – a smidgen of yellow through the trees. '*There,*' he will say to me, pointing down the hill, 'can you see it now?'

My father has lost the weight of a once sedentary man. His jeans are threadbare in the thighs and tinged with the rusty fur of sawdust. At best he shaves only every other day. His parka is beige, stained with spots of oil and grease and pine pitch. He cuts his hair himself, and his blue eyes are always a surprise.

I follow his tracks and pride myself that I no longer

have any trouble keeping up with him. Over his shoulder he tosses me a Werther's candy, and I catch it on the fly. I pull off my mittens, tuck them under my arm, and begin to unwrap the cellophane. As I do I hear the distant thunk of a car door shutting.

We listen to the sound of an engine revving. It seems to come from the direction of a motel on the north-east side of the hill. The entrance to the motel is further out of town than the road that leads to our house, and we seldom have a reason to drive by it. Still, I know it is there, and I sometimes see it through the trees on our walks – a low, red-shingled building that does a decent business in the ski season.

I hear a third cry then – heartbreaking, beseeching, winding down to shuddering.

'Hey!' my father calls.

In his snowshoes he begins to run as best he can in the direction of the cry. Every dozen steps he stops, letting the sound guide him. I follow, and the sky darkens as we go. He takes a flashlight from his pocket and switches it on.

'Dad,' I say, panic rising in my chest.

The beam of light jiggles on the snow as he runs. My father begins to sweep the flashlight in an arc, back and forth, side to side. The moon lifts off the horizon, a companion in our search.

'Anybody there?' he calls out.

We move laterally around the base of the slope. The flashlight flickers off and my father shakes it to re-connect the batteries. It slips out of his glove and falls into a soft pocket of snow beside a tree, making an eerie cone of light beneath the crust. He bends to pick

it up, and as he raises himself, the light catches on a patch of blue plaid through the trees.

‘Hello!’ he calls.

The woods are silent, mocking him, as if this were a game.

My father waves the flashlight back and forth. I’m wondering if we shouldn’t turn around and head back to the house. It’s dangerous in the woods at night; it’s too easy to get lost. My father makes another pass with the flashlight, and then another, and it seems he has to make twenty passes before he catches again the patch of blue plaid.

There’s a sleeping bag in the snow, a corner of flannel turned over at its opening.

‘Stay here,’ my father says.

I watch my father run forward in his showshoes, the way one sometimes does in dreams – unable to make the legs move fast enough. He crouches for better leverage and keeps a steady bead on the bag. When he reaches the plaid flannel, he tears it open. I hear him make a sound unlike any I have ever heard before. He falls to his knees in the snow.

‘Dad!’ I shout, already running toward him.

My arms are flailing, and it feels as though someone is pushing against my chest. My hat falls off, but I keep on clumping through the snow. I am breathing hard when I reach him, and he doesn’t tell me to go away. I look down at the sleeping bag.

A small face gazes up at me, the eyes wide despite their many folds. The spiky black hair is gelled with birth matter. The baby is wrapped in a bloody towel, and its lips are blue.

My father bends his cheek to the tiny mouth. I know enough not to make a sound.

With one swift movement he gathers up the icy sleeping bag, presses it close to him, and stands. But the material is cheap and slippery, and he can't get a decent grip.

I hold my arms out to catch the baby.

He kneels again in the snow. He sets his bundle down, unzips his jacket, and tears open his flannel shirt, the buttons popping as he goes. He unwraps the infant from the bloody towel. Six inches of something I will later learn is cord hang from the baby's navel. My father puts the child close to his skin, holding the head upright in the palm of one hand. Without even knowing that I've looked, I understand the infant is a girl.

My father staggers to his feet. He wraps his flannel shirt and parka around the child, folding the jacket tight with his arms. He shifts his bundle to make a closed package.

'Nicky,' my father says.

I look up at him.

'Hold on to my jacket if you need to,' he says, 'but don't let yourself get more than a foot or two behind me.'

I grab the edge of his parka.

'Keep your head down and watch my feet.'

We move by the smell of smoke. Sometimes we have the scent, and sometimes we don't. I can see the silhouettes of trees, but not their branches.

'Hang in there,' my father says, but I don't know if it is to me or to the infant against his chest that he is speaking.

We half slide, half run down the long hill, my thighs burning with the strain. My father lost the flashlight when he left the sleeping bag in the snow, and there isn't time to go back for it. We move through the trees, and the boughs scratch my face. My hair and neck are soaked from melted snow that freezes again on my forehead. From time to time I feel a rising fear: We are lost, and we won't get the baby out in time. She will die in my father's arms. No, no, I tell myself, we won't let that happen. If we miss the house, we'll eventually hit the highway. We have to.

I see the light from a lamp in my father's workshop. 'Dad, look,' I say.

The last hundred yards seems the longest distance I have ever run in my life. I open the door and brace it for my father. We wear our snowshoes into the barn, the bamboo and gut slapping as we make our way to the woodstove. My father sits in a chair. He opens his jacket and looks down at the tiny face. The baby's eyes are closed, the lips still bluish. He puts the back of his hand to the mouth, and from the way he closes his eyes I can tell that she's breathing.

I unlace my snowshoes and then undo my father's.

'An ambulance won't make it up the hill,' my father says. Holding the child against his skin, he stands. 'Come with me.'

We move out the barn door, along the passageway to the house, and into the back hallway. My father takes the stairs two at a time and turns into his bedroom. Clothes litter the floor, and a fan of magazines is on the bed. I hardly ever go into my father's bedroom. He snatches up a sweater but tosses it away because of the

roughness of the yarn. He gathers up a flannel shirt and realizes that it hasn't yet been washed. In the corner is a blue plastic laundry basket that my father and I take to the Laundromat every week or so. Between times he uses it as a kind of bureau drawer.

'Hand me that,' he says, pointing.

With one arm, he sweeps the magazines from the bed. I set the laundry basket on the mattress. He takes the baby out, wraps her in two clean flannel shirts, front to back, the small face above the folds. He makes a nest of sheets in the basket, and then he lays the infant gently in.

'Okay then,' he says to steady himself. 'Okay now.'

I climb into the truck. My father sets the basket on my lap.

'You all right?' he asks.

I nod, knowing that no other answer is at all possible.

My father gets into the truck and puts the key into the ignition. I know he's praying that the engine will start. It catches the first try only half the time in winter. The engine coughs, and he coaxes it to a whine. I'm afraid to look at the infant in the plastic basket, afraid I won't see the tiny puffs of breath in the frigid air, mimicking my own.

My father drives as fast as he dares. I grit my teeth in the ruts. The frozen lane is ridged up from the early snows and thaws of the fall. In the spring, before the town comes by to grade it, the road will be nearly impassable. Last spring, during a two-week melt, I had to stay at my friend Jo's house so that I could go to school. My father, who had taken great pains to be

alone, finally walked into town one day, both to see his daughter and to break his cabin fever. Marion, who tends the register at Remy's, tried to bring him home in her Isuzu, but she couldn't make it past the first bend. My father had to walk the rest of the distance, and his calf muscles ached for days.

The baby snorts and startles me. She gives a wail, and even in the weak light from the dashboard, I can see the angry red of her skin. My father puts his hand out to touch her. 'Atta girl,' he whispers in the dark.

He keeps his hand lightly on the soft mound of flannel shirts. I wonder if the motion of soothing Clara is coming back to him now and hurting his chest. The road down the hill seems longer than I remembered it. I hope the baby will cry all the way to Mercy.

My father guns the engine when he hits the pavement, and the truck fishtails from ice in the treads. He pushes the speedometer as high as he can without losing control. We pass the Mobil station and the bank and the one-room elementary school from which I graduated just the year before. I wonder if my father will stop at Remy's and hand the baby over to Marion, who could call for an ambulance. But my father bypasses the store, because stopping will only delay what he's already doing – delivering the infant to someone who will know what to do with her.

We drive past the small village green that is used as a skating rink in winter. In the middle is a flagpole with a spotlight on it.

Who left the baby in the sleeping bag?

My father turns at the sign for Mercy. The driveway to the hospital is lined with yellow lights, and I can see

the baby, scrunching her face, ugly now. But I remember the eyes looking up at me in the woods – dark eyes, still and watchful. My father pulls up to Emergency and leans on the horn.

The door on my side swings open, and a security guard in uniform pushes his face into the truck.

‘What’s the horn for?’ he asks.