You Will Come Safe from the Sea

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YOU WILL COME SAFE FROM THE SEA

by

Peter J. Geye

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YOU WILL COME SAFE FROM THE SEA

Peter J. Geye, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2008

Set against the Minnesota North Shore of Lake Superior, “You Will Come Safe From the Sea” examines the lives of Olaf and Noah Torr, a father and son whose long estrangement began after Olaf survived a shipwreck on Lake Superior. Thirty years after the wreck, Olaf is dying of cancer and has asked his son home to help him die. Over the course of two weeks in November, the protagonists learn each other’s lives and summon the courage to forgive. Multiple stories-within-the-story evolve, including the harrowing account of the wreck of the SS Ragnarök (Olaf’s ore boat), and Noah’s own struggle to make a life with an absent father and the help of his sagacious wife, whose own complications with infertility issues mark her husband’s life in ways he only fully understands as the reconciliation with his father takes shape.
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Peter J. Geye
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The aspens swayed white and bony, the last of their pale leaves had fallen. On either side of the road the pattern of trees made a crude geometry that had begun to lull him. Noah'd been toying with the car radio—tuning the dial up and down the AM band—when he heard a disc jockey from a station in Marquette announce the time, seven twenty-five, and an old country music song. The first few chords of a steel guitar moaned before fading to static. He turned the radio off, cleared his throat after a sip of lukewarm coffee, and settled into the white noise of the tires on the highway. It had been a half hour since he'd seen another car.

Occasionally the road curved to the right—to the east—and the trees dispersed and the brown rocks and the brown water of the lake came into view. The lake was unusually still, especially in contrast with his memories of it tonguing up onto the stone beaches and boulders—a child's memories, the water all froth and fury.

He'd been expecting the sun to rise over the lake but it was too late in the year, too far into fall, and it was rising over the hills instead. Watching the horizon over the lake to the north, he tried to remember the adage about a red sky in morning.
It was red—the sky over the lake—and threatening. It reminded him of his childhood and the late season gales that had been the curse of his mother, the curse of all the ore men’s wives. Their children too. He never knew what to think about the storms but that they were spectacular, and he suspected one was coming in the spiraling clouds.

Another hour, he thought. I’ll be there in another hour.

When Noah was a boy the North Shore was a savage place. Highway 61 had always been rutty with potholes and frost heaves, and deserted but for a few dilapidated wooden billboards and battered storefronts and the highway signs warning of deer crossings. Not much had changed as he drove along the highway but that the two deadliest curves, curves that had once pinned cars between sheer three-hundred-foot cliffs on either side of the road, one dropping into Lake Superior, the other climbing up from the highway, had been replaced with two quarter-mile tunnels burrowed into the craggy bedrock. The weathered wooden signs were still there advertising places like the Poplar Lodge and Ingrid’s Wild Berry Pies. The signs warning of deer crossings were still there too.

He was a long way from his townhouse in Cambridge. Two days earlier, on a Sunday, Noah was watching a Patriots game when the phone rang.

‘Noah?’ the voice said. ‘Noah’s that you?’

‘Dad?’

‘This is your father.’

‘I know. Where are you?’
'At the gas station in Misquah. There's a pay phone here.' Something about his father's voice gave away the old man's isolation. It was the voice of a silent man, a man who hadn't spoken aloud in some time.

'Are you in trouble?'

'Fucksakes can't a man call his son?'

'Of course he can, he just doesn't.'

There was a long pause. Noah could hear wind in the phone.

'Noah, I think something's wrong.'

Noah said nothing.

'I shit a pile of bloody tar this morning.'

Noah stood up, muted the television. 'What are you talking about?'

The cabin on Lake Forsone where his father lived didn't have running water or a toilet inside. There was a spigot on a limestone slab in the yard. The well. He envisioned the rusted well pump from his childhood, the ten gallon buckets used to haul the water into the house. He could practically taste the metallic water in his memory, could practically feel its coldness on his throat. In order for his father to go to the bathroom, Noah knew, he had to walk thirty yards past the well up a path through the woods to the privy. From the seat whatever fell dropped ten feet into an antique septic tank that had to be pumped out every spring. 'How could you tell it was bloody? You can't see down into the toilet there.'

His father sighed. 'Noah, I shit my pants. In bed. It happened this morning before I could get up. I couldn't get up.'
Noah hadn’t thought much about his father the last couple of years, but whenever he did, the same image always came to mind. The *Ragnarok* steaming into Duluth harbor, the dregs of an August thunderstorm hanging over the hills behind the city, the old man in yellow rain pants, shirtless, shoulder muscles ropy, holding a stern line above his head as he instructed a deckhand. Noah remembered being able to hear his father’s voice as the ship steamed past the breakwater where he and his mother stood. He hollered for his father, and between the ship’s horn blasts to the bridge the old man hollered back, waving his free hand. It was a safe memory, one that kept the hatred at bay.

“You still there?” his father asked.

“I’m here. Tell me what happened. Be more specific.”

“How in the hell can I be more specific? I woke up this morning and my pajamas were a mess. It was black and bloody.”

“How did you get to the gas station?”

“I drove the goddamn truck. Fucksakes, I’m not an invalid.”

“Have you talked to Solveig?”

“Course I’ve talked to your sister.”

“You’ve got to go to the hospital.”

“Like hell I’m going to the hospital.”

“You shit your pants. It was bloody.”

“I’m eighty-two years old,” his father interrupted.

“Exactly my point.”

“Drop it.”
‘Then I’ll come there. I’ll take you myself. I can leave tomorrow and be there by Tuesday morning.’

Olaf took a raspy breath. ‘Christ, there’s nothing for you to do here.’

‘I can get to Misquah but I don’t remember how to get to the house.’

‘Goddamnit, Noah. I just thought I’d let you know in case something happens.’

‘Nothing’s going to happen. Tell me how and I’ll be there the day after tomorrow.’

The directions he gave Noah were those of a man who knew where he was and where he was going unconsciously. ‘Past Misquah, past the gas station—it’s called The Landing, there’s a big red sign on the right—you’ll see a county road going up into the hills. At the turn there’s a stand of tall firs, on the right, burnt red from this summer. Five minutes into the hills you should see Lake Forsone Road, a dirt road. Follow it east. There’s a bunch of red milkweed in the ditch on the right, still in bloom as of this morning. Follow the road around the lake. Park up on the road because the trail down to the house is all rutted out. You’ll remember when you get here. Besides, it’s simple now that I think about it: just follow the red landmarks, like harbor buoys—red, right, returning.’

‘I’ll leave tomorrow. I’ll be there on Tuesday.’

Olaf hung up without saying goodbye.

Noah put the phone back in the cradle, turned off the television, and lowered his face into his hands. When he looked up a few minutes later, Natalie was leaning
against the doorframe in the oversized, hooded Dartmouth sweatshirt she wore around the house.

‘Noah, who was that?’

‘My father, he’s sick.’

‘How sick? Is he in the hospital?’

‘He won’t go to the hospital. He says he’s too old.’ He looked at his hands.

‘He shit his pants, it was bloody.’

‘Oh jesus. Does Solveig know?’

Noah didn’t answer.

‘Can I do anything?’

Noah shook his head no. ‘I’m going to see him.’

‘Really? Did he ask you to come?’

‘He told me not to.’

‘Noah, you haven’t seen him in years, maybe you should call your sister.’

‘He says he talked to her already. I don’t know. I think I have to go. I mean, what if he’s dying?’

Natalie sat down and put her arm around him. ‘If you think you should go, then do.’

‘Am I crazy? Is it stupid that I go?’

‘I guess you’ll know soon enough.’

After dinner that night, as Noah packed a duffle bag full of wool socks, insulated jeans, flannel shirts and a roll neck sweater, Natalie poked her head in their
bedroom. She’d just finished a run on their treadmill and was drinking a bottle of water.

‘Whatever happened between you two?’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Why does it surprise me that you’re going back there? Why has it been so long since you’ve seen him?’

‘It’s a long story,’ Noah said.

She took a long drink of water, wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her t-shirt. ‘I mean it, you should go.’

Something in her voice gave her away. ‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

She took another drink. ‘Nothing. It’s just . . . it’s nothing.’

The next afternoon Noah got on a plane at noon. By six o’clock he was at a restaurant in Canal Park ordering a Caesar salad and gnocchi. Since he’d last been in Duluth five years earlier, Canal Park had become a full-service tourist destination. Restaurants, art galleries, antique shops, even a bookstore-lined Lake Avenue like a Vermont ski town. It was a far cry from the days of his childhood when the area was one hole-in-the-wall bar after another.

He’d originally intended to head straight up to Misquah but because it was late—almost dark—and because he didn’t want to surprise the old man or get lost on the way to Lake Forsone, he thought better of it and checked into a hotel on the lake. After he showered and called his wife, he headed back up Lake Avenue towards the harbor. Along the way he stopped in the bookstore. The place teemed with Duluth
guidebooks, paperback bestsellers, and coffee table books by a famous Minnesotan wildlife photographer. A woman sorting magazines at the newsstand asked Noah if she could help him.

‘Actually,’ Noah said, only thinking of it as she asked. ‘Do you have any books on Superior shipwrecks?’

‘Of course. Underneath the canoe hanging from the ceiling over there’ – she pointed to the wall opposite the cash register – ‘you’ll see a whole bookshelf full of them.’

Among the many familiar titles there was a dog-eared copy of a book called, *Fire and Ice: The True Story of the SS Ragnarok*. Beneath the title a third-rate artist’s rendering of the *Rag* plowed melodramatically through heavy seas. There were dozens of books. Children’s books with caricatures of his father with a pipe dangling from his lip and a patch over his eye, academic books that included official inquiries and reports, fictionalized versions wild in their speculation, even a book of poetry and woodcuts. There were t-shirts and hats with screen-printed images of the *Rag* splashed across them, refrigerator magnets, enough kitsch to sink a boat. Noah had forgotten about the cottage industry of the *Ragnarök*, forgotten about how it tugged him in the wrong direction. He was annoyed that the tragedy his father survived had been capitalized upon the way it had. Yet despite this Noah could never resist buying a book he hadn’t seen before, so he tucked *Fire and Ice* under his arm, bought it, and headed back out, towards the harbor again.

At the breakwater he listened as the water in the canal lapped against the wall. A million gulls squawked and rolled and dove on invisible currents above the aerial
bridge. Every couple of minutes one would pull up on the breakwater wall and hop
towards Noah with a cocked head. They looked famished and well fed at the same
time. Their iridescent eyes glittered in the lamplight. He’d always loved watching the
gulls and thought that there was something epic about them up here, something very
different from the scavenger gulls back in Boston. Here the gulls fished first and
begged only after the smelt had gone out.

He looked over the breakwater wall, caught his reflection in the waves, and
wondered how many times during the last twenty-four hours he’d tried to remember
what his father’s face looked like. And how many times had he come up with empty
spaces where the memory should have been.

After the last of the gulls flew into the distant harbor, disappearing into the
fog and drizzle, he decided to go back to the hotel. But as he turned up Lake Avenue
he passed the coast guard office. Strange that it was still aglow. As he approached, he
saw that it was no longer simply the Coast Guard station, but a full-fledged museum.
He looked at his watch—it was seven thirty—then looked at the hours posted on the
doors. Through November first, it was open until eight o’clock.

Inside, a freckle-faced kid sitting behind the information desk, alone, must
have been counting the minutes until closing time. He nodded at Noah, and then
shifted his attention back to the radio on his desk. The long, split-level hallway was
covered with posters and artifacts representing a chronology of the Superior shipping
industry. He took the ramp up, which led into a large room with windows overlooking
the canal. A crumpled lifeboat hung suspended from the ceiling. Noah shivered—
almost turned around to leave—but veered into one of the anterooms instead. A sign
suspended just inside the door announced it as the *Ragnarok* room. Along one of the walls hung a montage of photographs, among which his father’s image glared back from two. The first—an eighteen-by-twelve-inch black and white of the crew of the *Rag* huddled dockside in front of the black-hulled *freighter* during a late winter snow squall—took Noah’s breath away. Taken in March 1967, the day of her first cruise that shipping season, it reminded Noah of countless other departures. Most of the thirty faces in the photograph were blurred in the snow or hidden by the wool collars of the crew’s standard issue pea coats, but the image of his father’s gaze—unblurred by the snow and unhidden by his collar—stung Noah’s memory. The placard beside the first photo said: *The crew of the ill-fated Superior Steel ship SS Ragnarok, March 1967. The ship is at berth at the Superior Steel docks in Duluth harbor. The Rag would founder off Isle Royale eight months later in a gale. Twenty-seven of her thirty hands were lost.* It also listed, in parentheses, each of the men, from left to right, front to back.

Noah had never seen the second photograph, taken of the three survivors. Luke Lifthrasir lay on a four-handled gurney being carried up the glazed boulder beach, his gauze-wrapped arm raised triumphantly in a frostbitten fist. Two men in Coast Guard uniforms tended to Bjorn Vifte who sat huddled under a wet wool blanket. Noah’s father sat in the edge of the picture, alone, his shoulders slumped over his knees, the small of his back resting against an ancient cedar tree that grew from a cleave in the bedrock. Blood frozen in parallel lines stained his cheek. In the background, a photographer aimed his camera at the same wrecked lifeboat that hung on display from the middle of the ceiling in the museum. The second placard read:
Like a sleepwalker Noah toured the rest of the museum. An unending series of ship models and more photographs chronicling the whole nautical history of Lake Superior filled the museum; artifacts recovered from Great Lake shipwrecks—forks, lanterns, life vests, a tea kettle, a sextant, a pair of black boots, an oil can, a coal shovel, and a pocket watch lined the glass cases that circled another room; a row of small rooms replicated the cabins of different ships, a sort of timeline of living conditions aboard Great Lakes freighters; a steam turbine tugboat engine, circa 1925, twenty feet tall, rose between the split level entry; and the museum’s centerpiece, a model pilot house complete with an antique wooden wheel, a chart room, and a brass Chadburn set to full steam sat in the middle of the place.

From behind the wooden wheel Noah looked out onto the channel running into Duluth Harbor. Although it was dark, he could see through the bare boughs of a maple tree. Beyond the canal breakwaters and the small lighthouses the lake disappeared into an even deeper darkness. On his left, he knew, the hills stretched above town, shrouded in a chrysalis of late autumn brume. And behind him, the aerial bridge loomed like a skeleton.

Before the museum closed, Noah checked the television monitor that announced harbor traffic to see if any ships were coming or going that night. At ten thirty a Swedish boat named Erindring was scheduled to depart. He checked his watch and headed back up Lake Avenue to a place called the Freighter for a beer while he waited for the Swedish ship. The place was a Duluth landmark, a bare-
knuckle bar that had lost its punch but was still crowded with regulars. Dark, greasy air thick with smoke and blue neon hung like the lake fog. In the back of the bar, a red felt pool table sat neglected in the glow of a Hamm’s beer lamp. A gauzy linoleum floor curled up from rotten floorboards, and a cobwebbed fishing net hung limply from the ceiling. Behind the bar, above the bottles of cheap gin, rum and whiskey, a dozen photographs of freighters in teakwood frames hung nailed into the wall. The place had always been his father’s pub of choice.

‘You look familiar,’ the bartender said. An old man with a ruddy face and thick glasses, he looked familiar to Noah too.

‘I haven’t been here in years,’ Noah said.

‘Well, I haven’t not been here in years.’

‘My old man used to call this place home.’

‘Who was your old man?’ He was wiping his hands on a dingy, blue bar rag.

‘Olaf Torr.’

‘Oh Christ,’ the bartender said, reaching for a bottle of Tulamore Dew. ‘If you’re Torr’s boy, then this is on me.’

Before Noah could decline, a lowball full of whiskey sat in front of him. The bartender poured himself one, too.

‘I can’t drink this,’ Noah said. ‘It’ll kill me.’

The bartender drained the glass he’d poured for himself and smacked his lips.

‘You ain’t Torr’s boy if that’s true.’

Noah smiled because he had to.

‘Your old man dead?’
'Jesus, no,' Noah said. Then added, 'Not yet.'

'He still living up there around Misquah?'

'Unbelievably, he is.'

'We used to fall on over to the Tallahassee every odd day of the week. Watch them girls shake tail.'

'You were his corrupter then.'

'Shit, he didn’t need corrupting.'

'I suppose he didn’t.'

'What brings you back home?' the bartender asked, pulling the filter off a Swisher Sweet and lighting it.

'I'm actually headed up to see my father.'

'You tell that sonabitch Mel says hello. Better yet, tell him to bring his old bones on down, say hello himself.'

'I'll do that,' Noah said, then took a sip of the whiskey.

The last time he'd been in the Freighter was also one of the last times he'd seen his father. He'd been in town for the wedding of a childhood friend and on the Sunday after the wedding, before he headed back home to Boston, he met his father for breakfast.

On the mismatched barstools, half a dozen gray-haired men sat like barnacles, each of them looking as bored and near to death as breathing creatures could. When the door creaked shut behind Noah they turned in unison to sneer at the yuppie in pressed khaki trousers standing in the doorway. Olaf stood up, last in line and farthest from the door, looked down at Noah over the top of his glasses, and pulled out the
barstool next to his own. ‘Hello, Noah. Sit down,’ he said as he pushed two empty Bloody Mary glasses into the bar gutter and crushed out a cigarette. ‘What do you know?’

‘You’re not taking very good care of yourself,’ Noah told him. ‘You look terrible.’

Olaf looked hard at Noah and asked him what he wanted.
‘Just coffee—it’s ten o’clock in the morning.’
‘Cup of coffee, Mel,’ he yelled down the bar. ‘A cup of coffee for the boy.’

Their talk over the next hour could hardly have passed for conversation. Between bites of runny eggs and oily hash browns, Olaf asked Noah about his job and his girlfriend, and told him about his younger sister, whom Noah—at the time—hadn’t seen in a while. Occasionally his father’s voice would surge, and all the other men in the bar would set their drinks down to look at him.

In a lull during their breakfast Noah said, ‘I’m getting married.’
Olaf made a throaty noise and shook his head. ‘Hey Mel, the boy’s getting hitched.’

‘Drinks are on me. When’s the big day?’ Mel asked.

Noah remembered looking at the bartender disdainfully, then looking at his father who was chuckling at Mel’s sarcasm. His father’s drunkenness had always struck Noah as cumulative. Seldom had he seen the old man stewed—there were never any nights locked up in the county clink, never any crashed cars—but the years between the wreck and that morning in the Freighter had surely added up to something, to some soggy history that had diminished him. It would have been easy,
Noah remembered thinking, to call him a ghost, but that would have implied some spirit.

'I have to get back to Boston. I'll see you in October for the wedding.'

'You can count on me.'

Noah took a few steps towards the door, stopped and turned around to look back at his father who stared back over the top of his bifocals. He left without another word.

The next time he saw the old man was the night before his wedding. Noah and Natalie had held the rehearsal dinner at her parent's Brookline home. It was a beautiful place, surprisingly un-suburban, with huge oak trees in the front yard, a deck overlooking a pond in the back, and a red brick chimney set against the clapboard siding. When his father stepped out of his old Suburban and looked up at the three-story house, Noah feared the worst. From the window in the foyer he could see the old man looked presentable, if a bit rustic. His beard and hair were longer than Noah remembered, and his corduroy pants and rumpled flannel shirt too informal, but all things considered, Noah thought, he could have looked worse.

Noah met him at the front door, took his duffle, and asked him how his trip was.

'Goddamn traffic,' Olaf said. 'This city's unbelievable. Bumper to bumper to goddamn bumper. How can you people stand it?'

'We can't,' Noah said.

'Is your sister here?'

'She'll be here soon. Let me introduce you to everyone.'
They made the rounds. Having been cautioned about the impending and inevitable disaster over and over again, Natalie graciously disregarded all of Noah’s warnings and treated Olaf as if he were her own father. When she introduced him to her parents, Noah in miserable tow, Olaf presented them a gift-wrapped bottle.

‘What is it?’ Natalie’s mother asked.

‘It’s Aquavit,’ Olaf said, ‘a liqueur from Scandinavia made with caraway. I have a friend, a Norwegian sailor who comes into Duluth a couple times each year. He brings me a bottle or two each trip.’

‘Well thank you, Mr. Torr,’ Nat’s father said.

Olaf looked hard at Nat’s parents, who stood with their arms locked. He hated people like this, Noah knew, people who had no discernable faults, no tragedy in their lives.

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

‘This is good stuff. The best of it crosses the equator twice. It’s made from potatoes, and in order to redistill the caraway right, it needs the roll and pitch of the ocean waves. This bottle here went from Norway to Madagascar and back up to Duluth by way of the St. Lawrence. Takes a special throat to drink it.’

‘Should we open it?’ Natalie asked.

‘Save it for a special night,’ Olaf said. ‘There must be something else to drink around here.’

Noah took his father by the elbow and led him away. In the study two guys in tuxedos manned the bar. Olaf ordered a drink and turned his attention to the baseball memorabilia collection on Natalie’s father’s shelves.
‘What is all this shit?’ Olaf said.

‘This stuff is worth a ton of money. Mr. Maier is a huge Sox fan.’

‘It looks like some kid’s bedroom in here.’

‘Don’t tell him that. He takes this very seriously.’

They stood there silent for a few minutes while Olaf looked over the autographed baseballs and jerseys.

‘I don’t need a goddamn babysitter,’ Olaf finally said.

‘I know.’

‘Then go mingle with your friends.’

At the end of the rehearsal dinner Olaf stood at the curb with a half-drunk beer in his paw, leaning on the bumper of the Suburban. Noah suggested he drive them back to his waterfront hotel, saying it would give them a chance to talk.

‘I’m okay to get back to the hotel,’ Olaf said.

‘Really,’ Noah said, ‘it’s a mess this time of night anyway. I’ll show you the sights.’

The silence on that trip was broken only by the horns and sirens and other din of the interstate. The car idled under the hotel façade. Olaf drummed his fingers on the dash. ‘Listen, why don’t you come in for a nightcap? The least I can do is buy my son a drink the night before his wedding.’

‘I don’t need a drink.’

‘Didn’t say you did. We’ll call it old time’s sake. Or the start of something.’

Noah looked at his watch, thought of so many reasons he didn’t want to have a drink with the old man, and pulled up to the valet to have the car parked.
In the bar Olaf ordered a whiskey and water. Noah nodded for the same. The drinks came and Olaf stirred his with a bent finger.

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

‘We haven’t ever spent much time together. I’ve been with Natalie for less than two years and I know her better than I know you.’

‘She seems like a nice girl.’

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

‘Lucky, huh?’ Olaf said as he nodded his head and pursed his lips, as if to console Noah. It was a gesture Noah remembered from his childhood, one his father employed whenever Noah was caught in a lie.

‘Yeah Dad, I’m lucky.’

‘What luck?’ Olaf said under his breath.

‘What does that mean?’

‘You’re being rolled into marriage, that’s what.’

Noah stood up. ‘What the hell are you driving at, huh? You were married for twenty years. To my mother, don’t forget.’

Olaf finished the last third of his drink in a single swallow and signaled for another. Big band music streamed from a nearby ballroom and a group of conventioneers shouted at the other end of the bar. ‘Your mother was some catch. Faithful like the goddamn weather.’

This is the last time I need to see him, Noah thought. He was trembling.
‘I’ve got a few years on you, boy. I know what a lifetime of marriage can do to a man.’

‘What do you know about a lifetime of anything but coming and going, huh? You were always gone. Mom deserved what she took for herself, she deserved every bit of it. You two weren’t married, not like normal people are, and you sure as hell weren’t around enough to be taking this liberty with me now. Do you honestly mean to sit there and give me advice on marriage? What’s the point of all this, huh? What do you want?’

‘I’m telling you what my old man should have told me.’

‘Do you have any idea what you’re saying? Do you see how insulting this is to Natalie? Or my mother? Do you see how you’re insulting me?’

‘I’m not trying to insult anyone.’

The calmness in his father’s voice only made Noah angrier. ‘What a bunch of bullshit. It’s the only thing you’re capable of. You offend someone every time you open your mouth.’ He laughed. ‘Are you seriously playing Dad now? I’m really supposed to sit here and listen to this?’

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

‘For god’s sake spare me the rest of the lesson. Don’t try coming to terms with your life at the expense of my happiness. I don’t want to hear it.’

‘You will hear it, goddamnit!’ Olaf boomed, loud enough that the group at the end of the bar turned to look. ‘You’ll hear me tell you marriage ruins a man. Your mother ruined me, and Natalie will ruin you. Mark it down. I don’t give two shits about your luck.’
Noah looked at him, memorizing the disdain he felt and the look of drunken self-assurance on the old man’s face. When it was burned in his mind, he dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the bar and walked out without another word.

The next afternoon Olaf showed up in his rented tuxedo, his beard trimmed and his rim of gray hair combed down. He sat there easily during the ceremony, kissed Natalie on the cheek while they danced at the reception, and behaved as if nothing had happened the night before. At the end of the night, as everyone was leaving the hotel ballroom, Olaf took Noah by the shoulder. Noah stared at him and when his father let go of his arm, the old man leaned in towards Noah and whispered something Noah couldn’t understand.

He hadn’t seen his father since.

‘You want another beer?’ Mel asked.

Noah shook his head.

‘You look like you been sleeping, son.’

‘What time is it?’ Noah asked, not sure whether or not he’d reset his watch.

‘Nine-forty-five by the clock I keep,’ Mel said, jerking his hand back towards a Budweiser clock above the bar.

‘Let me settle up with you,’ Noah said.

The drizzle had turned into a soft rain. When Noah got back to the breakwater he saw the nose of the Erindring slide through the fog. The ship blasted its horn giving notice to the bridge. One long blow, like a cello’s moan, followed by two short blows was responded to in kind. The warning arms dropped on either side of the
bridge. The grinding of steel and cable set the old bridge in motion, and in less than a minute it was up. A couple minutes later the Swedish freighter came into view on the other side of the bridge, trudging through the pewter lake fog. It moved slowly, almost imperceptibly, and Noah marveled—as he had a thousand times before—at the original notion of a million pounds of floating steel.

There was a faint hum as the ship steamed under the raised bridge, easing its way through the channel, past Noah who had walked out to the end of the breakwater. The muted drone and eerie slapping of water against the hull accentuated a silence that seemed to grow as the ship inched its way nearer and nearer the end of the pier. As the first quarter of the bow passed him, it was quiet enough that he could hear two men standing on the pilothouse deck, speaking in a foreign language he didn’t recognize. When they were beyond where Noah stood, one of the men tossed his cigarette into the lake and nodded at Noah. In another few seconds the stern was even with the end of the breakwater, and the hum replaced by water gurgling up from the prop. For five minutes Noah watched the ship until it dwindled into the darkness and fog and rain. Then it disappeared. Noah rubbed his ears and headed back to the hotel.

Among the landmarks his father mentioned two days earlier, only the gas station was visible. There was no tuft of red firs to be seen, no blooming milkweed, and no county road just beyond town. Only after driving five miles beyond Misquah to the Cutface Creek wayside and turning back—only by coming from the opposite direction—was Noah able to spot the county road heading into the hills. From the south it was hidden by a bend in the road. The firs his father mentioned were three
short, barely distinct trees among a forest of millions. The burnt red his father described was an almost indiscernible rouge they wore among their green, green limbs.

The clouds he’d been watching move steadily over lake an hour earlier disappeared behind him and been replaced with a hazy, summery sky. He’d left Duluth at six o’clock in the morning, stopped for coffee at a gas station in Two Harbors and drove up the Superior coast. Had he been paying attention, or been wide-awake, he might have seen the deer spring from the dense woods and tall grass along the county road. Maybe he would have seen it sooner, in any case, or had the presence of mind to swerve away. Instead he pulled his hands instinctively from the wheel to cover his face, slammed on the break with both feet, and felt the collision reverberate through the rented Pontiac.

He hadn’t been driving fast—not more than forty-five or fifty miles an hour—but his slow, unswerving response caused him to hit the deer almost the instant he stepped on the break. The car skidded to a stop. When he opened his eyes and lowered his hands from his face, he saw the deer tumble and collapse beneath its broken hind legs. The cup of coffee had spilled across the dash and splattered on the windshield, the smell of it filling the stalled car. He restarted it and backed onto the grooved gravel shoulder.

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

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

A couple feet shy of the deer he stopped. He couldn’t believe that it was going to get up and charge, so he walked closer still. Its wet eyes blinked slowly, looking up at Noah. The tawny, unbloodied belly was still heaving, but only for a few minutes. Slowly its eyes went motionless and dead while Noah stood watching. He noticed the warmth of the morning then, felt it in the wind and hazy sun, and figured he’d better move the deer off the road. He grabbed its two hind legs and pulled it across the pavement and onto the shoulder. His arms shook and he felt a surge of sadness. The deer was so young. So gangly. He looked into the tall grass the doe had sprung from and saw a tuft of red wild flowers hanging withered on their stems.
Lake Forsone Road was easy to find. One hundred yards past the deer, the crudely paved county road veered sharply to the left. In the middle of the curve, on the right, a gravel road tunneled into the thick fir forest. A bleached red metal sign marked the road, and Noah turned onto it. After a couple minutes, Lake Forsone came into view through the trees. The road turned left, to the north, past a public access road and another gravel road that went left. None of it looked familiar.

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

Despite his father’s advice to leave the car parked on the road, Noah turned onto the trail. Long grass grew between the tire ruts, and overgrown trees brushed the top of his car. For a quarter mile he crept back towards the lake under the canopy of trees and over the bumpy road. Then the road widened and began to go downhill. Rain run-offs a foot or more deep grooved the hill, and what little gravel remained on
the trail was loose and unpacked. After three sharp turns, the house appeared before him.

He parked beside the same old, rusted Suburban that his father bought the year Noah went into seventh grade. The house, which he had known only in his childhood as a sort of amber apparition sitting in the middle of the dark woods with its rough-sawn cedar siding, had taken on an almost green-gray hue. The grainy, knotted siding had been weathered smooth. The roof bowed slightly and had several spots of moss and dead grass between the shingles.

Noah’s grandpa Torr had been a persnickety old man and kept the house in ship-shape. The woodpiles—like bunkers along two sides of the house and in the middle of the yard—were so expertly stacked that his grandpa often boasted they could withstand a tornado. He kept the trees trimmed too, and the small lawn mowed. His grandpa Torr’s fastidiousness doubled in his own father, so the disrepair of the house shocked Noah. Only time—time of the long variety—could have done this to the place which meant either that his father had become a different man or that he’d not been well enough to maintain the place for years.

He didn’t know whether to knock or just walk in. After a second of hesitation, he pushed the screen door open and stepped into the house. ‘Dad?’ he said into the grayish room. ‘Dad,’ he whispered again, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. No one answered and after looking in each of the two bedrooms, he stepped back out and walked to the shed that sat nestled in a clearing. With the fieldstone foundation sinking into the earth, the windows cracked, the paint peeling from the trim, the shed looked even worse than the house. A padlock secured the door and
curtains covered the windows inside. He turned, stood for a minute watching the privy up the trail, and when his father didn’t appear from inside, he started towards the lake.

As he walked down the path, stumbling over pine roots and small boulders, he remembered summer days as a child when he’d followed his father, who carried a stringer of trout caught right off the dock, up this same path. His shoulders tan and strong, his long, graceful stride full of purpose, his father was a force so far as Noah ever thought. Noah could never keep up with him for running, and was always out of breath when he reached the top of the hill, where his father would already be at work on the tree stump in the yard filleting the fish. Those days were coming back to him sadly now, and as he came out of the shade of the trees, he stopped dead.

Was that man really his father? He had a short rod in the water, fishing in the shallows along the shore for pan fish or perch, not trout. Shirtless, his knobby spine bowed like an uprooted sapling. His stark white hair framed his old head.

‘Dad?’ Noah said, but must have said it too softly because the old man didn’t stir. ‘Dad?’ again, louder this time, but still the old man didn’t hear. ‘Dad,’ in a loud voice stepping in his father’s direction.

Olaf turned and looked up. ‘Ah, he’s here.’

Olaf reeled in his line and set the rod in the bottom of the boat. Awkwardly he stepped onto the dock, which was missing planks and drooping into the water, its poles rusted and bent. It had endured many winters in the water. When Olaf stepped on it it bobbed and swayed with his weight.

‘How was the trip?’
‘Okay. Fine.’

‘All right.’

Noah had planned on being calm and collected, even cold, but as his father stepped near him and put his hand on his shoulder, he felt compassion instead. The old man had become so slight—so diminished—that Noah was able to look squarely into his eyes. For a few awkward seconds they stood there sizing each other up.

‘How are you feeling?’ Noah said finally.

‘Like a hundred goddamn bucks.’

‘That’s good.’

Olaf cleared his throat and spit. ‘How about a cup of coffee?’

‘Sure.’

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

‘I am,’ Noah said. ‘I was up early this morning.’

‘You drive straightaway here?’

‘I flew to Duluth last night, drove from there this morning.’

‘You have breakfast?’

‘I stopped for coffee in Two Harbors but it spilled all over the dashboard when I hit a deer.’

‘Killed it, I hope.’

‘Afraid so. Right up on the county road, right before the turn off for the lake.’

‘There are so many goddamn deer up here. Now more than ever. Last night I counted twenty-nine of them in the yard. Goddamn nuisance.’
Noah watched his father's walk. The old man could barely get his feet off the
ground, and his shoulders slung low as he labored up the path. Midway he stopped,
leaned against a boulder, and wheezed.

‘You okay?’ Noah said.

‘It’s a hell of a walk nowadays,’ Olaf said, and then started up again.

When they got to the top of the hill Olaf sat down in a lawn chair next to the
fire pit. What should have taken a minute or two had taken them five, maybe longer,
and the look of fatigue on Olaf’s face gave plenty away. After a few minutes rest,
Olaf looked up. ‘How about some oatmeal with that coffee?’

‘That’d be good.’

The cylindrical box of oats sat on a shelf in the kitchen. So did the coffee.
Olaf put a kettle of water on the potbellied stove, which sat along the wall between
the two bedroom doors. He stoked the fire, walked back to the kitchen, and filled two
bowls with oats.

‘Can I help?’ Noah asked. The old man was laboring.

‘No. You just sit.’

After the water began to boil, Olaf brought it to the kitchen with a grubby
mitt, poured it over the coffee filter and the oats, then asked Noah if he wanted nuts
or raisins with it.

‘Whatever you’re having.’

The nuts and raisins were both in mason jars. The almonds were sitting on top
of one of the bookcases, and Olaf went into his bedroom for the raisins. He mixed the
bowls of oatmeal as if they were cement, carried them one at a time to the table. Finally he brought two mugs of coffee over.

‘Sugar for your coffee?’

‘No. Thanks.’

‘Well then, come on and get while everything’s still warm.’

They ate silently at first, slurping the coffee and blowing on spoonfuls of steaming oats. Neither had much flavor, and the raisins and nuts were both hard as stones. Olaf was concentrating, it seemed to Noah, thumbing through the mail Noah had set on the table, taking measured bites of the oatmeal, determined to show that whatever was eating him alive from inside hadn’t gotten too far along yet. Noah couldn’t bring it up, not then, so instead he said, ‘You’ve been doing your reading.’

Two bookcases in the dark corner of the cabin teemed with paperbacks. In the middle of the kitchen table a Wisconsin Lawyer magazine with splotches of butter or grease on its cover sat well-fingered. ‘What’s this?’ Noah asked, pointing at it.

‘Luke sent me that stuff last year. Said it might interest me. There’s an article in there about shipwreck property. I can’t make heads or tails of it.’ His jaw quivered as he spoke. ‘You remember Luke?’

‘Who could forget Luke?’

‘He’s a good man.’

‘What about all that stuff? Since when are you such a bookworm?’

‘What the hell else have I got to do up here? Can’t hunt, hell, I can hardly make it up and down the hill to the lake anymore.’

‘Well, you look good,’ Noah lied.
‘Shit, I look like I’m already dead. You want some more coffee?’

Noah held up his mug and Olaf topped it off.

‘I need a rest. Just an hour or so,’ Olaf said.

‘I could use a nap myself.’

‘Make yourself at home,’ Olaf said and went into his bedroom

Noah wondered if his father hadn’t been putting himself out, exaggerating his health and pushing himself too hard. He got up from the table and brought his coffee to the overstuffed chair next to the bookcases. There was an afghan draped over the back of it, one his grandma Dahlie—his mother’s mother—had made. He hadn’t thought of her for years, but as soon as he pulled the blanket over his knees and the imagined scents came lingering up from it, he remembered her perfectly: the dime store perfume, the banana bread, the powder and Oil of Olay, her peppermint breath, all of it trapped in the throw.

He reclined in the chair, the mug of coffee resting between his legs, and looked at the spines of the books on their shelves—Louis L’Amour, popular mysteries, ham radio and Chevy Suburban manuals, maps of constellations and Great Lakes, and on the bottom, every book about the Rag, including the one Noah’d just bought. He almost reached for it, but settled back instead. He shut his eyes, wanted to sleep, but couldn’t. His mind jumped around, searching for the anger he’d expected to feel but didn’t. Instead of accepting the leniency, he dug back into his memory.

During the first hundred or so nights of Noah and Natalie’s first winter together, she’d managed to dredge from him part of the story of his childhood. Their bedroom
in Boston was lit by the sign above the door of the Chinese restaurant on the floor below them, and as their John Prine or Bob Dylan tapes clicked in the stereo, Noah explained how his childhood had been split between the seven years before the wreck and the eleven years after.

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

From his bedroom window Noah would watch the last moments of his father’s getting home. He’d park the truck, sit on the wrought-iron bench next to the fence and smoke his last cigarette. Noah must have seen the same routine twenty times before he finished first grade, so many times that, despite the dramatic changes in seasons or his father’s appearance or Noah’s own sense of perception, they had melted mostly into one composite memory.

One occasion was clear in his memory, though. Thanksgiving morning, 1966. The truck stopped in the alley and the engine choked off. His mother shouted at Noah to get a comb through his hair, to do it fast, before his father came in. But he was too excited. It had been two months since he’d seen his father, and since his mother was
in the kitchen preparing the turkey and stuffing, he left his hair alone and sat in the bedroom window admiring the man.

Earlier in the week, on an unseasonably warm day, Noah watched his mother try to loosen a hinge on their fence with a pair of pliers. When Noah asked what she was doing she explained that the fence was broken and that she wanted to fix it so his father wouldn’t have to. When he asked why it was broken his mother replied, ‘Sometimes things just break, they get old.’

Noah watched her strain against a hinge bolt, but despite her deceptive strength she couldn’t loosen it and the hinge went unfixed. On that Thanksgiving morning his father reached into the backyard and opened the gate. Noticing the broken hinge, he took off his leather glove and squatted to have a look. He fidgeted with it for a minute before gripping it tightly in his bare hand—as he might’ve opened a bottle of Worcestershire sauce—and loosened the bolt that his mother could not with her pliers.

Olaf wore his weather worn pea jacket and the gray wool trousers that his wife had made for him. He had a wild head of hair, hair Noah had inherited, and a speckled beard. His wire-rimmed glasses gave him an intellectual look that not even his Sorrel boots could diminish. He was lean with titanic shoulders and long legs. Setting the bolt on the bench next to him, he combed his beard with long, crooked fingers. The temperature was below zero, but he wore no hat. The sun shimmered off of crusted patches of snow, and in the glare his father looked tired.

From a pocket inside his coat he pulled a crumpled package of Drum Tobacco. From the pocket of his pants he withdrew his cigarette papers. He rolled a
thin cigarette and set it between his lips. In the summer or spring, with the bedroom window open, Noah could smell the butane first. A mellow flame would flare from the silver lighter and set the cigarette burning. The stink carried up on a breeze and he’d gulp it all in. In the winter, though, he had to imagine the smells. But it was never difficult to imagine.

When his father finally came inside Noah had already run down the carpeted stairs two at a time, and he greeted his father at the door. In seconds his face was buried in his father’s beard, just like he’d imagined. ‘Hello boy,’ Olaf would whisper. ‘Where are your mama and Solveig? Did you take good care of them while I was gone?’

Beside himself, Noah told him he had.

‘I brought you this from Toledo,’ he said, pulling a tiny wooden ship model from the inside pocket of his coat. ‘And these too,’ he continued, pulling five taconite pellets from the same pocket. Noah had no idea what they were. ‘That’s what we carry on the Rag. Run down to the basement and put them in the barrel next to the furnace.’ He brought them home every time after.

When he got back upstairs, his parents were hugging. She said, ‘How was the run?’ and he replied, slowly, ‘It was a long getting home.’

Those were the easiest hours of his childhood, he explained to Natalie, who listened to his story as if she were watching a movie.

Just less than a year later, he continued, sometime before it was light on November sixth, his father and two of his crew washed ashore at Hat Point. Their lifeboat had crashed onto the beach, the starboard gunwale caved in and coated with
ice twenty inches thick to port. The three men had somehow managed to stay alive for more than eight hours on the boat, this despite the freezing water of Lake Superior washing over them all night.

They didn’t know it, but they’d been towing a fourth member of the crew of the Rag all night. Red Farvann, their tow, was a twenty-three-year-old porter. When the lifeboat crashed onto shore, the three survivors struggled to help each other onto the beach. They sat huddled and hypothermic and so near to death, each of them, that when they saw Red attached to an aft line and realized that he was one of their mates encased in ice, none of them could summon the strength to brave the killing shore water and haul the line in. After a few violent breakers finished splitting the lifeboat in half, Red came free, crashing onto the rocks himself. The first pounding shattered the ice that had built up on his torso and head, the second separated one side of his face from the other.

The Coast Guard station in Grand Marais had launched two rescue boats hours after the Ragnarok made her mayday. They also launched a search plane as soon as daylight broke. Taking into account the awesome northeasterly winds, the same wind that brought the storm and cold front spiraling down from Hudson Bay, the Coast Guard searched a grid starting at the Canoe Rocks on the northeastern tip of Isle Royale heading west-southwest. The search plane identified the wreckage of the lifeboat and dispatched emergency crews.

Harold Claessens, the vice president of Superior Steel in charge of its fleet, notified Noah’s mother of the mayday and subsequent loss of radio contact with the Rag sometime in the middle of the night. Noah could still remember his mother
waking him to tell him that something had happened to his father’s ship. Because the ship scared him, he assumed it scared his father too. On the winter nights during the off season when he and Olaf sat huddled on the sofa in front of the roaring fireplace, he’d ply his father with questions about his life out on the lake, paying special attention to questions regarding catastrophes. His father would always assure him that it was safer to be on the ship than it was to be in their truck and driving up to see grandpa. He also assured him that the crew he and the Captain had were as seaworthy and seasoned as any crew ever had been. Because of these assurances, Noah had no context for the things his mother was telling him. How could it be true that something had gone wrong?

By lunch-time she’d been informed of Olaf’s survival. All three men had been airlifted to the Duluth Medical Center. Luke had two toes and his left hand amputated; Bjorn went into cardiac arrest and then shock, but survived both. Olaf unofficially identified Red by the boots he was wearing. Later, officially, they used dental records. They treated his father for hypothermia and frostbite and massive contusions to his head, and he lost half a pinky, but was otherwise unscathed. Physically unscathed in any case.

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

‘Sure. Seven-year-old boys aren’t made to understand things like that, believe me.’

‘So just like that everything changed?’

‘I guess it did.’
But then he’d backtrack, filling in earlier details to bolster the later tragedy. He told her about his mother and the wild, almost incomprehensible patience of the woman whose only source of companionship for the better part of nine months each year was her young son and daughter. He told her about ski jumping competitions at Chester Bowl, and his first trip down to Cloquet, where he won the biggest trophy on the table in the chalet. He told her about the swelling pride he felt, about the runny nose he wiped on his hand just before shaking the judge’s hand to accept the trophy, and about the scolding his father gave him walking to the car for the drive back home. He told her how, later that night, his mother came into his room and tucked him into bed, whispered in her magnificent voice how proud she was of him and that he ought to listen to his father about wiping his nose. Then he told Natalie how the old man came in after his mother, told him he did good, and, with a wink, said that the only reason he had scolded him was for his mother’s sake, although it might be true that gentlemen didn’t wipe their noses on the backs of their hands, but how could a six-year-old boy be expected to be a gentleman. He told her about his sister Solveig and how she wanted to ski jump too, but neither his mother nor his father thought very highly of that idea and encouraged her to play the piano instead; how he took her himself, when he was twelve or thirteen and she was six or seven, out into the backyard to teach her, if not how to ski jump, at least how to ride down the hill on his old skis.

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

He told her about how his mother, during the shipping season, had taken up an affair with the insurance agent across the street, Mr. Hember, and how her discretion left nothing to his teenage imagination. He would come home from school in the afternoon and see his mother pouring a cup of coffee over Mr. Hember’s shoulder, and he would see the hand of the same man kneading the inside of his mother’s thigh. He told her about the Friday night in early November when he was seventeen and on his way to Ely with his buddy Sal Padgett for some early season jumps. They’d gotten out of town but had to turn around because Noah had forgotten his jumping boots. When he got back home and walked upstairs to get them from the closet, he saw his mother naked for the only time he could remember. She was lying on her bed trying to get the blanket over her, but it was tucked so tightly between the mattress and box spring that she finally gave up and settled on covering her breasts with her arms instead. He and his mother both blushed, and as Noah turned away, he saw Mr. Hember on the other side of the bedroom hurrying his pants back on. Noah explained to Nat that it not only seemed fair to him, but the obvious thing for his mother to do in the light of the drunken lout his father had by then become.
Finally he told her how the whole mess started to seem unimportant by the time he was getting ready to graduate from high school, how he decided that once he went away to college—once he started his new life in the big city—he would never bother with his father again.

Natalie chided him about letting bygones be bygones, suggested that he get in touch with the man, give him a second chance and all that, but he never did. After their wedding and the scene at the hotel the previous night, he’d given up on the old man for good. Until now anyway.

I’m here, he thought, pulling the afghan over his legs. The fire rasped in the stove. Noah rolled onto his side and finally dozed off.
Olaf was prodding the ashes in the stove when Noah awoke. The old man had managed to refill the wood-box and clear the breakfast dishes from the table. Noah dipped his thumb into the coffee mug sitting on the bookshelf. It was cold.

Olaf set the log with which he'd been stirring the ashes in the stove and fastened the ceramic handle shut. ‘Sorry I woke you,’ he whispered.

‘What time is it? How long have I been sleeping?’

‘Don’t know. My watch hasn’t worked in years.’

Noah sat up and wiped his eyes. ‘So you never know what time it is?’

‘Only when they tell me on the radio.’

‘That’d drive me nuts.’

Olaf shrugged his shoulders. ‘We’ll go fishing. They ought to be jumping out of the lake. I haven’t seen another boat out there since July or August.’

‘I haven’t been fishing in forever.’

‘Don’t worry, it’s like riding a bike. The rods are in the same old spot,’ Olaf said. ‘Grab one for yourself, mine’s already down in the boat.’

Noah opened the cupboard and saw five or six rods hung carefully on the inside of the door. Among the collection he recognized his old fly-fishing rod—the one he had used as a high school kid almost every summer day—and his favorite lake
rod with the closed-face, mallard-green spin reel and rod painted to resemble bamboo. He seldom used the lake rod after he discovered river fishing with Sal. By the time they were fifteen, Sal would sneak his old man’s conversion van and a cooler full of Schmidt beer and the two of them would drive across the bridge into Wisconsin and fish the Amnicon River. They always had luck, and after a couple hours they’d sip lukewarm beer and pretend to be men.

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

‘That’s a good set-up. I just changed the line and oiled the reel. It’s all ready.’

Noah imagined his father’s huge, bumbling hands putting new line on the reel, imagined them shaking and pained. He imagined he’d spent a full afternoon on it. ‘So we’re all set then?’ Noah asked.

‘And we better get moving. By sundown it’ll be raining like hell and damnation. We’ll drop lines over by the creek, it’s still the best spot.’

They climbed into the boat and rowed across the lake. Creek water slithered down the face of the cliff. The deepest spot in the lake, Noah remembered, was fifty feet off the face. They might have been sitting on it as Olaf tied a bucktail jig onto Noah’s line with his sausagey fingers. ‘It’s still enough we won’t drift much,’ Olaf said, handing Noah the rod, hook baited and line weighted. ‘We’ll cast up the shore here. They’re spawning now, out of the depths.’

Noah took the rod, thinking, you’re dying but still baiting my hook? I know how to bait a hook, I remember. I’m forty years old. I could carry you up the hill, that’s how strong I am. I could kick a hole through the floor of this boat, so why do I
feel like I’m seven years old again? He stared at his father, who cast his line over the side of the boat. Silently it unreeled. He appeared to be counting, his lips muttering something, and stopped the line after half a minute. He rubbed his nose and combed his beard with his fingers again, looking past Noah and out over the still, black water.

It was so quiet Noah could hear the old man swallow.

‘Won’t be long,’ Olaf said softly.

‘What’s that?’

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

‘Chatter?’

‘The fish aren’t stupid. You gotta keep quiet to catch them.’

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

‘No fish, no dinner.’

‘Dinner is easy enough to come by,’ Noah said. ‘I can get in the car and be back in forty-five minutes with dinner.’

‘Fucksakes, if you want potato chips and bologna sandwiches, why’d you come all the way up here?’

‘Why’d I come up here? I came up here because you’re a sick old man. I came up here to give you a hand.’

‘Well right now the best thing you could do for me would be to shush so I can catch some of the fish swimming around at the bottom of this lake. Maybe spare me your bologna sandwich. What do you say, how about you row us up to the point?’
Noah sat back trying to make sense of what had just been said. Unable to, he whipped his rod over his shoulder and cast the line out into the placid water. The thunk of the splash and the ripples widening in perfect circles distracted him for a second before he heard the hiss of his father’s drag and saw the old man’s rod arcing from his hands. His old face looked serene.

Olaf caught four lake trout, enough fish for dinner that night and three meals the next day. Noah didn’t catch a thing.

‘That’s just rotten luck,’ Olaf said as they rowed back towards the house.

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

After their four o’clock dinner of flour-breaded trout, instant mashed potatoes and creamed corn, they sat at the table and talked for an hour about the things Noah could help him do around the house. Noah insisted, despite his misgivings and certainty that he would be unable to do any of it, that anything Olaf needed he would do.

Olaf excused himself, disappeared into his bedroom for a few minutes, and reappeared in an oversized union suit buttoned to the neck. ‘Time for bed,’ he said. The sun was still an hour from setting.

‘Really?’

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

‘I’m going to run into town and call Natalie then, let her know that I got here.’

Olaf nodded. ‘Good. The other bed is all made up for you.’

‘All right,’ Noah said and watched his father duck back into his bedroom.
On the way back into town Noah saw the deer—splayed and eviscerated—lying in a pool of shadowy blood. The ravens, with their marble eyes and stiletto, gut-speckled beaks, stared at him as he got out of the car for a closer look. Hadn’t the deer been whole, he wondered? Hadn’t it lain there as if asleep? But now, as the ravens cawed in displeasure, and lifted heavily off the ground, Noah was struck to find the deer ripped open. Fresh, still wet-looking paw prints and thin pools of blood surrounded the carcass. He looked anxiously into the woods and up and down the road half expecting to find a tribe of savages. Only wind, though, and the quaking of the trees. Then it dawned on him: wolves. They must have witnessed it all, he thought. Noah didn’t wait for them. He got back in the car and drove to Misquah.

’Solveig, hi, it’s Noah.’ The phone at the Landing was outside on the wall. Across from it two old gas pumps sat under an awning. Inside a bakery, a few breakfast tables, a deli counter, a selection of videos for rent, a rack full of t-shirts with embroidered moose, wolf and deer silhouettes and several shelves of groceries crowded the narrow aisles and low-ceilinged room.

‘Hey Noah,’ Solveig said, her voice relaxed and airy. As ever.

‘Listen, have you heard from Dad lately?’

‘I was going to call you. He’s sick.’

‘I know, I’m here.’

Solveig didn’t say anything.

‘I got here this morning.’

‘What are you doing there?’ The tone of urgency in her voice stunted Noah’s blossoming conviction that perhaps it wasn’t that strange for him to be there after all.
'I wish I knew.'

'Is everything okay?'

'You wouldn’t recognize him.'

'It hasn’t been that long since I’ve seen him. He was just here in April.'

'How did he look then?'

'Old, skinny, but normal for someone his age.'

'He’s a different man, Solveig. He ran out of breath cooking oatmeal this morning. He had food stashed all over the house, rotten food in the same mason jars mom used to fill with rhubarb jam. He looks like a scarecrow in his flannel shirt, and the house looks like it should be condemned. There’s nothing left of him.'

'Noah,' she said impatiently. 'Why are you there?'

'Where should I be, he’s dying?'

Solveig had managed, through her own adult years, to forgive their father most of his disgraces. Although her childhood had been just as fatherless as his own, Noah had had the brunt of Olaf’s brutishness. There had always been some ounce of compassion that his father reserved for the little girl in his life. Noah understood that much of Solveig’s forgiveness came at his own expense, and although he hated the animosity between him and his father, he didn’t mind the relationship his sister and father shared. He was even glad of it.

'What are you talking about, Noah?'

'When he told you he was sick, what did he say?'

'That he couldn’t digest his food, that he was having some trouble going to the bathroom. That he was getting old.'
'Solveig, I suspect he’s got cancer. You can practically smell it coming off of him. Natalie and I went though the same thing with her father just a couple years ago. I don’t think there’s any doubt about it, and I think it’s bad.’

‘Has he been to the doctor?’

‘He won’t go.’

‘Make him.’

‘Solveig, I haven’t seen him since my wedding, how can I make him do anything?’ Noah heard her crying.

‘He didn’t tell me any of this, he didn’t even make it sound bad.’

Noah replayed for her the phone conversation he had with him two days earlier, the trip there, the morning’s events, and the whole story of Natalie’s father’s recovery from colon cancer two years earlier. He couldn’t explain what impulse got him on a plane for Duluth, but he did say that things weren’t as bad as he’d expected them to be. When Solveig asked if she should come, Noah didn’t know the right answer. ‘Certainly you could—I’m sure he’d love to see you—but I don’t think it’s urgent yet. I mean, how could I know if it’s urgent or not but it doesn’t seem to be.’

‘I’ll get there as soon as I can, but I don’t know when that will be.’

She lived in Fargo with her husband Tom and their three kids, each of whom defied all categories of adorability. Tommy, the oldest boy, had been the spitting image of his grandpa Torr year after year until he reached age five, when all of a sudden, in his kindergarten picture, he transmogrified into an intellectual-looking version of his own father. As a first grader he read at a sixth grade level and did long division in his head. Nick was only eleven months younger than his brother but
already bigger and heavier. Less brainy, almost simple, even, he'd already broken both of his arms. Tom taught Nick to do back flips on the trampoline they had in their enormous back yard that was rimmed with Red River Valley wetlands, and only a couple months ago Solveig had told Noah about his most recent broken arm, an accident that happened when he tried to stretch a single somersault into a double and landed on the lawn instead of the trampoline. Julia, their two-year-old daughter, feared everyone but her mother, around whose leg she constantly entwined herself.

After she had graduated from the state university in Duluth, Solveig took a job teaching eighth grade biology at a Moorehead middle school. In less than a year she'd met Tom and they married. A real estate attorney, Tom wore five hundred dollar suits and drove a vintage Mustang. He'd been a college hockey star at North Dakota and parlayed his celebrity into his partnership at the firm. Now he contributed to Republican political coffers and the private Catholic school he sent his kids to. He had the good looks of a Hollywood action hero, and loved to admire his square jaw and muscular arms in the reflection of his wardrobe mirror, loved to smile at himself in the bathroom mirror while he shaved meticulously around his moustache, even took the liberty of winking at his own reflection—all of this reported by Solveig over a bottle of Chablis during the last visit he and Natalie had made to Fargo.

Solveig had done it right. Happy as could be, she held no grudges and never, ever—as she insisted—had anything to complain about.

'The deficiencies of our father?' Noah asked her over the same bottle of Chablis, insinuating everything he had to complain about.

'You find me perfection in this world and I'll bow to it,' she'd replied.
‘Bow to yourself,’ he said in all sincerity.

After he talked with Solveig, Noah called his wife, first at work and then at home. He left a message on their answering machine when she didn’t pick up at home, and went inside the Landing to use the bathroom and stock up. He bought three bags of groceries, a pair of detective novels, and a styrofoam container of sucker minnows thinking he might do a little more fishing off the dock when he got back to the house.

After a full day of stewing, the sky looked ready to burst. In the east it had the greenish look of a summer storm and in the west the wintry gray look of a gale. It would be dark soon, and he drove back to the house as it started to drizzle. Ever since their first miscarriage a year and a half ago, the rain always reminded Noah of their childlessness, and he thought of Natalie and their first trip to the Mirendorf Clinic a couple years earlier as he switched on the wipers and turned the radio off.

The place had intimidating mahogany doors with brass hinges and handles and an embossed brass placard listing all the doctors. The receptionist’s desk was also mahogany and a better fit, Noah remembered thinking, for an airline CEO than for the overweight, acne-scarred receptionist who greeted him that morning. After he checked in she handed him a plastic jar and a clipboard and said, ‘You can do this in there.’ She pointed to a glassed-in waiting room. His gut went empty for a minute before he realized that she meant he could fill the forms out in the fish bowl, not jack off into the cup.

Name, address, date of birth, insurance provider, the form queried—time elapsed since last ejaculation? Noah looked up, embarrassed, and wrote forty-eight
hours. The right answer both in truth and by doctor's orders, the question made him blush despite being alone. He finished filling out the form and sat cross-legged regarding the Georgia O'Keefe painting on the wall. He couldn't recall ever feeling so self-conscious. Ten days earlier Natalie had had a laparoscopy. When the doctor called Noah into one of the hospital conference rooms to tell him that everything had gone well, that she'd removed a bit of endometriosis but that, more than likely, it hadn't been restricting their ability to conceive, Noah figured the onus was on him. Together he and Nat had read countless books and articles for couples that were having trouble conceiving so he was well-educated in the causes and corrections of infertility. 'I'd like to have you checked,' the doctor said. 'The sooner you can get in, the sooner we can isolate the problem, the sooner the two of you can have a baby.' He knew that being checked meant exactly this.

The nurse didn't call him until nearly quarter of eight and before he knew it they stood face to face in an examination room. For as wrong as the receptionist was for the task at hand, the nurse was right. Curvaceous and longhaired, she wore an old-fashioned nurse's skirt and a tight blouse unbuttoned one time too many. She batted her painted eyes as she took a pen from her conspicuous breast pocket and said, 'Are you nervous about all this?'

'As a matter of fact I am,' Noah said.

'Don't be,' she said, patting the lapel of his tweed jacket. 'Don't be at all, there's nothing to it.' She handed him a label for the plastic jar. 'When you're done, put this on the jar and put the jar in there.' She pointed to a little door in the wall that
looked like a laundry chute. There was a light switch next to it, and she told him to turn it on after he put the jar in the door. She winked at him and left him alone.

A sink and chair sat along one wall, and a small cupboard with a television along another. He’d anticipated a selection of magazines but saw none, so he turned the television on and pressed the play button of the built-in VCR. Instead of an X-rated video, though, a middle-aged couple talked about the merit of trust in a healthy sexual relationship, and Noah wondered how in the hell he might pull this off. He couldn’t recall feeling so hopelessly unaroused. He tried thinking about the woman at the coffee shop next to his store, the one with the downy nape and voluptuous lips, who greeted him every morning by name. Then he thought about the woman who worked in the architect’s office on the corner, the one with the BMW and short skirts. She’d flirted with him on more than one occasion, even bought him a cup of coffee one morning, suggesting as she did an impromptu date at one of the tables. He’d declined. Then he thought about Natalie’s friend Mary, who’d only half teasingly come on to him last New Year’s Eve when she cornered him in the bathroom and asked, with champagne breath, for a kiss. But these women all inspired a flirtatious impulse, not the kind that sent you reaching for your pants.

What am I supposed to do, he wondered? The jar sat on the counter. He looked around the room hoping for something to spark an erotic image but the place stunk like latex and cleaning solvent, and he could hear his watch ticking. He took off his pants and jacket and hung them on the back of the door. It had been months since he’d masturbated, and the sudden realization of this fact made him even more despondent. I can’t do this, he realized, not without some help. He heard women
laughing in another room. They talked about soap operas and recipes, and Noah wondered what it would be like to spend your days in such close proximity to a parade of men who all came to do the same thing.

Standing there in his underpants he decided to dig a little deeper. He opened the drawer of the table with the television and VCR—nothing. He looked in the cupboard above the sink—nothing. He looked in the drawers under the examination bed—still nothing. He opened the door under the sink—nothing but paper towels and, wait a minute, the glossy edge of a magazine? It was. The November 1995 Playboy, the special college basketball preview issue. He opened it directly to the centerfold. Brandi, a sophomore cheerleader at Michigan State, stood on the gym floor, holding a basketball between her legs. She had airbrushed breasts—size 36D according to the statistics meant to resemble a basketball boxscore set apart from the photograph—and they were pressed together between adolescent arms. He imagined a throaty come-get-me voice and finally felt a twinge in his groin.

When he finished he looked down into the plastic jar at the snotty sample he'd managed. He felt strangely adulterous as he affixed the label and set it in the wall, and he walked out with his head down in the collar of his jacket.

That morning he had had a meeting with one of the antique map dealers he did business with at his shop, and Noah showed up ten minutes late. His shop was on the first and second floors of a renovated brick warehouse on Landstowne Street. Three years earlier, at the height of his teaching despair, he'd finally caved in to Natalie's insistence that he quit making the terrible commute to the terrible prep school in Brookline to teach the terrible kids, and find something else to do. Thumbing through
the classified section in the back of a Harper's magazine one morning, he saw an advertisement that said: FOR SALE—BOSTON ANTIQUARIAN MAP DEALER. TERMS INCLUDE ASSUMPTION OF LEASE AND INVENTORY. STEADY CLIENTELLE. POISED FOR GROWTH. CONTACT GREGORY STACKNICK, PO BOX 3406 BOSTON, MASS. $100,000.00—FIRM

Although he had no small business experience—no business experience of any sort, actually—and certainly no experience or even interest in antiquarian maps, the advertisement compelled him to write a letter of inquiry that same day. A week later he ambushed Natalie and brought her down to the shop.

‘Natalie,’ he said by way of introduction. ‘This is Gregory Stacknick. Mr. Stacknick, my wife, Natalie Maier-Torr.’

‘Charmed,’ Mr. Stacknick said.

‘Nat,’ Noah buried his hands in his trousers, looked at the floor, ‘Mr. Stacknick owns an antiquarian map business that I’m interested in buying.’

As they toured the store, a split level shop with glass cases covering the wall space, each of them holding beautiful antique maps from all over the world, Noah explained how in the last week he’d done more research on antiquarian maps than he’d ever done on the industrialization of the Midwest—the subject of his thesis—in three years of graduate school. Although it was her style to allow him to pursue his whims, he never expected Natalie to fall for this. A new hobby was one thing, but a six figure investment in something that, until now, she’d never heard him mention, altogether another. He also figured, given her Tuck MBA and his University of Minnesota MA in history—that she’d assume he had no chance of making a go of it
in the business world. A thought that had occurred to him every fifteen minutes since he’d seen the advertisement in the back of Harper’s. After a couple hours with Mr. Stacknick going over his ledger and tax returns from the last ten years, and walking through the inventory, Noah and Nat shook hands with the eccentric old man and got back into their car.

Anticipating stiff resistance, he’d typed up a point-by-point proposal and he gave it to her. ‘Before you say anything, I want you to know I’ve thought about this good and hard. That’s a list of pros and cons, my business plan, really, and I think—if what he says is true, and I believe it is after that meeting—I can make it work. I’ve done all sorts of research.’ His eyes stayed fixed on the road ahead of them.

‘I’m sure you have.’

‘I know it’s a gamble, a huge gamble, and I won’t even ask if you’re dead set against it. So tell me if you are.’

‘I’m not.’

‘It’s risky. Incredibly risky.’

‘Most things are.’

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

‘I think you’d do well at it.’

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

They pulled up to a stoplight. Nat reached over and put her hand on his shoulder. ‘Noah, you’re not listening. I’m not against it. It sounds fascinating. Let’s
look at this when we get home,' she said, holding up his proposal. 'I think you’d do well.'

'A hundred grand,' he said. The light changed. 'I could make it work. I’ve looked into it.'

'I believe you could.'

Unlikely as it seemed to him at the time of the transaction, the business grew with the Internet and now Noah was making twice as much money as he had as a teacher just by brokering for the real experts like the guy waiting for him in his shop.

'Sorry I’m late, Saul,' Noah said, wiping his hands on his pants before shaking hands with him. He suspected Saul knew where he’d been.

'Never mind,' Saul assured him. 'Ed’s been keeping me company.' Ed was Noah’s single employee, a retired army corporal who had a genuine interest in the maps.

'What have you got?' Noah asked, as Saul unpacked a valise on the round table in Noah’s office. Strangely, he felt hung over, and he thought he could smell the antiseptic hospital soap on his hands.

'Look-at-this,' Saul said, pausing between words for effect. He handed Noah an old leather journal wrapped in a plastic sheath. 'I found it in Genoa of all places.' He looked through a ledger to quote Noah the price.

The journal’s pages were scribbled in ancient blue ink, covered with handwritten maps of the constellations and indecipherable equations. Noah had known this would be one of the things that Saul had to show him, and he’d done his research on it. It was the diary of Tycho Brahe, the one Brahe’d used during the
writing of his treatise on navigation, and Noah wanted it badly. Whatever Saul quoted him, Noah knew, he’d be able to add twenty-five percent to when he turned it around. Saul showed him twenty other maps, and despite his excitement, Noah couldn’t stay focused. His mind kept drifting back to the clinic and the image of himself jerking off into the cup.

That night, at dinner with Nat, all he thought about was the plastic jar and the nurse with the blond highlights and the Playboy centerfold. He joked his way through the episode with Nat, exaggerating everything so that each absurdity seemed doubly outrageous. She laughed with him and seemed thrilled that they were finally on their way to having a baby. And despite the embarrassment, Noah had to admit that the prospect filled him with happiness.

In the years since, that hope became less and less sustaining. But his feelings for Nat had only grown, and the saga of their infertility—which hadn’t been the fault of his semen, after all—was the only thing that stood between him and completeness. Or so he measured himself.

As he drove back to his father’s house he passed the deer for the second time in as many hours. In the twilight he could only discern what looked like a heavier darkness around the carcass, a shadow maybe, though a shadow would have required moon or starlight. The drizzle stiffened and fell more like rain, and the wind moved the coming darkness around like a plaything.

The house looked lonesome when he got there, and Noah hurried from his car onto the porch, shook the rain from his hair, and took off his shoes. Inside he could
smell the wood fire and felt the warmth of it like an embrace. Outside, the rain ratcheted up.
That night Noah dreamt of dogs.

A Siberia of ice stretched before him and he walked across it barefooted. Although it wasn’t snowing, everything sparkled and the wind whorled so it became visible, became a cold, faint diamond-blue. Under his arm a baby boy lay swaddled in a blanket under Noah’s cloak. He did not know the boy, but he suspected it was his son. His feet would have been bleeding but they were frozen. He could hear the dogs barking and panting, and he could hear their handlers laughing and swearing in front of him. The men looked mythic in their black cloaks and fur boots.

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

‘Why run if they’re going to catch me?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Spare the boy,’ he said again, this time whispering. ‘Please, spare the boy.’

As he said this Noah looked up and the child was suddenly flying, on a pair of skis. Noah felt the boy’s flight vicariously. Though safely gone now, the boy could not land. He was fixed in flight.

Lowering his face from the wind, Noah saw the bloody snow around him and the tangle of dog’s legs. Of course, he thought. It’s so simple, I should have befriended the dogs. He blinked long, shook his head, and looked up again. Now the white dog had his jaws clenched open and was diving for Noah’s neck. He thought he heard the dog’s bloodstained teeth clicking on his vertebrae.

What he dreamt were the dog’s teeth clicking on his spine was actually a piece of wood crackling in the stove. What he thought was blood trickling down his lower
back was actually sweat. He could smell fresh coffee and hear his father clearing his throat. Angling his watch towards the window, he saw that it was only 6:45.

The wood-burning stove heated the entire house, would’ve heated a house twice the size. When Noah pulled open his bedroom door, the warmth of the living room almost took his breath away.

‘Jesus, it’s hot in here,’ he said to his father, who stood over the stove pouring a cup of coffee.

‘Doesn’t feel too hot to me. You want a cup of coffee?’
‘Sure,’ Noah said. ‘Do you always get up this early?’
‘I’ve been up for a couple hours.’
‘It’s not even seven yet.’
‘Yeah?’ Olaf handed him a cup of coffee then headed outside without another word.

Noah got up and walked to the window. He watched his father’s shape tread across the yard in the near dark, the woods shadowy enough that he lost sight of him as he walked up the path to the outhouse. In the middle of the yard a woodpile and three giant oak stumps that sufficed as splitting blocks sat strewn about the fire pit. A maul leaned against one of them, and a wheelbarrow half-full of split oak and birch sank into the soil. Most of the trees in the immediate forest were pine, so very few fallen leaves littered the yard, but the grass bent dull and yellow everywhere and gave the scene a somber tinge. In all his life, Noah had never been here in the fall, and it struck him how seasonal the place was, how beautiful. He sat in the big chair with his coffee and almost dozed off again, but it was too warm.
When his father came back in, Noah said, ‘What do you think about going to the hospital today?’

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

‘Listen, Dad, I want you to understand how serious this is. I talked to Solveig yesterday and she insists you see a doctor. Two years ago Natalie’s father went through the same thing I suspect you’re going through and he only made it because he got checked out in time.’

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

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

‘For christsakes, it’s not rotten cottage cheese. I know that. I’ve been to the library. I’ve looked at books.’

‘Then go to the doctor.’

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

Noah put his face in his hands, pressed his eyes. ‘Who said anything about hospice or a nursing home or radiation anything? Not me. Maybe, like I said, the news won’t be so bad. I don’t care how many books you’ve read, I doubt you’re qualified to diagnose yourself. Don’t be so pigheaded about this. Just let me take you to the doctor.’

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

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

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

He shook his head as he headed up the path to the outhouse.

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

As he unhitched the makeshift knob, Noah was somewhere between that fear and that will now. The splintered toilet seat hung by two rusted screws, and it creaked when he sat down. He breathed through his nose because he dreaded the stink. Everything was soggy and the toilet paper, which sat in a covered coffee can, was moist and useless. He finished his business and stepped out into the damp air and took a deep breath.

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

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

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

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

Looking up at the jump he remembered the physicality of it all. The cold on his cheeks, his fingers forever numb, his toes too, the exultation of the speed and flight. And his skis too, the navy blue Konsbergs, their camber and their yellow bases and the bindings his grandfather mail-ordered from a friend still in Bergen. He remembered the way his sweater smelled when wet, and the way it itched his wrists in that inch of flesh between the end of his mittens and the turtleneck he wore underneath it. He remembered his complete understanding of the physics of it all,
too—this is what separated him from most of his peers when he was winning all the junior tournaments in Duluth—the way that everything depended on that crucial moment when you either maintained or lost all of your speed on the take-off, the way in flight it was imperative you kept your head up and tried to simulate an airplane wing, building the low pressure beneath you to create lift.

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

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

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

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

‘You can hardly see it up there.’

‘I can see it.’

‘For a long time this ski jump was the only thing that seemed normal to me,’ Olaf said. They were both looking up the landing hill, and both had their hands in their pockets. The temperature was dropping by the minute, but the sky was clearing. ‘I used to wonder about you when it came to this thing,’ he gestured up at the jump.
‘You were so talented but you had the concentration of a dumb dog. You could have been an Olympian, I think. If you’d have stuck with it.’

‘I wanted to go to college, I guess. I wanted to get the hell out of Duluth.’

Olaf looked at him askance. ‘Come here, I want to show you something.’
The truck smelled like damp cigars, and the inside of the windows dripped with condensation. The plastic upholstery covering the enormous front seat was split and cracked from corner to corner, and mustard-colored foam padding burst through each tear. A speedometer, fuel gauge, and heater control sat derelict on the dashboard, and beneath it, where a radio should have been, three wires—one red, one green, and one white—dangled, clipped, with copper frizz flowering sharply from each.

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

‘Carburetor,’ Olaf said, a grin on his face. He reached under the seat and pulled out two cigars wrapped in plastic, gave one to Noah, bit the end off his own,
and lit it with a kitchen match. Noah rolled his between his thumb and forefinger but left it in the wrapper.

‘We can take my car,’ Noah said, pointing out his window at the dust-covered rental with the dented passenger side quarter panel.

‘We wouldn’t make it up the road.’

‘How long has this thing been sitting here, anyway?’ Noah asked.

‘Don’t worry about the truck. It gets me around.’

‘I can’t believe you still drive this thing,’ Olaf had bought the truck when Noah was in seventh grade.

‘It’s got almost four hundred thousand miles on it.’ He peeked under his forearm at the odometer. ‘Three hundred ninety eight thousand and twenty-two to be exact.’

‘That’s truly one of the most remarkable things I’ve ever heard. I’ve had four new cars in the last eight years. Each of them two-year leases.’

‘Whoever leased a goddamn car?’

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

‘This thing’s never been in the shop either.’

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

Noah did. ‘Where are we headed?’

‘Thought it would be nice to get down to the cold water.’
Olaf navigated the gargantuan Suburban up under the low hanging trees and onto the county road that led back towards town and Lake Superior. Nearing noon, cool air streamed through the open truck windows.

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

‘Yeah, but the pressure’s rising which means it’ll be clearing up. With this wind, though, it’s going to blow the high pressure right through.’ The tall pine trees swayed drunkenly. Even the empty boughs of the aspen and birch trees shook in the wind.

‘That your deer?’

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

‘Never does,’ Olaf said.

When they got to Highway 61, Olaf turned left, away from town, and drove slowly down the middle of the road. After a few miles it wound down, through the heavy forest, to the lake. ‘Look at that water,’ Olaf said.

‘Those waves are huge. It looks like the ocean,’ Noah said. ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve seen this.’

Olaf stared out at the lake and Noah watched him from the corner of his eye. The deep creases around his eyes and in the slack of his chin and neck seemed to be flexed all the time. His lips and nose crinkled in a constant grimace and his mouth parted as he alternated between long slow breaths and puffs of his cigar. Noah watched his father’s hands, too, one on the steering wheel with quivering white-
haired knuckles, the other sitting on his leg, as if helping to keep the accelerator constant. He kept it steady at thirty miles per hour.

In half an hour they’d made it to the Cutface Creek wayside. Olaf pulled into the parking lot and left the truck idling in one of the dozen parking spots. It was Wednesday, lunchtime, and Noah figured that the next nearest person—aside from the truck drivers steering their rigs along the highway—was either fifteen miles behind them, in Misquah, or fifteen miles ahead of them, in Grand Marais.

‘I never come down to the big lake anymore,’ Olaf said.

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

‘You missed the county road? I told you about the trees there.’

Smiling, Noah said, ‘Anyone would have missed them.’

After a few quiet minutes Noah asked, ‘How far is it from, say, Silver Bay across the lake to Marquette?’

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

‘On my way up here yesterday I picked up a radio station from Marquette for a while. It surprised me, that’s all.’
By now they had gotten out, moved around to the front of the truck, and were leaning against the rusty bumper. Six-foot waves curled up onto the rocky shore in white explosions. They were both facing the sharp wind that brought a delicate spray of lake water with it. Olaf said, 'I wonder if it’s anything like this on the coast in Norway.'

'What do you remember about it there?'

'Our house in Bergen, little two-room place on the edge of the city. My father coming home from work, surly as hell. Almost everything about my mother.'

'How hard did they have it?'

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

'What did he do for a living when he got here? I mean Grandpa Torr.'

'He worked as a lumberjack in the camoose shanties at first. Gone all the time, down around Cloquet, up along the shore. Over in Michigan. Great big man. Strong as a goddamn ox. Later he worked on a tug down in Two Harbors.'

'What about Grandma?'

'What do you mean what about Grandma?'

'What did she do?'

'She raised me, of course.'

'I wish I could remember her better.'

'My mother was the single kindest person I ever knew. A goddamn saint. Never hit me once, hell, never even raised her voice.'

'That’s how Mom was, too.'
Olaf glared ahead, out at the water, towards a horizon that rested somewhere in the middle of the lake. ‘My mother, she was faithful. She loved my father, God knows why. She was forgiving.’ The tone of his father’s voice told Noah something he’d only ever suspected: that the old man knew about his wife’s affair with Mr. Hember. Noah had always accepted her indiscretion as her due, as the solace in her long, lonely days. And whatever pain it had caused his father, if he knew about it at all, well, Noah had always chalked that up as his due. But now the perverse pleasure he had always taken in his mother’s infidelity was replaced with the shameful recognition that there was another side of the story.

Olaf cleared his throat, spit, and stubbed out his cigar. ‘Solveig tells me you’ve got a map shop out in Boston.’

Caught off guard by the change in topics, Noah stammered. ‘Yeah, I do.’

‘What about teaching?’

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

‘How are you at selling maps?’

‘My maps sell themselves. The people who buy them are the same kind of people who collect stamps or coins or rare books. They know as much about the business as I do.’

‘That doesn’t make much sense, does it? You’re at a disadvantage, aren’t you?’

‘I would be if the people who buy from me didn’t consider overspending an integral part of their passion. My maps are like art. The more you pay the more status
you attain. The guys who collect these things get together in the country club and compare notes over twenty-year-old Scotch.'

'You make good money?'

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

'How much do people pay for these maps?'

'Well,' Noah said, amazed that his father was interested, and anxious to impress him. 'It depends on the map. A few years ago I bought a handwritten diary by Tycho Brahe. In the diary, there were twenty or twenty-five illustrated maps of the seas and constellations. It cost about eight grand. If I get the right person to buy it, and I usually do in time, I'll sell it for a profit of thirty percent plus appreciation for the time I've owned it. Anything less than that and I won't sell. Now, that's very high end, very valuable. Most maps I sell cost between four and twelve hundred dollars, and very few of them sit in my inventory for more than a year.'

'Where the hell do you get them?'

'I work with about ten dealers. I also research my own purchases on the Internet.'

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

'That's a good question.'

'That all makes about as much sense to me as a rowboat in a bathtub.' Olaf waved his hands. 'And what about Natalie? When are you two having kids?'

'Those are two different questions.'

'Take them in order.'
‘Natalie’s doing well. She works for a consulting firm. Travels a lot.’

‘What the hell is a consulting firm?’

‘The company she works for is called McGreary and Wynn, it’s a computer consulting firm. I don’t understand all of it myself, but her clients pay her to be told how they could be running more efficiently.’

‘Sounds like a goddamn racket.’

‘Some people say it is.’

‘And what about kids?’

Noah paused, closed his eyes, and bowed his head. ‘That’s the million dollar question. We’ve been trying for a while and had lots of tough luck. But we’re still plugging away.’

‘Plugging away, huh?’ Olaf pointed his chin towards the water. ‘That’s the biggest lake in the world.’

They stopped for lunch at the Manitou Lodge. The dining room was a moderately sized room with grand ambitions. The walls were paneled with dark, stained wood, and the vaulted ceiling supported four chandeliers that aspired to some kind of elegance but failed. The floor, a rippling, knotted pine thing, glimmered, polished to a shoeshine brown. Along one wall a colossal fireplace with a mantel as big as a canoe loomed over the deep hearth. Hanging over the mantel a moose head with antlers spanning six feet or more surveyed the room with glass eyes peculiarly small. On either side of the fireplace, black bear skins hung like paintings. Above the wall of windows that faced the highway, a dozen fish—Chinook and brown salmon, lake
trout, northern pike, walleye—hung mounted on elaborately carved and lacquered pieces of wood. The tables were sturdy and unvarnished and covered with paper placemats and lusterless silverware. Salt and pepper shakers, sugar bowls, pats of butter and foils of jam all sat huddled on the edge of each table. The three waitresses wore black skirts and white blouses. One of them directed them to a table by the window and gave them menus.

‘Our soup of the day is walleye chowder,’ she said, filling their water glasses.

‘I’ll be back to take your order when you’re ready.’

‘I haven’t been in a restaurant in years,’ Olaf said.

‘We eat out all the time.’

‘Doesn’t your wife cook?’

‘When we eat at home, I cook.’

Olaf raised his eyes suspiciously.

‘What looks good, anything?’ Noah asked.

‘I’m having the chowder.’

When the waitress came back she was sucking on a spearmint candy, her bright blue eyes still sleepy. Before she could ask Olaf said, ‘Give me the chowder. And a hot cup of coffee.’

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

Noah smiled, hoping to compensate for his father’s boorish behavior, and asked for the chowder himself. She smiled, put her pen behind her ear, and walked towards the kitchen. They were the only customers in the dining room.
‘What’s in the box?’ Noah asked, gesturing towards a wooden whiskey crate his father had had him lug in.

Without a word Olaf slid the slotted lid from the box and regarded its contents. There were half a dozen photo albums and a pine cigar box. Olaf took a sip of his coffee, which still steamed, and set the cup back on the saucer before sliding it towards the edge of the table.

‘Isn’t this dramatic?’ Noah said.

Olaf took an album from the box, set it down on the placemat, and wiped an imaginary layer of dust from it with the palms of his doddering hands. He looked at Noah from over the top of his glasses—big, thick, black-rimmed bifocals that he’d pulled from the breast pocket of his red flannel shirt. ‘I guess this is some of the stuff I wanted to show you. I might say that, well, I think I know what it was like for the two of you growing up.’

Noah sat up. He had an impulse to protest, to tell the old man—as he had so many times in his imagination—that he had no idea how it had been, that he couldn’t possibly know. It was an impulse more than twenty years in the making, one Noah had felt whenever the subject of his father crossed his mind. He’d rehearsed his part in this conversation a thousand times, but on cue he forgot his lines and could only say, ‘Listen, we probably don’t need to hash this all out.’

‘Hash what out? I just wanted to show you some pictures.’

Noah sat dumb as his father opened the album and took two photographs from their plastic sheaths. The first, a black and white snapshot of five men standing on the main deck of the Ragnarok, and two others suspended over the side, one in a bosun’s
chair, the other on a rope ladder, looked like something out of a *Life* magazine pictorial. Printed on heavy Kodak paper, it had a sepia hue that made it seem more like a daguerreotype than a simple black and white snapshot. Of the seven men, Noah recognized three: his father, Jan Vat, and Luke Lifthrasir. They all wore scowls on their faces and looked identical in dress, too, wearing black wool caps, three quarter length pea coats unbuttoned to the waist, gray trousers cuffed at the ankle, and thick-soled black boots. The ship’s bow line was attached to a harbor cleat, and it sagged heavily under the weight of icicles. The ship, as the unmistakable block letters of his father’s handwriting on the back of the photograph said, was wintering up.

On the deck, behind the men, the riveted hatch coamings and covers and the hatch crane—which sat on parallel lines running the length of the main deck on either side of the hatches—were glazed with ice. The two men hanging over the side of the ship chiseled at a layer of ice. The men on deck all wore that expression so fixed in Noah’s memory—they looked caught between humor and tragedy, looked as though they were thinking, simultaneously, that they were elated to be home, but craved leaving again, too.

In the steely background of the picture, a million shades of gray blended into the harborscape: the cone shaped piles of taconite and limestone, the enormous cranes and rail tracks, the rail cars steaming with coal heaps. Fences, razor wire, wooden pallets. The crisscrossing power lines and twenty-story-tall grain and cement silos. A squat tug steaming through snow flurries. Ice. And, enveloping all of it, smoke from a thousand stacks and steam whistles.
Noah looked up from the picture and saw his father staring out the restaurant window, breathing into his empty coffee mug. Noah thought of saying something but looked back down at the picture instead. In the background he recognized a big part of his boyhood, recognized it for the second time in as many days. Just the day before, as he drove through Duluth above and along the St. Louis River, past the seedy houses on his left and the rusty decaying dockside industries on the right, he'd felt similarly transported in time. In his exhaustion of the previous afternoon he'd chalked it up to the depressive autumn mood that seemed to have settled on the city like fatigue. But now, seeing the same place and thing in a different time and in different hues, he knew that he mistook fatigue for the nature of the city, not autumn’s coming on.

He thought back to the time of the picture—to his boyhood—and the ships, his father’s ship especially, his third, actually, the storied Rag. The Superior Steel Company had a fleet of fourteen ore boats and though there were many distinctions in their size and capacity, in their age and shape, each of the ships was distinctly superior—as they were known across the lakes—as well. Just as the Pittsburgh Steamships wore their tin or silver stacks, so the Superiors wore their black hulls and white decking. And emblazoned on the stern and port side of each ship’s nose the diamond and S.S.C. logo of the fleet looked like an opened serpent’s mouth. Though any ship from any fleet or port of call stirred something like awe in Noah, even now but especially as a boy, the ominous, serpentine Superiors ruled his imagination. And the Rag, of course, ruled most, both in Noah’s boyish imagination and in the collective imagination of the people of Duluth. Although flagship honors fell on the
newer, **bigger SS Odin Asgaard**, the *Rag* remained—until her **foundering**—the secret darling of the Superior Steel Company brass. Her officer’s crew all hailed from Duluth, a fact which alone would have made her revered, but she had a mystique, too, one **whispered about** in the sailor’s bars on Lake Avenue and in **church** basements up on the hill. Though exaggerated, an ounce of truth pervaded the mystique. She was tenacious in wicked seas, as she proved over and over again in the November gales. She’d **withstood** ice, the shoals, the concrete piers jutting out into the lakes from Duluth to Ashtabula, and even, allegedly, a **tornado** in the middle of Lake Huron. She possessed the belly of a whale, too, exceeding her load limit from one trip to the next. Though the *Asgaard* was **one hundred feet longer** and made to carry **three thousand tons more ore** than the *Rag*, though the *Asgaard* and her type eventually replaced the ships in the *Rag*’s class, during the last few years of her life, the *Rag* performed—categorically—on an almost **equal** annual footing with the flagship. She was the mother of the Superiors, **even if not** her majesty.

Noah knew all of this because when the subjects of ski jumping, what was for dinner, or the goddamn unions weren’t being discussed at home, the *Ragnarök* was. He knew her statistics like some kids knew the **batting averages** of their favorite ball players. He could still remember them, too.

Olaf’s voice seemed to whistle at him. ‘That’s the *Rag*.’

Noah looked up from the picture and saw his father’s nub pinky—the one that had been **amputated** at the second knuckle because of frostbite—pointing at the picture. ‘I know.’
‘And those are the Bulldogs there, the Bulldogs and a couple sailors working on the hull.’ The Bulldogs was the moniker given to the all-Duluth officer crew of the Rag in honor of their tenacity, but also because it was the namesake of the local state college. ‘That kid in the chair is Bjorn Vifte. You know Bjorn. Seventeen years old there. That’s me, of course, that’s Jan, that’s Joe, that’s Luke—you know him too—and that’s Danny Oppvaskkum, the engineer. This picture was taken a few days after Christmas the year before she went down.’

‘Who’s this?’ Noah asked, pointing to the kid on the ladder.

‘Ed Krebs, one of the deckhands.’

‘And who’s Joe?’

‘Joe was Second Mate. Joe Schlichtenberg. He hung around when you were a kid. Joe probably froze to death. Or drowned. Danny O. was in charge of the engine room. He probably burned to death.’

The story of what had happened was the only thing he ever wanted from his father after his mother died, and even a hint of it got his pulse thrumming. ‘The ship here, she’s at Fraser shipyards?’

‘Four or five ships from our fleet wintered up there every year. In ’66 and ’67 the Rag got her new engine, a diesel. They did it at Fraser.’

‘You guys all look the same.’

‘We were.’

They sat in the dining room of the Manitou Lodge for a couple hours, paging through the photo albums. The waitress came by every half hour and refilled their coffee, and
on one of her stops she brought them each a complimentary piece of rhubarb pie slathered in ice cream, the house specialty she said. Olaf pushed his piece away.

The pictures dated as far back as the spring of 1938, Olaf’s first year on the lakes when he shipped as a deckhand on the 253-foot Harold Loki, a ship named for the original Chief Executive of Superior Steel. Olaf, a baby-faced kid in the picture, his shirt sleeves rolled to the elbows, had a cigarette dangling from his lips while another hand stuck him with a fake jab to the ribs, looked for all the world like Noah himself. Along both sides of the main deck of the ship in the background, a procession of fresh air vents loomed like a marching band of tuba players, and the smokestack in the stern coughed up its coal smoke in pitch-black plumes. Olaf couldn’t remember the other deckhand’s name, but he told Noah about a whole crew’s worth of sixteen- and eighteen-year-old kids shipping out in order to avoid abusive fathers or college. Some of the boys, he said, were just cut from the lonely cloth. He told him about Tony Ragu, a kid from Muskegon who worked on the Loki for the first three months of the shipping season that year before being picked up by the Duluth Lumberjacks, a minor league baseball team who wanted his hundred-mile-per-hour fastball. He told him about Cliff Gornick, a Chicago guy who put himself through Northwestern Law School by working Superior Steel boats in the summer and who eventually became a famous Chicago newscaster. He told him about Russ Jackson, the first black guy he saw on the boats, second cook on the Loki. A potbellied, middle-aged man with a receding hairline and a wife and seven kids in Detroit, he cooked the best beef brisket north of New Orleans. He told him about the Cejka brothers—one of whose sons was later a watchman on the Rag—thick-
shouldered shovellers who worked in the engine room of the *Loki* moving coal. If not
for the whites of their eyes and their ungloved white hands, Noah might not have
known there were any people in the picture at all.

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

Noah looked up and down between the pictures and his father and the same
thing kept happening, it had happened when he saw him sitting in the boat down at
the dock the morning before, it had happened over oatmeal and in the truck as his
father lit his cigar: he couldn't believe that he was there with his father, nor could he
believe how much his father had changed. What struck him most was how much
Noah himself resembled the man in the photographs and how little the man sitting
across from him now did. Three days ago he might have overlooked his father in a crowd, now he felt like he was him. Noah wondered, as his father reconstructed more than thirty years of his life with the help of the photographs, how it felt to be him then, in the spring of 1938, and how it felt to be him now, with the burden of all that had happened and all that he suffered, in the cancerous present. More than anything Noah wondered what it would be like to sit across the table from a son, imagined a whole lifetime of moments like this: spooning baby food, helping with homework, explaining the birds and the bees, sharing a beer over a cribbage board. Jesus, how he longed for that.

By the time the waitress announced that they were closing for the afternoon, they’d looked through five albums. ‘Listen, Dad,’ Noah said, ‘why don’t you pack this stuff up? We can finish looking at it at home. I have to call Nat.’

Olaf said, ‘Sure, sure. We can finish later.’
The first thing Noah remembered fearing was the corner of Second and Superior streets in Duluth. As a child, he and his mother—and eventually his sister—piled into their Impala and headed downtown on the first day of every summer month. They’d park at a meter on Second Street and Noah would plug it with a couple nickels. Walking towards the glowering façade of the LaCroix building, they passed the street corner newspaper kiosk and the patch-eyed man who hawked the Herald. Noah cowered every time because it all seemed so eerie: the concrete gargoyles, the barred basement windows, the mewling gulls, the pirate newspaper man, the morning steam issuing from beneath the manhole covers—it all conspired against his boyish imagination.

Inside the LaCroix building, though, paradise gleamed. The revolving doors turned into the marbled rotunda where braided white columns towered out of the perfectly shined cipolin floor and supported a painted domed ceiling that chronicled the history of Duluth in eight triangular panels of Indians, fur traders, wolves, railroad cars, steamships, statesmen, children, and a bonneted woman holding a Lutheran cross. Just beneath the bottom ring of the dome, a circle of leaded glass let the sunlight fall in rainbow prisms on the walls and floor of the rotunda any hour of the day.
In the bustle of the workaday crowd, Noah and his mother crossed the lobby, hand in hand, to the bank of elevators. A coveralled man mopped the glassy floor, and a couple of balding executive types in Brooks Brothers suits smoking the ends of their cigarettes around the steel ashtrays speculated in hushed, gravelly voices about the cadre of secretaries heading up to the offices of American Family Insurance, the local Teamsters office, Houle Title, or the ninth and tenth story offices of Superior Steel.

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

Ethel Gurlaski, the receptionist, handed Noah's mother a clipboard with a sheet of paper attached. Already half-covered with the prudent cursive signatures of a dozen other ore men's wives, it was to be signed by Noah's mother in order that Olaf's paycheck be handed over. His mother folded the check in half, put it in the zippered pocket of her purse, and hung around Ethel's desk for a few minutes catching up. Then they'd retrace their steps back onto Second Street and walk two blocks west to the credit union where his mother deposited the check and let the teller—a woman who worked there until Noah graduated from high-school—give the boy a sour-apple sucker meant to pacify him until they got home.

Sometimes they'd stop at Wahl's department store to buy Noah a new pair of sneakers or jeans, either of which would eventually send Olaf into an irrational fit of
financial anxiety. Of course, his father was usually away, either adrift in the middle of
the lake or moored in some ship’s berth in Toledo or Cleveland, and so his mother
had to manage the mortgage, the bills, and the thousand other expenditures Olaf
considered extravagant. Primary among which were the two-dollar sneakers Noah
always seemed to need.

During any number of midsummer stopovers—when the Rag might have
needed her pumps or prop repaired—Olaf would sit behind his oak desk for hours
poring over the receipts and checkbook and savings account statement. His desk sat in
the den, a small room with empty, built-in bookcases and a leather sofa. ‘New shoes
again?’ he’d yell in the general direction of the kitchen, where Noah’s mother would
be peeling potatoes or rinsing gooey lutefisk in the sink.

‘He’s a growing boy,’ she’d sing back.

‘He’s breaking us!’

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

‘The phone bill! The electric bill! What is it with all of this?’

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

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

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

She flashed him a no-big-deal smile and turned her attention back to painting her nails.

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

‘I was starting to think you’d forgotten me. Where are you?’

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

‘Is it bad?’ She sounded unhappy.

‘Not really, it’s just this restaurant. There are more dead animals on the wall than there are left in the woods. And the walleye chowder’s got nothing on the soup at Pomodoro. Hey, I tried to call you yesterday. I left a message.’

‘I know, I got it this morning. I was in New York last night. New clients.’ She never discussed clients by name, and the last minute trips to New York—or elsewhere—were her number one job hazard.

‘Do you have any news? I haven’t stopped wondering.’

Since their third failure, an ectopic pregnancy that took Natalie months to recover from, they’d been to the Mirendorf Clinic together only once, three months ago. Natalie had insisted that the reason nothing was working—the reason three tries had yielded nothing but endless fretting, thousands of dollars in fertility clinic bills, and a terminal attitude—was that they hadn’t been doing everything together. ‘You
go to the clinic at eight in the morning to drop off your seed and I go at noon between a tuna fish sandwich and a conference call to be shot full of it like a junkie—I mean, how could we expect anything. It's just unnatural,’ she had said, forgetting that their course of action couldn’t be anything but unnatural. So they’d put their busy days aside and decided to make their clinic visits together.

Their last trip had been on a beautiful, stunningly clear morning. Natalie had taken off her blouse in a heartbreaking gesture of impossible eroticism and begun the ridiculous task of getting Noah off into the plastic jar. For as difficult as the first couple of picklings—as Noah referred to the semen samples in lighter moods—had been, they were nothing compared to the labor of that morning with Nat. Had they been, as was the case on their ninth date eight years earlier, sitting in the front seat of his car after a night at the bar, groping each other in the dark, getting off into her hand would have been—actually was—an embarrassingly easy thing to do. But in the isopropyl whiteness of that clinic room, with the unbelievable weight and seriousness of what they were doing suspended there like a baby’s mobile, the chance of getting off at all seemed as remote as anything ever had. For reasons unclear to him, the nurse had advised them that no intercourse or fellatio was advised, so Natalie worked tirelessly stroking him, her bare breasts pressed coolly on his stomach while he thought of ten thousand reasons he was never going to get off. When he finally did, he was so far lost in the clinicality of it all, so far removed from any sense of sexuality, that he literally could not believe it had just happened.

And although they’d caught it all in the plastic jar and been assured by the nurse that it was an excellent sample and perfectly motile, Noah knew that they’d be
unlucky again. How could anything come of a moment like that, with the bulldozers working in the parking lot right outside the window and the paper covering the examination table crinkling under his bare butt?

Since then, she hadn’t ovulated again but Noah knew she’d had a third appointment in a week that morning, and the odds for another insemination attempt were looking up.

Her voice turned even graver. ‘Of course, now that you’re in the middle of the Minnesota woods, it looks like I’m finally going to ovulate again. What’s it been, three or four months?’

‘What did the doctor say this morning?’

‘Oh, just that there’s at least half a dozen follicles that look good, that I should come back tomorrow for a check-up and that we could probably be inseminated the day after tomorrow.’

In all of his apprehension about coming to see his father, Noah had completely forgotten that any trip would more than likely coincide with Nat’s ovulatory cycle, which was being managed by the doctors and a medicine chest full of fertility drugs.

He could hear her crying now and felt an impulse to hang up the phone, not because he didn’t want to hear what she said, but because he knew that whatever he said in response would be monumentally wrong. He knew that even though their struggle to have a baby had grown to ridiculous proportions, and that the urgency and excitement he would have felt two years ago upon news like this had now become something less, still, her urgency and excitement hadn’t diminished at all, had only
become more desperate. He also knew that voicing his skepticism would be foolish because his pragmatism, in her opinion, was really only a lack of resolve.

‘Okay, sweetie,’ he began against his better judgment. ‘I know it’s terrible timing, I know it stinks and I wish I were there...’

‘But you’re not,’ she interrupted.

‘I know. And I can’t help it I’m not.’

‘I’m not getting any younger, Noah. When we have a chance like this we need to capitalize.’

Capitalize, the sort of word that had become stock in the parlance of their infertility. All of the words: appointment, prescription, insemination, ovulation, suppository, uterus, fallopian, cervix, endometriosis, laparoscopy, motility...they made the whole goddamn thing feel like a science project. ‘But I’m not there, Nat. We might have to wait until next time.’

‘What if there isn’t a next time? What if this is the last time I ever ovulate in my life?’ She cried louder now.

‘Nat, it won’t be the last time you ovulate.’

‘If it is, that son you’re always talking about will never come along. You’ll never be able to teach him how to ski jump. We’ll grow old and one of us will die and the other will be miserable.’

‘Neither of us is going to die. Listen, I know this hasn’t been easy...’

‘Hasn’t been easy? Noah, they had an easier time putting a man on the moon than they’ve had getting me pregnant. Keeping me pregnant anyway.’ She blew her
nose. ‘Maybe you could airmail it. You could go to a hospital in Duluth and they could pack it in dry ice and FedEx it.’

‘Airmail it?’

‘Why not? I’m sure you could do it.’

‘Nat, do you honestly believe it’s worth all that trouble?’ And the minute he said it he regretted it.

‘Worth it?’

‘You know what I mean,’ he interrupted her now. ‘I just don’t think you’re being reasonable.’

‘And injecting myself with a syringe full of saline and fertility drugs every night for no good reason is reasonable? Spending all this money is reasonable?’

‘That’s not the question. I’m asking if it’s reasonable to send sperm in dry ice from Duluth to Boston. The question is whether or not it’s the end of the world if we have to wait another month.’

‘We just waited god-knows-how-many months, Noah, and time passes every second.’

He groaned.

‘What if you’re there for three months, what happens then?’

This startled him, and he looked across the dining room at his father, whose chin was on his chest. He must have been sleeping. ‘I’m not going to be here for three months.’

‘Why don’t you just come home for a day? You could do that.’
‘You’re not listening to me, are you? Nat, I just got here yesterday. I can’t very well leave tomorrow. My father needs me right now. He’s not well. He shit his pants last week, remember?’ He paused to think of the many ways his thinking ran.

Across the dining room Olaf twitched, his head bobbed up, and he looked around the restaurant confused. ‘Nat, I hate to say it but I have to go. This place is closing and I have to get my father home. I’ll call you tomorrow and we’ll figure everything out then.’

‘Just forget it. There’s nothing to figure out. You’re there, so what?’

‘Please Nat, I don’t want to fight. We can’t. Let me call you tomorrow. Same time, okay?’

‘Whatever.’

‘Please.’

But she’d hung up.

His conversation with Solveig was equally tense. She rattled off her husband’s work schedule, the kid’s school schedule, and her own appointments like an auctioneer. She told Noah that the earliest she could be there wasn’t until next week. When Noah said he had everything under control, he almost laughed at his lack of conviction.

The blunt head of the splitting maul, stuck in the oak stump, looked like clay. Noah had his hand on the smooth ash handle, remembering the sound a piece of wood made when struck with the maul.
'I'm falling behind,' Olaf said, sweeping the back of his hand lazily towards a pile of sawn oak. He had just reappeared from the outhouse trail where he went straightaway after lunch. Noah had made it a point of going to the bathroom in the restaurant himself.

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

'It needs time to cure. That pile there,' Olaf pointed at a four-foot-tall by eight-foot-deep pile of split wood as long as Noah's car sitting beside the shed, 'it won't be ready until next year.'

'It won't burn?'

'Of course it'll burn, just not very well.'

Noah jerked the maul free of the stump. Heavier than he remembered, he swung it up onto his shoulder.

'I could use help with this,' Olaf said.

'This is something I can help with,' Noah said, balancing a piece of wood on the block.

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

'We can do that.'

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

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

‘That felt good,’ Noah said, still feeling the reverberations in his shoulders.

‘Let’s get at that oak,’ Olaf said.

‘All right.’

They emptied the wheelbarrow in the yard, and Olaf fetched a chainsaw, a gas can, and two pair of gloves from the shed. They started towards the gulch, Noah in front and pushing the wheelbarrow.

‘I talked to Solveig today,’ Noah said over his shoulder. The wheelbarrow bounced over the roots and pine saplings that had overrun the path.

‘How’s she doing?’ The old man was already short of breath.

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

‘What are you talking about?’

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

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

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

Olaf flinched and grabbed his side and moaned an unintelligible string of expletives. It looked like it could have been an act, but the grimace on the old man’s face convinced Noah otherwise. Olaf, looking up at Noah and jack-knifed at the
waist, said, 'As effortless as you might imagine this whole business is for me, it's not.' He prodded himself in the stomach and took a deep breath. His teeth clenched, a white thread of spittle dangled from his lips. 'Maybe I should have told her, maybe you're right.'

Noah said, 'She just deserves to know what's going on, that's all.' He reached to help the old man upright. 'She's worried. Anyway, she wants to come see you but can't right now, not until next week.'

'Just as well she can't. What does she want to see me like this for?'

Noah took a deep breath and rolled his neck back over his shoulders. 'Why don't we head back to the house? We can take care of the tree in the gulch tomorrow. I think you should take it easy right now.'

'Hell, I'm okay. Let's get started on it.'

Noah turned back for the wheelbarrow.

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

'Must have been some wind,' Noah said.

Olaf nodded in agreement. He explained how the chainsaw worked, said that it'd be easiest to work on the branches first, that he should approach the job as if he were whittling a stick. He warned Noah about how, when cutting off a particularly large branch—and he pointed out half a dozen examples—he had to be careful because the balance might shift and he could lose his footing. Finally he pulled the
cord and the saw fired up. He handed it to Noah who took it with stiff, outstretched arms. Olaf sat down with his long legs hanging over the edge of the gulch and pointed at Noah to get going.

The saw whined with the first pull of the trigger, it also pulled Noah towards the tree. He sawed the first branches, the finer treetop ones still thick with dried leaves. The saw ripped through them. He moved quickly, letting the saw tear through thin branch after thin branch, each falling into the gulch, until he had moved halfway down the trunk and was working on the thicker limbs. After fifteen minutes he looked back over his work, at the pile of branches lying on the bank of the gulch. The air smelled like sawdust, and his ears rang from the noise of the saw.

He worked for another half hour until the only thing left was the spotted trunk of the tree spanning the two sides of the gulch. Olaf sat there, his shoulders draped over his chest, his hands folded on his lap, like a child. Noah flipped the power switch and the saw choked off. The muscles in his arms and back stung and twitched, and his shoulders felt like he always imagined they would were he ever struck by lightning.

‘Oh-hohh!’ Noah hollered. The air had gone silent when he turned off the saw but his ears still buzzed. ‘That’s work!’

Olaf smiled. ‘You’re talking too loud.’

‘Huh?’

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

‘Huh?’

‘Never mind.’

‘Now what, just start sawing the trunk?’
'Let's leave that for tomorrow. It's getting dark already.'

Noah set the saw in the wheelbarrow and knelt down next to his father. 'You feeling okay?'

'Good as I ever do anymore.'

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

'We've covered that.'

Both of them sighed simultaneously.

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

They left the wheelbarrow and gas can and started back for the house. The empty tree boughs formed a black web against the pewter sky.

'You're up late tonight,' Noah said. He meant it as a joke. Olaf, short of breath and unsteady on his feet, laughed but said nothing.

'Straight to bed,' Noah continued. 'When we get back.'

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

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

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

'What?' Olaf said, startled himself by the thud of the saw on the stone.
‘That,’ Noah whispered again, pointing at the bushy outline of whatever it was. ‘Is that a wolf?’ he asked. He was terrified. He bent down and picked up the saw. The handle was cracked. ‘Is that a goddamn wolf?’ he asked again, this time in a louder whisper, turning his head but not taking his eyes off the shadow in the yard.

‘What are you talking about?’ Olaf said.

‘There. Sitting right there, by the fire pit.’ He picked up the saw, clutched it tightly, prepared to use it as a weapon if he had to.

‘That’s not a wolf,’ Olaf said, elbowing Noah aside. ‘That’s my dog. That’s Vikar—come here, Vikar.’ And he whistled. The dog came bounding around the truck and ran a circle around them.

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

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

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

‘That’s what you said. But it’s just my dog.’ They were back at the house.

‘Vikar?’ Noah asked, and the dog knocked playfully into his legs upon hearing his name.

‘Yep.’
‘Why Vikar?’

‘I got him at the humane society. He already had a name.’

Noah let the dog sniff his hand.

‘That’s a good dent in the saw,’ Olaf said.

‘Sorry. Maybe I’m not cut out for hard labor after all.’

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

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

‘Couple years.’

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

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

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

‘Surprises?’ Olaf replied. He stepped behind Noah, into the porch, took the top off a tin garbage can and filled an empty ice cream bucket half full of dog food. He set it down beside the steps and the dog ate it like a machine.

‘Why don’t you put some water on for coffee, I’ll be right back,’ Olaf said and walked towards the privy sitting ramshackle and invisible in the dimming woods.
‘Do you remember your mother playing the piano?’ They sat in the rusted steel lawn chairs on the grassy beach, within spitting distance of the lapping water, darkness cascading down the sky. Vikar lay at Olaf’s feet, his legs outstretched and muscular, a stream of groans muttering from his black lips.

‘Of course I do,’ Noah said.

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

‘It drove me nuts when I was a kid.’

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

‘Because I could never listen to my records.’

Olaf was teasing a sprig of brown grass. He sighed, cleared his throat, and put the grass between his lips. ‘She never aspired to anything. She could have been a real pianist, could have played in the symphony or something.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ Noah said softly. ‘She was a real pianist, and she aspired to plenty.’

The wind blew and stopped, and when it stopped, and the trees settled, the silence became willowy and cool.

‘You know,’ Olaf said, ‘I was on my way home when she died.’
‘I remember when she died,’ Noah said and felt a rush of the old bitterness. There was no use trying to disguise it, no use trying to pretend this was just another of the many conversations to catch up. He could tolerate, he had now established, the catching-up, he could handle the curiosity about his job, his marriage even, but he would not stand for the defamation of his mother.

‘That’s the only time I’ve ever been on a plane in my life. I had to leave my ship in Toledo, take a cab to Detroit and get the plane. It cost a hundred bucks.’

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

Olaf turned away, took a sip of his coffee, and set his chin back on his chest. The moon rose in front of them, above the tree line across the lake, half hidden by a rolling black cloud. A rim of clouds specked the horizon. The rest of the sky sparkled with stars, lightening and darkening simultaneously as it got later and the moon rose.

‘Your mother wanted you to play,’ Olaf said.

Noah sneered incredulously, nearly stood up to leave, thought of a dozen curses but finally folded his arms and looked away, sneering again.

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

‘What difference does it make who played the piano?’

‘It doesn’t,’ Olaf said. ‘I’m just trying to remember.’
She used to play for hours at a time, in summer especially when her long
evenings alone went on endlessly. Mendelssohn, Beethoven, and Grieg were always
drifting through the house on High Street and out the window screens, filling the alley
while Noah and his buddies pitched pennies against the garage door. Solveig played
too, in her mother’s style but without any of her elegance. Noah remembered
Solveig’s rendition of a Chopin Mazurka humping and hammering its way out of the
Acrosonic upright, and how he felt pity for her, pity because she wasn’t his mother.

‘Your sister never quite got it, did she?’ Olaf asked, as if reading Noah’s
mind.

‘Why are you doing this? Who cares how Solveig played the piano? You can’t
even face it now, can you? Why were you gone? Why didn’t you come home before
she died?’

‘Don’t pull any punches,’ Olaf said.

‘Answer the question.’

When, one night early in their relationship, Natalie had asked Noah how his
mother had died—they were eating oysters and drinking Pimm’s at a place out on
Marblehead Beach—Noah said drunkenly, but with conviction, ‘Of a broken heart.’

His mother had, in fact, died of heart failure, of a heart attack brought on,
Noah always imagined later, by an excess of longing. During the week after New
Year’s, home from their family vacation here, at Lake Forsone, back in the house on
High Street, she’d complained of a pain in her chest. Noah had never seen her ill
before—never seen so much as a cough or runny nose—so it terrified him when, for
three days, his mother could hardly get out of bed.
Finally, Noah took her to the hospital. At St. Mary's, they admitted her after running tests and she lay there for a week diagnosed, wrongly, with angina. The doctor recommended she change her diet—no more coffee or bacon or peppermint ice cream, her favorite—advised her to quit doing anything, for the time being at least, that excited her too much. This meant no more bike rides with Solveig along Skyline Parkway, no more scrubbing the kitchen floor every Saturday morning, no more hoeing the garden herself, and of course, though never said explicitly, no more Mr. Hember, no more afternoons while the kids were at school and Olaf a thousand miles away, screwing after coffee and shortbread.

She obeyed the doctor's orders to the finest detail. All through winter and into the next spring, right up to Noah's graduation, everything seemed fine. Occasionally she'd sneak a clandestine cup of coffee or nibble on a piece of buttered toast and suffer for a day, but her transgressions were few and far between. Mr. Hember, who still lived across the street, got fatter while his mother got skinnier, and though he still came around—as evidenced by the coffee cups sometimes left sitting on the end table, or the extra salad fork dirty in the sink—he no longer, Noah was sure, made love to his mother. She had changed in aspect that much.

And for six months his mother's health seemed to improve.

Then, on a warm day in June while he sat in the car in front of the house waiting for his mom—they were going to one of Solveig's summer league softball games—his mother fainted and fell down the front steps. By the time Noah reached her, she'd turned pale and looked twenty years older than she ever had. She said nothing, neither did he, but Noah knew things were bad, knew things had changed.
At the hospital the doctor told Noah the diagnosis they’d made earlier that year was likely a mistake, and that it looked now as though his mother had a rare congenital heart disease called Marfan’s Syndrome. He told him that her aorta and the valves connecting the heart with the rest of her body were badly damaged. He told him that it looked as if she’d had an aneurysm, and if this was true—they were still running tests to confirm it—then it was amazing she was still alive.

‘Contact your father, son, as quick as you can.’

Solveig wept piteously, prophetically, from the instant she saw Noah alone in the car. Through her sobs she somehow reasoned that they had to get to the Superior Steel offices downtown and instructed Noah to go there. He remembered telling the receptionist they needed to reach their father. By then, despite the wreck of the Ragnarök, Olaf captained the Siegfried Gimble, his last ship in his last position with Superior Steel. The receptionist assured Noah that his father would be notified immediately, that the Gimble was in transit on Lake Huron, and that they were radioing the ship now. She would call Noah herself, at the hospital, once Olaf had been reached.

Back at the hospital, his mother sat propped up in bed, her hair suddenly gray and matted, her eyes wrinkled and dry. Solveig sat at her bedside all day. When the receptionist from Superior Steel finally got in touch with Noah, she told him that his father had been notified, and that he’d return as soon as the ship reached port. Sitting in the hospital lobby, Noah and Solveig and their Aunt Lena assumed it would only be a matter of a day or two. It wasn’t.
‘They called you on Saturday. You got to port on Sunday morning. You didn’t get back to Duluth until Thursday.’ Noah’s scorn felt sharper than ever. ‘For four days you knew how sick she was, knew she was laid up in the hospital, and still you didn’t get home? And somehow, this is the part that just boggles my mind, somehow you were a hero for leaving your boat? For getting on a plane?’

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

‘What’s not simple about it? She was dying.’

‘We didn’t know that then.’

‘Are you kidding me?’ Noah stood up, walked to the edge of the water, picked up a rock, and threw it out into the lake.

‘I didn’t expect her to die, Noah.’

‘What did you expect, huh? Did you expect your thirteen-year-old daughter and eighteen-year-old son to take care of everything? Did you expect aunt Lena to explain the sight of our dying mother? For that matter, did you expect your wife to hold on forever while you mustered up the fucking wherewithal to get off whatever barstool you were sitting on?’ He threw another rock into the lake, spit, and turned to face his father. ‘We were fucking kids.’

‘It was a long time ago.’

‘Is that supposed to make it all right?’

‘Fucksakes, Noah, it’s not that simple. Your mother and I, we were hardly speaking to each other by then. Things weren’t easy.’
‘You had two kids, too. Did you think things were easy for us? Did you forget about us?’

‘I didn’t forget about anything.’

‘You know what?’ Noah said, stepping back towards his father. ‘That only makes it worse. We needed you and you weren’t there. You were never there.’ Noah looked at his father and felt a flush of something else—elation maybe—for having said what he’d wanted to say for so long.

‘The story is a lot longer than you remember,’ Olaf said.

Noah dropped back into the chair and ran his hands through his hair. ‘What part of the story am I forgetting, Dad? The part where you drank yourself stupid? The part where you abandoned us altogether, told me and Solveig it was time to buck up? Because if that’s what I’m missing from the story, believe me, it’s all up here.’ He pointed at his temple. ‘All we wanted was for you to come home and tell us that the world hadn’t ended, that’s all you would have had to do.’

‘The world ended a long time before that night,’ Olaf said.

Noah heard a note of resignation in his voice, a pitiful, sad, thoughtful timbre that he’d never heard before but that he didn’t quite believe. ‘Don’t you get it? We were kids and our mother just died. Whatever tragedy you suffered shouldn’t have mattered. It still doesn’t matter. You had a responsibility and you blew it. No, you didn’t blow it, you fucking obliterated it.’

‘Do you think I’m sitting here ignorant? You think I don’t know I did wrong by you kids?’
‘I think you’ve sat here for the last ten minutes—no, for the last thirty-five years—without taking any responsibility. I think you’ve always believed that what happened to you was more tragic and more meaningful than anything that ever happened to anyone else. And that’s wrong. You just couldn’t shake it, that’s all, you wore it around on your sleeve and nothing else mattered. That’s what I think.’

‘You’re dead wrong about all of that. Dead goddamn wrong.’

‘Then tell me why you weren’t there. Tell me why you disappeared from the fucking world. Tell me why my mother never had a funeral.’

Olaf looked squarely at Noah, a face full of regret if Noah judged right. ‘I still have her ashes,’ he said.

‘What?’

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

Noah sat there dumbstruck. It wasn’t anger keeping him quiet but bewilderment. He felt as if he were liquefying, as if this new and sudden fact somehow changed everything.

‘I can’t tell you why I wasn’t there, Noah. I can’t tell you why I disappeared or why your mother never had a funeral. I can’t tell you anything about any of it because I don’t know.’

‘They’re in the shed?’

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

Noah had no idea.
They sat there quietly for a long time. The night was stunning, cooling, getting cold, the sky bursting with stars. Noah watched his father fall asleep, his chin on his chest again, and felt the rage give way to pity. This infuriated him for a moment, and he had an impulse to wake his father and finish hashing it out, but he let the old man sleep instead, intent on the suspicion they’d only end up further behind than they already were.

The lake’s black surface seemed almost to glow as the reflecting stars flitted across the small waves that came and went with the breezes. Twice Vikar stood, stretched, and went to the shore to drink, and twice he came back to Olaf’s feet and fell back asleep.

Eventually Noah’s anger and resignation gave way to a different anxiety, and he couldn’t get Nat off his mind.

He imagined her at home, curled up on the couch in the den thumbing through one of the dozen infertility books she had, probably one that dealt with the feasibility of shipping semen in dry ice. For months now she’d been addicted to alternative solutions, and her burgeoning library included books on herbal, meditative, and cosmic remedies. At first the self-education seemed natural enough, given the fact that for three months the fertility drugs meant to stimulate ovulation weren’t even working, but after a couple months and several entreaties from her to him—entreaties that included his skipping the sauna at the club, it reduced sperm count, and his eating more legumes and peanuts, the zinc was supposed to increase the motility of his sperm—the education began to seem as patently hopeless as the whole enterprise in
general. More than a couple times they'd talked each other down, screamed irrational accusations across the kitchen table and spent the evening on different floors of the house only to reconcile, tearfully, later, assuring each other that the madness was natural enough, sparked entirely by their childlessness and the strain of the past few years of trying. Sometimes, before they fell asleep, they'd lay in bed conjuring up their fantasy child—a baby boy—whose ascendance into the nighttime world of forgiveness and fantasy was like religion for them. After whispering and coddling and apologizing—after Nat fell asleep on his shoulder—Noah would play the fantasy-child’s life out.

The boy was a prodigy, of course, but a prodigy of ordinariness. This meant a little league career that included errors and strikeouts galore, but also a zest for the game straight from the little guy’s good nature. It meant a seventh grade girlfriend and questions about how to kiss. It meant high school and the prom and ski trips up to Sugarloaf, his and Nat’s favorite resort, with the boy and a couple of his pals. It meant college at Dartmouth, Nat’s insistence, and law school and a job in downtown Boston where the two of them—Noah and his son—could get together for lunch on Fridays. There were no infidelities or dislocations in this fantasy, no shipwrecks either.

‘Winter’s in that wind,’ Olaf said, turning the collar of his shirt up.

His voice startled Noah from his reverie. He hadn’t noticed the outright chill in the air, but felt it the moment his father mentioned it.

‘You fell asleep.’

‘It’s awfully damn late for me.’
Noah turned his attention back to the lake and the rippling water. Steadier now, the waves lapped gently onto the dock posts and beach. He felt the rage about his mother start to simmer again.

‘Two weeks ago that sky would’ve been a circus with Northern Lights,’ Olaf said, pointing upwards. ‘It’s a goddamn sight.’

‘My first year on the Loki I used to sit watch from midnight until four. Ninety percent of the time this meant just staying awake. Sometimes I’d be up in the pilothouse, sometimes down on deck, depending on the weather and where we were. It was a boring job, boring as hell to tell truth, but my Captain that first year was a German guy named Wolfgang, a hell of a guy, smart as anyone I ever knew. He introduced me to the stars, so to speak.’ Olaf nodded up at the sky. ‘He taught me some things about navigating. Just basic stuff, but it hooked me. He said that a true sea man could sail around the world without anything more than a watch and a sextant and the sky to guide him. I didn’t even know what the hell a sextant was, just figured you knew where to go if you were in charge of one of those ships. I never reckoned there was any kind of science to it. In the harbor you could see where you wanted to go, but out on the lake, where the water meets the horizon, you obviously can’t see where you’re headed, where you’re going to end up in any case. Wolf taught me how to take sun sights, how to chart our course, how to estimate our position using dead reckoning when the sky was cloudy and the shore out of sight. Back then we still depended on all that stuff. Now it’s just a bunch of satellites all over the sky telling you where you are and where to go. Back then it was still something beautiful to steer a ship.’
Olaf stopped talking, looked up at the sky, and pointed to different clusters of stars, marking the air with fingertip dots. Noah, in all his life, had never heard his father say so much at one time. He’d never heard him say half as much.

‘What are you pointing at?’

Olaf looked down. ‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘There was a lot of down time on the ship, especially as a kid when I didn’t have any responsibilities outside my watch. On clear nights I used to stand on the stern deck looking out at the wake. There’re a lot of things to see in the night sky, especially on Superior. And there were a lot of reasons to be lonely, especially if you’re the new kid onboard. But when you’re aching to get away, which I was, even the worst loneliness doesn’t sound too bad.

‘Anyway, I got interested in what the Captain was teaching me. I used to watch him take his sights, consult our charts, mark our position, do the math. After a couple seasons I had a real sense for this stuff. I could keep time in my head. I knew where we were all the time. I got good at it.

‘You see there?’ he asked Noah, pointing nearly straight up at a cluster of bright stars. ‘That’s Andromeda, you can tell by the spiraling cloudiness of it. It’ll be lower in the sky in the next month. That’s Cassiopeia to the left there. That’s Auriga there, and that’s Capella, that bright star right on the edge of that cluster. You can’t see Orion or Betelgeuse now because they’re too low on the horizon. Jesus, those stars are a long ways away. I can hardly even think about it now. But I’ll tell you what,’ he coughed to clear his throat and nodded his head affirmatively. ‘I used to sail by their light—I used to sail by Andromeda’s light—and I got around just fine.’
A long silence ensued, Olaf still calculating some impossible star equation with the tip of his finger, still conducting. Noah thought it looked like, some star symphony.

'The galley would start serving breakfast at six o’clock on every ship I ever sailed. Those first couple seasons I’d sit on deck until right before chow time, take my morning sight, then head to the galley and eat breakfast like it was meant to be eaten.' He smacked his lips. 'Buttermilk pancakes drowning in syrup, eggs, hash browns, bacon and sausage, coffee, juice, fruit. Sometimes we’d even have chops or steaks. We all ate like that, all the time. It was one of the perks for living on those boats. I still remember what it was like to feel as full as I did after those breakfasts. I’d go back to my cabin, slide off my boots, and lie down on top of my bunk.' He sighed. 'Didn’t have a goddamn thing to worry about in that sleep. Nothing.'

'But later,’ Noah interrupted.

'I’ve never been a good sleeper, but those mornings were pretty damn fine. After your mother and I got hitched and you came along, the sleep got a little bit tougher. I was ten years into my career when I met your mother, though. There was nothing else I could do.’

Olaf stood up and went to a tree in the woods to piss. When he came back he said, ‘It all blends together for me now, everything before the Rag. Each of the ships and each of the years have turned out to be the same thing unless I’ve got pictures to remind me. But I’ll tell you what, my life was split the night she sank.’

Noah couldn’t decide if his father was pandering to the moment or aching to reconcile in a way Noah was just beginning to understand. He tried to keep in mind
that the old man was—in all likelihood—dying, and he imagined a dying man’s nature was probably pretty susceptible to nostalgia. But he also thought how easy it would be for a man like his father—like any man for that matter—dying or not, to look back on the failures of his life and find easy answers in them. Maybe his father’s life had been divided the night his ship sank, but did that excuse the years since?

‘Maybe it’s time we head on up to bed,’ Olaf suggested.

Noah stood without saying anything. They walked back up the starlit path, Olaf in front, panting and clumsy and tentative. The dog walked beside them to the door of the house and then curled up on the top step.

Inside Olaf disappeared into his bedroom for a minute, then reappeared in his union suit. Noah stood at the sink brushing his teeth.

Olaf opened the stove door and put a couple pieces of split wood on top of the glowing embers. He turned. ‘We’ll finish with that tree over in the gulch in the morning, all right?’ Olaf said.

Noah just nodded.

‘Okay then.’ And his father turned and trudged back into his bedroom.

Noah turned out the lamp over the sink and went to bed himself.

In the middle of the night Noah jerked awake. The heavy quilt, still tucked between the mattress and box spring at the foot of the double bed, lay over him. He moved his arm under the quilt to feel for the edge of the bed, lifted the quilt when he found it, and slid his legs over the edge so that his feet touched the dusty wood floor. It was so quiet he could hear the stovefire wheeze in the next room. He had to shit, and in an
instant all of the old childhood fear-of-the-woods-at-night came back to him, blazing back to him, but he knew he couldn’t wait until morning.

His jeans hung on the bedpost. He reached for them, fumbled around, and slid them on. They were cold and stiff. When he opened the bedroom door, the warm air from the living room choked him. The smudged window on the door of the stove cast a lamentable, barely discernable amber light onto the middle of the great room floor.

He walked out onto the porch and groped around for the flashlight he remembered sitting on the shelf above the coat rack. He found it, tried turning it on, then knocked the red plastic head of it in the palm of his hand a couple of times before it flickered on. The glow was as dull and dim as the light of the stove, but it was better than nothing. He slid his feet into a pair of unlaced boots and donned a hunter’s blaze orange sweatshirt from a peg on the coat rack. Then he stepped outside, over the dog, and headed towards the outhouse.

As a kid, the thought of making this walk alone would never have occurred to him. He could remember many nights when he was eight or ten years old—old enough, his parents thought, to make the trip to the outhouse alone—standing at his father’s or grandpa’s bedside, tugging at their arm, insisting that he couldn’t wait until morning to go. He thought about the fantasy child, thought of what it would be like to have his own son twisting his arm at the edge of the bed, wanting to be taken out to the shitter. He thought about his own fear now. It was the kind of thought that made him feel woefully unready to have that child. Olaf, Noah was certain, had never feared the dark.
He stopped in front of the outhouse. Two soggy wooden steps lay at his feet, rotted and carpeted with moss. The sky had gone completely black, cloud covered, and he realized in a shiver that the temperature had dropped several degrees since he went to bed. It felt like winter.

The wooden latch on the door was rotten too. When he pulled it, the door stuck for a second but then swung open and hung by a single hinge. He flashed the light inside, looked up at the sky, and took a deep breath. The cold air hit his lungs. It felt good. He peeked into the outhouse again, took another deep breath, and froze when he heard what he thought sounded like fallen leaves being kicked around in the forest. He shined the pathetic light into the woods but saw nothing. After a minute the sound disappeared, and he hurried into the outhouse, decided to leave the door open, and let his pants down. Outside, noises flittered everywhere. He heard clicking tree branches, the wind or an alighting owl, he hoped, then a chirp, a mouse or a chipmunk he figured, then another creak, a distant one, then a click, nearby, what sounded like a car door opening. Each of the sounds was amplified in the silence and made creepier by the darkness.

The toilet paper almost disintegrated to the touch. When he stood to hike his pants up, the flashlight, which he’d balanced on his knee, bounced off his leg and rolled onto the outhouse floor. He reached into the cobwebby corner of the floor to fetch it and when he stood back up, wiping the wet metal handle of the flashlight on the sleeve of the sweatshirt, he heard the unmistakable sound of a car door slamming. He froze again, stared intensely down the path towards the house, but couldn’t see anything. He flipped the switch of the flashlight but this time it was completely dead.
He had an instinct to step back into the outhouse, close the door, and hope that whoever or whatever was up at the house would just leave. He envisioned a huge black bear with three-inch claws, or north shore hillbillies with bottles of empty whiskey and their hunting rifles, or escaped Canadian convicts still in their prison issue jumpsuits with shaved heads and sawed-off hockey sticks sacking the house, or hotwiring the truck. The images paralyzed him for a second before he took a cautious step forward, then another. As he paused to take a breath, he heard the screen door slam shut and wondered why the dog wouldn’t be putting up more of a fuss. A cold sweat began to soak his back and his temples throbbed.

Why, he suddenly wondered in a moment of uncommon clarity, would anyone have found his way all the way to this isolated house in the middle of the night? This calmed him. Nobody was breaking into his car. This wasn’t Boston, for god’s sake. It was eight miles up a winding county road from a town of one hundred and fifty people. He saw the window on the back of the house turn yellow through the leafless woods and realized his father must be awake inside. Now he only had to get back down the trail. He used the lighted window as his beacon.

‘Shit!’ Olaf startled as Noah came into the house. The old man was standing behind the kitchen counter with his hands raised, as if ready to box the intruder he mistook Noah for. ‘What in the hell are you doing? You scared the hell out of me.’

‘I scared the hell out of you? What are you doing up? It’s the middle of the goddamn night.’

‘This is when I get up,’ Olaf said.
Noah noticed the wooden box of photographs sitting on the coffee table. His father must have gotten them from the truck. ‘What about a toilet, huh? It’s not the nineteenth century anymore, you can get indoor plumbing. This must be the only house in America without a toilet. It’s freezing out. A man shouldn’t have to walk a mile through the woods to take a shit at night. And how about a flashlight that works? It’s pitch black out there.’

Olaf looked stunned, almost frightened. He looked, Noah thought, like a child who can’t understand a parent’s rage, like he used to feel himself whenever the old man was giving him hell for breaking a garage door window, for accidentally tripping Solveig on the sidewalk, or for not mowing the lawn just right.

‘There’s a flashlight here,’ Olaf said, taking a ten-inch long light with a lamp five inches in diameter from the shelf beside the door. When he turned it on and shined it out the window, the trees lit up as if under a spotlight. ‘I keep the light here,’ he continued, turning the flashlight off and setting it back on the shelf.

‘I’m going back to bed,’ Noah said, stomping across the living room and into his bedroom.
PART III
THE RAG IS BURNING

Just the day before, Noah might have stood shirtless in the sun, now snowflakes as big as cotton balls fell slowly enough that he could pick one out thirty feet in the air and watch it fall weightlessly to the brown grass. He’d been watching the snow fall for twenty minutes from behind the screen door, sipping a cup of muddy coffee.

Olaf’s clomping had woken him an hour earlier, but Noah stayed in bed—still smarting from a lingering sense of guilt and animosity—hoping his father would get out of the house so he could be alone for a while. When he heard the screen door slam shut and the dog bark excitedly outside, Noah got up and fixed the coffee. While he should have been wondering where the old man had gone, he found himself tracing the illogical path of his thoughts instead. How he had gotten from the image of his wife’s beautiful, milky breasts pressed warmly against his back in bed—the first thing he’d thought of standing at the door—to the unimaginable nightmare of twenty-seven men on a sinking ship, he’d never know.

Although most of the details of the morning of the wreck were vague at best, a few remained etched in his memory. He remembered two-year-old Solveig wiggling impatiently on his lap, her toddler’s innocence so distant from his own. He
remembered that his mother, despite her anxiety, had commended him for being such a wonderful big brother. He remembered his mother’s teary eyes, too, and the eruption of sadness their look provoked in him. He knew something had happened that morning, knew that his father’s ship was missing, though what ‘missing’ meant he didn’t quite understand. Judging by the mood in the room though, he knew it wasn’t good. His Aunt Lena would never have driven through the middle of the night to be with them otherwise.

‘Oh, Lena,’ his mother had said. ‘Where is that thing?’ She was talking about the newspaper, which had become the focus of her anxiety. Waiting for it had been an event in itself. Apparently, hopping into the car and driving down to the gas station on Central Entrance had never entered his mother’s mind. Perhaps this was because of the snow, a foot of which had fallen overnight, or because leaving meant the possibility of missing a phone call or radio news broadcast.

Lena was an adoring aunt who’d spent a lot of time with Noah and his sister when they were kids. A miniature version of his mother—a less stunning one—her cobalt colored eyes and dusty blond hair accentuated an otherwise ordinary face. But what she lacked in sheer beauty she made up for with kindness and composure, and she could make most people smile just by smiling herself.

‘The paper will come, Tove,’ Lena said. ‘Don’t worry. Remember, it’s snowing like crazy, and that slows the delivery boy too.’ She spoke so gently that his mother finally put down the dust rag and ceramic figurine she’d been polishing for ten minutes and collapsed on the sofa.
When the thud of the paper hitting the oval pane of glass in the door finally broke the uneasy silence, his mother was too terrified to move, so Lena instructed Noah to fetch it. He handed her the paper and she kissed the tip of her pinky and offered it to his lips in a gesture so familiar it restored, at least for a moment, a semblance of order. Beneath the curlicue of the Duluth Herald masthead, a banner stretching from margin to margin declared: *SS Ragnarök Missing: Worst Is Feared.* Beneath the banner, a file photograph of the *Rag* steaming under the aerial bridge into Duluth harbor duped Noah for a minute, but then Lena began to read.

‘At 12:27 AM today, the Superior Steel ship *Ragnarök* lost radio contact after making a mayday call, according to a spokesman from the Superior Steel offices in Duluth.

‘According to the spokesman, the ship is believed to have lost her rudder somewhere northwest of Isle Royale in Lake Superior.

‘A meteorologist from the National Weather Service reported high winds and heavy snow in the area. Other vessels in the vicinity reported waves of fifteen to twenty feet.

‘“The ship was under the command of Captain Jan Vat,” the Superior Steel spokesman said. “He is believed to have been the officer that made the mayday. An hour earlier First Mate Olaf Torr reported a small fire in the engine room, believed to have been caused by a faulty fuel line.

‘“We have contacted family members, many of whom live here in Duluth, and will update the public as events unfold. For now, we’re praying search and rescue
operations are successful.”’ Lena paused, looked at her sister, and began reading again.

‘Both U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards launched search efforts, but were hampered by dangerous seas and weather conditions. “Maybe when day breaks we can get back out there, but for now it’s just too risky,” U.S. Coast Guard Captain Donald Nosur said.’

‘Stop it!’ his mother yelled. ‘That’s enough! We know all this.’

Noah remembered the tremor in her voice, remembered pulling the afghan over his head as he lay on the sofa and hoping for sleep.

Of course the sleep never came, and the rest of the morning was a blur of neighbors trudging up the walk in knee-deep snow to offer their prayers and staticky WEBC radio broadcasts announcing over and over again the day’s anthem: The Rag is missing. The Rag is missing.

By the time the blizzard broke at lunchtime, the phone had already rung so many times that it no longer alarmed any of them. The local TV news stations had called, so had friends and other sailor’s wives. But at noontime the call put a different mood in the room, a different look on his mother’s face—one caught between disbelief and importunate joy—it came from St. Mary’s hospital. She nodded, mumbled into the receiver, and sat on the edge of the coffee table as Lena knelt before her.

‘They’re taking his pinky,’ his mother said as she put the receiver back in the cradle. ‘At the second knuckle. Frostbite they said.’
Lena took her by the elbow. ‘Tove, whose pinky? Who was that on the phone?’

‘Olaf’s pinky. He’s at St. Mary’s. They have to amputate.’

‘He’s alive?’ Lena said. ‘He’s at the hospital?’

Noah’s mother swooped him into her arms and soaked the shoulder of his turtleneck with her tears. Not long after, as Noah sat at the kitchen table eating Spaghetti his aunt had cooked for him, the voice on the transistor radio began broadcasting the first version of the wreck.

They kept Olaf at the hospital for three days. On the second of them, Lena hustled Noah and Solveig into her car after lunch and brought them to St. Mary’s to visit their father. Tove had been at the hospital since she received the news of his arrival the day before, and when Noah and Lena and Solveig showed up a day and a half into Olaf’s recovery, she looked worse than he did. Her eyes swollen from all the crying and sleeplessness, her hair disheveled, the usually rosy color of her cheeks all flushed and wan, it all alarmed Noah more than the look of his father, who slept peacefully, his beard strangely trimmed, his hair combed off his forehead revealing a stitched-up wound.

Lena cautioned Noah to keep quiet while Tove took Solveig squirming and fussing into the hallway. He stood at the foot of the hospital bed like a good soldier staring at his father until Lena sat Noah in one of the straight back captain’s chairs and whispered she’d be right back. For a little while nothing seemed strange at all except for the IV entrenched in his father’s hand. It seemed as if he might just as easily have been napping on the couch in their living room. The sun—shining
spectacularly all morning—lit the room through two windows, and Noah remembered the shadows beneath his feet as they hung from the chair, remembered suddenly feeling his father’s eyes on him.

‘There he is,’ Olaf said.

‘Hi, Dad. What’s that in your arm?’

‘They’re pumping the life back into me.’

‘What’s that mean?’

‘Never mind. Where are your mother and Solveig?’

‘Solveig was being a brat, so mom took her out there.’ He pointed at the door.

‘What’s that?’ Now he pointed at his father’s bandaged hand.

‘They had to chop off my pinky.’

Noah walked over to the bedside. ‘Can I see it?’

‘Not now,’ he said, looking away without explanation.

Noah felt reprimanded and hung his head. Moments like that were usually when his father would tousle his hair and kid him about long faces, but instead of teasing him, Olaf took a deep, silence busting breath.

‘Dad,’ Noah said after a minute, risking admonishment. ‘What does it mean the Rag is missing?’

Olaf squeezed his eyes closed, said, ‘She’s gone,’ and that was it, that’s all that ever passed between the two of them on the subject of the Rag.

His father took the rest of that season off, spending most of his time alone in the den smoking his Drum tobacco. Lena stayed with them, entertaining Noah and Solveig while Olaf and Tove sat at the kitchen table over mugs of coffee until all
hours of the night. Once in a while Noah would sneak into the kitchen before bedtime and climb up onto his mother’s lap, sitting there in silence with them.

The day before Christmas that winter they all piled into the truck and drove up to Lake Forsone. Olaf’s silence had become monumental by then, and except for the mornings and afternoons on the ski jump when he’d holler his coaching commands, the only thing that could crack his silence was the whiskey he’d begun drinking after dinner. By the end of the week, he was drinking it from a wineskin out by the jump, too. Noah mistook the garrulousness the whiskey inspired for happiness, and the ruse of his childhood was on.

When the family got back to the house on High Street after New Year’s and Lena went back home to Minneapolis, the cups of coffee shared between his parents over the kitchen table were replaced—on his father’s side of the table—by Tupperware tumblers of Old Crow over ice. Not long after New Year’s his mother quit joining Olaf in the kitchen, and the sound of her voice quietly imploring Olaf to pull it together was replaced by the sound of shuffling cards. Olaf played solitaire all night every night until early March, when he shipped out on the Magni, still First Mate.

Sitting in his father’s house now, all of the old memories suddenly seemed urgent. It was as if they were some sort of verification, as if that morning thirty-however-many-years ago was the reason he was here now, as if without that morning and the events that precipitated it, there would be no reason to be here at all, at least not under the same circumstances, with the same ambivalence coursing through his thoughts.
Whenever Noah and Natalie talked about how they’d someday raise their own children, Noah would recall for her the years after the wreck when his father’s affection evolved first into complacency, then neglect, then something like spite. He labeled it the sure-fire-way-to-fuck-up-your-kid, and assured Nat—not that she needed assurance—that he’d employ an altogether different method, what he called the anti-Olaf parental program, a plan that included plenty of doting, tenderness and unequivocal emotional sustenance.

Sometimes their conversations were enthusiastic and hopeful, sometimes grim and barren, but no matter how they came out, one thing never changed: the conversations always came around to the bitter memory of Noah’s old man.

Nat reminded him that his father had endured something pretty terrible, and suggested that maybe there was room somewhere in his memory for forgiveness.

‘It’s not a question of forgiveness,’ Noah insisted on more than one occasion. ‘You can’t forgive something that big. It’s a question of erasure. The only way to get over it is to forget it, believe me.’

‘Well, for someone who’s working so hard at forgetting,’ she’d say, ‘you sure have a long memory. I swear, sometimes I wonder if you want to have a child simply so you can raise him differently than your father raised you.’

He’d wondered how true her words were. Despite his memory of the years after the wreck, he could recall even more clearly the years before it, could recall the
unfettered, overwhelming love he had felt for his father before everything went to shit.

Standing over the kitchen counter in his father’s house now, pouring a fresh kettle of boiling water through the coffee filter, the bitterness stung more than ever, if only because the old resentments were multiplying by leaps and bounds because of things as simple and complicated as flashlights, outhouses, and un-interred ashes. Too bad, too, because for once the cabin wasn’t twenty degrees too warm, and it felt good to breathe in the smells of coffee and dying fire without choking on the air.

Noah was hungry but didn’t have the gumption to wring breakfast out of the under-stocked kitchen, so he dressed, refilled his coffee, and went out to his car intent on heading back into Misquah for pancakes and eggs at The Landing.

As he got into the car and started it up he had a prick of conscience, thinking that rather than heading into town he ought to be finding his father, making sure nothing was wrong, that he hadn’t fallen off the dock and drowned in the icy water or tripped on his way to the gulch and broken a hip. But appetite trumped guilt, and he helped justify his leaving by reminding himself he needed to call Nat anyway.

As he started up the road, though, the front wheels tracked into different rain ruts and the car bottomed out. He rolled it backwards, restarted it, and tried again. This time it didn’t stall, but he couldn’t get traction to climb the hill. He turned the car off, got out, and stared ahead at the road. In a moment his father walked from the woods.

‘Where have you been?’ Noah asked.

Olaf threw his thumb in the direction of the outhouse.
Noah looked at his watch. ‘For an hour?’

‘I was working in the shed before that.’

Just hearing mention of the shed—of his mother’s temporary tomb—made Noah bristle.

‘Where are you headed?’ Olaf said, kicking the bumper of the Grand-Am.

‘Nowhere, I guess. I can’t get the car up the road.’

‘I oughta get that thing graded,’ Olaf admitted, then cleared his throat and spit.

‘I can tow you up the hill with the truck, or you can borrow it. Either way, we ought to get that car up the hill. That road’s gonna get worse before it gets better.’

‘Let’s tow it.’

Olaf nodded, lumbered across the yard to the shed, and stepped inside. When he came out he had a towrope, and he tied a loop in one end of it as he walked back to the car.

‘You get this onto the front of your car,’ he said, handing Noah the towrope.

‘I’ll get the keys to the truck.’

Noah took the rope and squatted, looking for the best place to attach it. He started to lash it to the bumper but he couldn’t make a sufficient knot. As he twisted the rope over and over, Olaf reappeared. ‘You’re making a hell of a mess with that thing,’ he said. ‘Give it here.’

Noah stood up, untangled the rope, and handed it to his father. Olaf knelt, unfastened the rope from the bumper, and put it through a hitch on the underbody instead. He tied an expert knot, checked the rope, and struggled back to his feet.
‘Simple half hitch,’ Olaf said. ‘You see how I did that? And you gotta attach the rope to the hitch under there, take a look. You put it on the bumper and it’ll rip the damn thing right off.’

Noah squatted to have a look while Olaf pulled his truck around the front of the car. He attached the looped end of the rope to a trailer hitch on the old Suburban and told Noah to get in his car. ‘Steer it around those ruts if you can, and stay on the edge of the road. When we get to the top of the hill, be careful not to ram the back of my truck.’

‘Should I leave my car off or turn it on?’

Olaf looked at him sideways. ‘Turn it on, of course. How the hell else you gonna steer the damn thing? Just put it in neutral and follow along.’

The truck had no trouble maneuvering up the road or pulling Noah’s car. At the top of the hill they stopped, and Olaf got out and unhooked the rope.

Noah rolled down his window. ‘I have to call Nat. She’s having a shitty time of it right now. I told her I’d call her today.’

‘Nothing serious, I hope.’

‘It’s complicated. She’s ovulating and wishes I was there.’

‘Ovulating?’

‘Like now would be the time she could get pregnant.’

‘So what’s the problem?’

‘I’m here, she’s in Boston.’

‘Go on home then, take care of the little lady.’

‘It’s not quite so simple. There’re extenuating circumstances.’
Olaf combed his beard with his hand. ‘Is it money? You need me to lend you the fare?’

‘Of course it’s not money,’ Noah said, turning off the car’s engine and stepping out of it. ‘It’s you. You’re sick, this is why I’m here. And I just got here, too. There’s more to be done than sawing trees. We’ve got to figure out what you’re going to do.’

Olaf spit again. ‘I don’t know what you’re saying, but I don’t need a babysitter for fucksakes. I was doing fine before you got here.’

‘Actually, you weren’t doing fine, Dad. You shit your pants, remember? I’ve been watching you trip around this place, dragging your feet, stumbling over the rug, wincing in pain every fourth step.’

Olaf waved both his hands at Noah. ‘That’s horseshit.’

‘No, it’s not.’

Olaf leaned on the hood of the car and stared into the woods. ‘I can manage a couple days alone. You go back to Boston, do your business, then come back and help me get the place ready for winter.’

Goddamnit, Noah thought, then said, ‘Don’t worry about Natalie and me, okay? I’ll take care of it, she understands Or she will.’ He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. ‘Listen, I have no idea what to do. I’m going to go call her. I’ll be back in an hour or two, we can talk then. But we have to do something. You can’t just stay shacked up in the woods out here and I can’t stick around forever.’

‘We’ll see,’ Olaf said, patting the hood of Noah’s car.

‘You need anything in town?’
‘Actually, I need a length of chain from the hardware store, about twenty feet’s worth. The hardware store is north on 61, about a half mile beyond The Landing.’

‘Chain?’

‘Something coated with polyurethane, medium heavy-duty. Twenty feet of it.’

‘Okay.’ Noah got back in the car and headed towards Misquah.

Inside the Landing a piece of classical music droned beneath the tinkling of coffee spoons and the rustling of newspapers. All four café tables were occupied and a couple was already waiting for the next table. When Noah asked the woman behind the cash register how long it would be for a table she told him not long, and offered to get him a cup of coffee while he waited.

‘Thanks,’ he said, ‘but I’ll hold off until I sit down. I’m going to make a phone call.’

‘Use this,’ she said, handing him a cordless from under the counter. ‘It’s too cold to be standing outside.’

‘It’s a long distance call.’

‘So don’t tell the boss,’ she said.

‘Who’s the boss?’

She winked. ‘I am.’

Nat answered on the first ring. ‘Are you taking my calls?’ Noah said.

‘Apparently,’ she said, her voice not unkind.

‘How are you?’
‘Officially about to ovulate.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘The doctor gave me an injection to take tonight—the Ovadril—and said to plan on coming back on Saturday for an insemination. He said it’s never looked better.’

‘I don’t know what I’m supposed to say, Nat.’

‘You know exactly what you’re supposed to say. I checked flights from Duluth and there’s no shortage of options. Six flights a day connect in Minneapolis. You could leave and come back on the same day if you had to.’

‘If you could see my father you might not be so adamant.’

‘I haven’t seen your father since our wedding, I doubt it would change how I feel if I saw him now.’

‘That sounds cruel.’

‘It’s desperation, not cruelty.’ She took a deep breath. ‘I know I’m being selfish, Noah, I hate myself for it. But I also know that we don’t have many chances left. At least that I don’t have much stamina left.’

He could hear the commotion of her office in the background, then heard it go silent as her office door closed.

‘Listen to this,’ she said. ‘Trips to the doctor’s office for fertility or pregnancy related visits: Fifty-two. Number of prescriptions filled for fertility or pregnancy related drugs: sixteen. Number of injections administered by you or me: more than a hundred, maybe two hundred. I lost count figuring it exactly. Number of full days, or their equivalent, missed at work for fertility or pregnancy-related appointments: at
least a dozen. Number of opportunities for us to make love that were lost by way of some fertility or pregnancy-related ramification: who knows? Too many no matter how you add it up. Number of times you’ve had to jerk off over some sticky Playboy in a doctor’s office: five. Number of miscarriages: three. Number of ectopic pregnancies: one. Number of hours spent in paralysis, bawling my pathetic eyes out: countless. Number of dead fetuses: five. Amount of resolve I have left: almost none.’

‘That’s a new perspective.’

‘Noah, I need you to come home. If it doesn’t work this time, I can’t do it again. I’m at the end of my rope.’

‘Where did you get all those statistics?’

‘It’s all written down in my calendar.’

Noah clenched his eyes shut, smelled bacon wafting from the kitchen, and pictured his father laboring up the hill from the lake, the stringer of trout hanging from his hand.

‘Noah, I have a scar on my arm from where they’ve drawn blood the last three years. I have permanent bruises on my thigh from the injections. I’ve never asked you for anything, not like this, but I am now.’

‘Natalie, my father is dying. He lives alone in the woods. You have to drive eight miles just to use the nearest phone. What am I supposed to do about him?’

‘Bring him with. Drive him to your sister’s and leave him there. Handcuff him and bring him to the hospital. I don’t know, but figure something out.’

‘That’s reasonable.’

‘You think any of this is reasonable?’
Noah tucked his mouth into his shoulder and clenched his teeth while he talked. ‘Of course it’s not reasonable. Of course it’s a mess. I don’t know what you want me to say. Goddamnit Natalie, think about the position I’m in. Waiting until next month isn’t the end of the world, even though it seems like it—’

‘*Please* change your mind, Noah. Tell your father what’s going on and come home. None of the flights are close to full. They leave as early as seven thirty in the morning or as late as eight at night.’

Two of the tables cleared. The woman who offered Noah the phone signaled to him that he could have one of the tables, held up the coffee pot as if to ask if he wanted any. Noah nodded.

‘Listen, Nat—’

‘Noah,’ she interrupted. ‘I’m so unhappy. I don’t mean to make you feel guilty. I don’t mean to make this worse for you. I’m sorry about your father, I truly am. But I also want you to come home. I have a feeling about it this time.’

‘I have no idea what to do, Nat. I feel like you’ve got me by the balls and my father has me by the ear. I feel like I’m being drawn and quartered. I need to talk to him. I need to see if he’d be willing to come with me, or if he’d be okay for a day alone.’ He took an audible breath. ‘Listen, sweetie, you know it’s not that I’m not crazy for this to happen, I just don’t know where my duty lies. I don’t know what to say.’

‘Say you’ll come home.’

‘I won’t say I won’t.’

‘What about the Ovadril, should I take it?’
‘Will anything happen if you do and we don’t inseminate? Are there any potential complications?’

‘None but the possibility that we’ll never have a child together if I don’t.’

‘Take it, Nat.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I’m not making any promises.’

‘Please, Noah.’ She hung up the phone.

After eggs Benedict—instead of ham they used Lake Superior salmon—and tomato juice, Noah still didn’t know what to do. Before he paid, he loaded several baskets with groceries and supplies. He bought kitchen matches and lantern mantels. He bought coffee and hot dogs, oatmeal, roasted peanuts and bread. He asked for ibuprofen, antacid, Chap Stick and gold bond from behind the counter. He said he wanted two Hudson Bay blankets. He stocked up on batteries and candles and toothpaste.

When he was done, and after the cashier had bagged it all for him, she said, ‘Getting ready for a nuclear winter?’

‘Minnesota winter,’ Noah said. ‘Thanks for breakfast, it was spectacular.’

‘Come back any time, we’re open every day of the year.’

‘I’ll probably be back tomorrow,’ Noah said, leaving the store with the provisions.
There was an agate and smoked fish shop on the northern edge of town. An odd combination, Noah thought as he pulled into the driveway. He parked the car near the highway so he could see the curve of the road as it disappeared into the woods in the rearview mirror. He sat there for a minute thinking about Nat, watching the reflection in the mirror. He could imagine her now, busying herself at work, willing him to come home.

When he pulled the door of the agate and smoked fish shop open, a synthesized loon call startled him from above the door. On the left, a refrigerated deli case—an antique thing that hummed and clinked and dripped—was filled with smoked fish. There were sockeye salmon, lake and rainbow trout, whitefish and smelt, all whole, all golden, desiccated and eyeless. On the right, another glass case full of agate jewelry sat under canned lights. A counter spanned the two cases, and an antique cash register sat in the middle of it.

‘How-dy,’ a man said from behind the fish counter. Thin and long fingered, he offered his hand. The two sides of his gray goatee were unevenly trimmed. ‘Rocks or fish?’ he said as Noah shook his hand.

‘Agates,’ Noah said. ‘I’m looking for something for my wife.’

‘Normally it’s my own wife who handles the rocks, but she’s visiting our daughter out in Portland.’ He wiped his hands on a dirty apron as he circled behind the counter to the agate case. ‘I can help you, though. What’re you looking for? A nice necklace? Maybe a bracelet?’
The only piece of jewelry he'd ever bought Natalie was the half-carat diamond ring he gave her when he proposed, a fact that compounded the strangeness of being in the shop in the first place. 'A necklace maybe. Something simple, not too gaudy.'

'What color eyes has she got?'

'Green-gray.'

'You like the green or the gray better?'

'The green I guess.'

'Then you want a green agate.' He fumbled with the latch on the case. There were hundreds of pieces of agate jewelry on display, arranged without any regard for appearances. Gold and silver chained bracelets and necklaces lay heaped and tangled together, earrings and rings were dumped in ceramic bowls. There was even a tiara on a Styrofoam bust.

The first couple necklaces he pulled out of the case had agates the size of ping-pong balls attached to thick gold chains. Noah winced and asked if he had anything with a smaller agate, something on a silver chain perhaps. As he said it the absurdity of buying her an agate hit him. Just as he thought it, though, the man behind the counter pulled out a pearl-sized, emerald green agate attached to a very thin, very pretty silver chain. 'This one's actually a real Superior agate,' he said, putting on a pair of glasses and reading from the little tag. 'An Agate Beach agate. Not all of 'em are.' He winked.

'How much is it?'

He looked at the tag again. 'It says thirty-five, but we can make a deal.'
'Can you mail it?'

'If we couldn't mail things we'd be out of business. Every day I send a hundred pounds of fish to you folks down in the Cities. Hell, we know the UPS driver like he's our own son.' He smiled. 'We'll leave the price alone and ship it for free, how does that grab you?'

'That's fair enough.'

Noah picked a postcard with a picture of a white-specked doe in tall summer grass off a rack and scribbled a message to Nat. *It was either this or smoked salmon. I love you.* 'Put this in with the necklace, okay?' Noah said.
It wasn’t until Noah got back to the house that he remembered the chain, and he wouldn’t have remembered it then if not for the padlock on the shed. The shake shingles and cedar siding that had been so inconspicuous at first—sitting under the overgrown trees, among the overgrown grass and bunchberry bushes—had taken on a new significance with the knowledge that the shack was doubling as his mother’s tomb.

The smoke coughing from the tin chimney on the house smelled wintry. It was a good smell, clean and faint. As it rose and dispersed into the flurries, Noah forgot about his mother’s ashes and felt an urge to hunker down, to make a pot of coffee, stoke the fire in the stove, and pick a big book—a book of myths or the biography of a king—to spend his afternoon with. The thought of bundling up and heading back to the gulch to finish with the oak seemed not only arduous, but a waste of time, too. There was no way his father would live to burn a tenth of the wood that was already split and stacked around the house.

Noah dropped the cache of groceries and winter essentials on the counter. Olaf sat in the armchair with the afghan bunched behind his shoulders, reading a magazine. The lamp shining over his shoulder—an old lamp Noah recognized from the house on High Street—lit only a corner of the room. His father didn’t stir, and the
look of concentration on his wrinkled, white face convinced Noah—for a minute anyway—that despite the moans and limps and spasms of pain, there was still a little life left in the old man.

Noah kicked off his boots, set them on a braided rug beside the door, and went to the stove for the coffee pot.

‘There’s not much left,’ Olaf said, setting the magazine on his lap. ‘I can make some more.’

‘Don’t get up.’

Noah grabbed the kettle from the stove, filled it with water, and set it back on to boil. The fire was searing, he could tell, not only from the heat pouring out of the stove, but from the faint whine and pinging of its cast iron flanks.

‘Have any trouble with the truck?’

‘No. But I forgot the chain.’

‘Fucksakes, how could you forget the chain?’

‘It’s not a criminal offense, Dad. It just slipped my mind.’

‘One simple job.’

Noah felt his shoulders tighten as a bead of sweat slid down the small of his back. ‘You know, there’s nothing simple about me being here at all. I’m sorry I forgot the chain, and I’ll go back into town and get it if it’s urgent, but you don’t have to go haywire. Natalie gave me some bad news and it slipped my mind.’

Olaf dismissed Noah’s explanation with a feeble wave of his arms and a snort.

‘She giving you hell about the baby business?’

‘She’s got a lot on her mind.’
‘Women usually do.’

‘You want me to run back into town for the chain?’

‘Forget about the chain.’

Noah started putting the supplies on the kitchen shelves. ‘What’s that you’re reading?’ Noah asked.

‘Magazine article Luke gave me. It’s about shipwreck property. Can’t make the first goddamn bit of sense of it.’

‘You thinking about diving for the booty left on the _Rag_?’

Olaf declared flatly: ‘Rest assured of this, nobody’s ever salvaging the _Rag_. She’s too deep.’

‘You know, I always wanted to hear the story from you. About the _Rag_ I mean.’

Olaf looked down into his coffee. ‘I wouldn’t know how to tell the story. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.’

‘Start in Two Harbors.’

‘It’s a long story, Noah.’

‘And we’re sitting in the middle of the woods. It’s snowing. We’ve got nowhere to go.’

‘It was a long time ago.’

‘It was snowing then, too,’ Noah coaxed.

Olaf took a deep breath. ‘We took twelve tons of taconite,’ he began. ‘It was our last run of the year. We were going to spend the rest of the season moving coal on the lower lakes. It was the First Mate’s job to oversee loading, but you knew that.’
Noah nodded.

‘Well, it snowed like a son-of-a-bitch and before we could start with the hatch covers we had to shovel her clear. We got started but before even one of ‘em was clear, Jan called us off.’

‘It was the fuel line, right?’ Noah asked, knowing perfectly well that it was.

‘On the trip up, we noticed a leak. It wasn’t too bad at a glance, and we managed to get from Toledo to Two Harbors without any trouble, but after we unloaded the coal and were refueling, the bilge started to fill with diesel. That’s when Jan got jittery.

‘I remember thinking it was strange that the bossheads let us get away with a repair like that so late in the season. I mean, they never gave two shits about maintenance during the season generally, let alone so near to laying up. I wasn’t ever a spook, but something in the back of my mind got a little itchy then.’ He paused, scratching the back of his head. ‘I chalked it up to the engine being new, and the brass just not knowing how reckless they could be. But I was still uneasy about it.

‘Twenty-two hours we sat there while a contractor put a new line in.’

‘What did everyone do? The crew I mean.’

‘We gave ‘em fourteen hours leave and watched ‘em all hump into Two Harbors.’

‘I bet they did their best to hump once they got there, too.’

Olaf smiled. ‘They usually did.’

‘In Two Harbors, though?’
'You’d be surprised.' Olaf smiled again, shook his head, and then turned more serious. 'Some of those boys lived up there. Bjorn was one of ‘em. He had a baby girl and a sweet little wife. I’ll tell you what, he was off that goddamn boat in five minutes.

'The boys who didn’t live there got pissed in the bars up on Willow Street. I’d venture to guess that more than one or two of those fellas had a pretty good time that night.' Olaf smiled again, as if to admit that despite his age, the memories of those little Great Lake ports, the rundown pubs that filled them, and the sailor-loving girls who knew the ship schedules like their multiplication tables hadn’t escaped him even now.

'The next morning, when they come back aboard, it was like watching a zombie parade. I remember the days before I met your mother, before I became an officer, too, and the shit we used to get ourselves into,’ he smiled again. 'Those boys knew how to dig it up too. They were all red-eyed and pale, sweating in spite of the weather. Goddamn.

'The boys who lived up there, though, they all looked happy as clams. Walking lightly, you know,’ he winked. ‘But not Bjorn. I didn’t know him well, but he looked like two different people at once. You could see he was happy—must have been thinking of his little girl and wife—but he also looked resentful as hell, probably about shipping out again. He was one of those guys who got tricked into his life on the boats. He was just dumb enough not to be able to do something else and just smart enough to hate what he did. There were a lot of guys like that on the lakes.'
Noah scanned his memory for the men he knew from his father’s trade. Having had it put so simply he could recognize the split in many of them. Some of the men, like Luke, stood out. They were single-minded types, gruff and bigger-than-life. But the majority of men he remembered—men from his childhood cruises on the boats with his father and from his time slumming down in Canal Park with his high school buddies—were just schmucks, working-class guys trying to beat a buck or two out of the industry.

‘I’ll bet you put them right to work,’ Noah said.

‘Of course. We had to get the deck cleared and we only had a short window of time to do it.’

‘Because of the weather?’

‘One front had already passed—the one that left a foot and a half of snow on our deck—and another one was coming, a nor’easter. We knew the seas would be rough and that it’d be cold as hell, so we wanted to get loaded and in front of the weather. It was no fun to be out there latching the hatches when it got below zero.’

‘Didn’t the forecast warrant sitting tight for a few hours?’ Noah asked.

‘We could see it coming, we could feel it too, but we never would’ve backed down on the basis of the weather reports we were getting.’

‘Were they wrong?’

‘Not wrong,’ Olaf said. ‘When the wind turned around and the flurries started out of the northeast, we all got that sinking feeling, and when the lake started crashing over the breakwater and the harbor water got choppy, we knew it was going to be a mean day, but it would’ve taken more than we saw to keep us in port.'
'Anyway, we knew we could hug the lee of the Minnesota shore if we had to. There were also three ships ahead of us, a French freighter full of lumber…'

'The Lachete,' Noah said.

Olaf looked at Noah sideways. 'Yeah, the Lachete. There was also one of our boats out there, the Heldig and one of the boats from the Cleveland Cliffs fleet.' He tapped his bushy lip, thinking.

'The Prudence,' Noah said.

'Was it you there or me?' he asked.

Noah grinned.

'All three of those ships were updating us on the weather.'

'And each of them were talking about taking shelter from the time they debarked. What did they tell you that made you think getting started was a good idea?'

'It didn’t matter what they told us. We were going to go or not go on the basis of Jan’s gut, not on what some goddamn Frenchman had to say about the wind.'

'What about the Heldig? Didn’t you have any confidence in her?'

'You see, it was never a question of the confidence we had in the reports the other boats were making. They were instruments, that’s it. It was always just a simple question: Did we feel like the Rag could handle what the lake was giving? If the answer was no for the Heldig or the Prudence or any of the other boats out on the lakes, it didn’t necessarily mean it was no for us.' There was no vanity, no posturing, in what his father said. Noah knew this as simply as he knew the story itself.

Olaf gazed over his shoulder at the stove.
‘Don’t tell me you’re cold.’

‘No, no,’ Olaf said looking up at him. ‘I was just thinking about how it felt to be on that ship,’ he said. ‘Standing on the bridge, even in the worst weather, it was easy to stick your chest out—to puff it up—because we knew that no matter what was in front of us the Rag was behind us.

‘She was six hundred and ten feet long. Sixty-two feet abeam. The hull alone—hull number 768—weighed five thousand tons. Loaded as she was, there were more than eighteen thousand tons—eighteen thousand tons—of steel lugging it up that lake under two thousand horsepower,’ Olaf said, raising an eyebrow. ‘The bridge was forty feet above the surface of the lake and still we had to keep the wipers going in order to see out the damn window. Despite all this we were making better than seven knots. Under normal conditions and with a normal load we would’ve made twelve knots, thirteen on a good day. But seven was a hell of a pull all things considered.’

‘Seven knots makes for a long day up Superior,’ Noah said.

‘Better than sixteen hours to Rock of Ages light.’

‘As opposed to?’

‘Ah, nine or ten,’ Olaf said with a wave of the hand. ‘The point is she wasn’t normal.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean she shouldn’t have been making that time. The other ships were thirty or forty miles ahead of us and they weren’t making a third of the time we were.’
Again he shook his head. ‘But that’s just how the *Rag* was—above the weather, above the seas, those things just didn’t bother her, they didn’t stop her.’

‘Why?’

Without a touch of irony Olaf said, ‘She was a goddess, I guess. ‘I remember storms she weathered that would’ve sunk other ships in a second. On Erie we sailed through the worst lightning storm I ever saw. Took two bolts right on deck. Lost one coaming thirty miles from safe harbor. The pumps were working that night.

‘Another time we hit a real son-of-a-bitch coming out of Whitefish Bay, heading up to Marquette. When we got to the Soo they were all set to close her down until it blew over, but when they saw we were next in line to pass, they let us up. Eight or ten boats had to wait out a twelve-hour blow in the St. Mary’s River while we chugged out onto the Lake. Now *that* was a storm we might’ve sat out.

‘I remember eating dinner that night. We had pork chops and applesauce—that’s it. Nothing that had to be cooked on the stovetop because we were rolling too goddamn much. The guy that did the baking was named Ed Butterfield—we called him Butter—used to put together this delicious rye bread. When the weather got rough, we’d soak thick slices of it in water and then stick them under our plates to keep ‘em from sliding around. It was an old trick. The next morning, when things calmed down a bit, I remember watching the porters hacking it off with spatulas and butcher knives.’

‘Did you ever wait the weather out?’
'Sure we did, just not nearly as often as other boats. Once or twice every couple of years we’d sit one out, but it took some kind of hell for that.'

'Should you have sat it out the night she wrecked?'

Olaf guffawed. 'The winds were supposed to shift more to the east. If they had, we knew we wouldn’t want to face the middle of the lake. But we also knew we wouldn’t have to, see? We knew that if push came to shove we could take shelter in the lee of Isle Royale,' he was snaking his arm—as if it were the ship—into the imaginary estuary between the Canadian shore and the long finger of Isle Royale. 'It was an uncommon maneuver but one we’d used before. And even if the wind shifted sooner rather than later, we knew—based on our own precedent—that we could muscle our way to safety.

'By the time we passed Rock of Ages light we’d been at it with that goddamn lake for almost seventeen hours. It was two o’clock in the afternoon and snowing so hard we couldn’t see the railing around the pilothouse deck.

'And Jan hated to be blind,' Olaf continued. 'I mean, we knew exactly where we were and where we were heading, but when you can’t see your hand in front of your face and you’re putting up with the hell we were, you have a tendency to get a little hot. At least Jan did.

'He had a guy at every position every minute of that cruise – a man at the wheel, a man at the radar, a man at the compass, a man on the charts – it was like watching an orchestra. Jan would say, my heading? and the Watchman at the gyrocompass would say, four five, sir, and Jan would say, speed? and a voice would say, eight knots steady, sir and Jan would boom again, is it clear and the Wheelsman
at the radar would say, *clear, sir,* and Jan, *position* and the Wheelsman at the chart, *Captain, we are at such and such latitude and longitude, sir,* and Jan, *How much water have I got between me and that goddamn island?* and the Wheelsman at the radar would say, *sir, Isle Royale six point zero seven nautical miles bearing one hundred and forty-one degrees,* and the Wheelsman at the chart would settle it all, *six point zero nautical miles to shoal water, sir.* Olaf had related the whole pilothouse episode as if he were a conductor himself, raising and wagging his fingers.

Noah, his heart actually beating a little faster, was sitting on the edge of the sofa. ‘And the water is coming over your deck and it’s snowing like the end of the world...’

‘And in the middle of it all, roaming from the charts to the compass to the wheel, Jan would take each piece of information and plug it into his internal calculator and come up with some goddamn equation the sum of which dictated every move he made. And despite his aggravation at being blind, despite that goddamn lake and the wind like a hurricane, he still managed it all without a hitch. I don’t think he ever even spilled any of his coffee.’

Noah stood up and stretched his arms above his head. He felt boyish, nearly giddy in the thrall of the story. ‘What about the rest of the crew?’

This question seemed to sober Olaf. ‘The Crew? They were just a bunch of anybodies. With the exception of guys like Jan and Luke they were just men and boys.’

For the first time since Noah arrived at his father’s house, he recalled the picture in the museum, the one of the whole crew dockside with the *Rag* in the
background. Although he could not summon a single face clearly, he could recall the apathy he felt looking at them. He remembered chalking it up to some kind of ambivalence towards his father, but in retrospect it was an ambivalence borne by the unconscious knowledge that what his father just said was—and always had been—the truth. Twice already he’d alluded to the commonness of the crew, and twice now Noah had paused at the realization of this deflating fact: They weren’t gods and giants sunk on that ship, they were men and boys.

‘That takes some of the starch out of the story, don’t you think?’ Noah asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Isn’t it more fantastic to think of the guys that died as a little bit heroic, as swashbuckling sailors? As gods and giants? As something more than a bunch of yokels from Great Lake port towns?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Olaf said, pausing to consider it seriously. ‘It’s real life. In real life there aren’t gods and giants, there’re boys from port towns.

‘There’s one picture of ‘em that I’ve never been able to get out of my mind,’ Olaf continued. ‘After we’d cleared the southwestern tip of the island, must’ve been around supper time, I went down into the crew’s quarters for a fresh thermos of coffee and something to eat. You remember that the top two decks on the bow of the Rag didn’t have any interior passageways, don’t you?’

Noah nodded.

‘Well, that walk usually took, what, twenty seconds? Two flights of stairs, maybe thirty steps altogether? There were eighteen hours of snow and ice coating
those stairs and that railing. You put that together with the wind and rolling of the boat and those two minutes were the hairiest of my life. Until then anyway.

‘The temperature couldn’t have been above zero and I was out there without my mittens, without a hat, gripping onto that goddamn railing for dear life. In twenty seconds my fingers were burning cold. I was slipping all over the place helter skelter. And I couldn’t see three feet in front of me. I remember sitting down for a second, wrapping my arms around the railing with my hands tucked up inside my coat, and hugging that goddamn thing like I was a child.

‘The sound of that storm,’ Olaf continued, shaking his head as he closed his eyes for a long moment, ‘It should have been my first warning. I could hear the lake washing over the deck. I could hear the wind roaring. And I sure as hell could feel that wind coming from every direction.’ He looked hard at Noah, his eyes colorless in the cabin light. ‘For maybe three seconds while I was sitting there, everything went quiet, though, and I could hear her bending.’

‘Bending?’ Noah said, sitting up and combing his sweat-damp hair back with both his hands.

‘I sat on that icy step for a couple of minutes. I don’t know what in the hell I was waiting for, but I couldn’t move. The ruckus was out of this world, howling and drumming all over the place. But then it just stopped, went quiet, and I heard it: a slow, high-pitched cry. I knew was the Rag under the weight of all that ice and water. It sounded human.’

Noah dropped back onto the couch. ‘Those boats don’t bend.’

‘Sure they do,’ Olaf countered. ‘Like skyscrapers give a little in the wind.’
‘What did you do?’

‘I finally got down into the crew’s quarters. And that’s when I saw them—this is what I was getting at—all bleary-eyed and miserable, sitting around the common table playing euchre. Those boys were so goddamn hung over, and when you put the weather and seas like we had on top of what they must have been feeling to begin with, well, they might as well have been dead already.

‘Tell you what, I never saw a card game on that ship without a pile of money in the middle of it. Hell, those boys found ways to gamble over solitaire, but not that night. They were just trying to keep their cards on the table.

‘There were thirty men on that boat, the lesser part of half of ‘em on the bow—wheelsmen, watchmen, deckhands, the mates—and the rest of ‘em in the stern—the engineers and oilers and firemen and wipers and the galley crew. The boys on the back had their berths in eight small cabins above the engine room in some goddamn cold and clammy quarters. Steel bunks with lumpy mattresses attached to the low overheads. Even the shortest guy back there couldn’t stand upright without knocking his head on something.

‘And noisy as hell, too. They had to sleep through the constant whining of that engine and the churning of the prop. None of ‘em could hear a goddamn thing. They had shit and grime under their fingernails all the time, and their trousers were always dirty at the knees. But for as filthy as they always seemed to be, that engine room was the cleanest place aboard that boat.

‘The chief back there was a guy named Danny Oppvaskkum—a great guy—who knew the physics and chemistry and engineering of that ship like he’d invented
and built it himself. Couldn’t tell which way the wind was blowing, but he could’ve taken that thing apart and put it back together with a screwdriver.’

‘How old was he?’ Noah asked.

‘Danny must’ve been about forty-five.’

‘Was it,’ Noah paused hoping a seconds delay might make the question seem more delicate, ‘you know, was it his fault?’

‘Oh Christ no. No, no. Danny was innocent in that mess. He probably gave each of those boys an extra hour of life with his thinking.’

‘There’s a picture of all of you in the maritime museum down in Duluth. Did you know that? You look like a football team in it.’

‘They might as well have been a football team, being as they were young and lean to a man.’

‘Did they have any idea, do you think?’

‘Any idea of what?’

‘Any idea they were about to die?’

Olaf thought about it. ‘The storm was bad, no doubt about it, but we were killing it. It was snowing like hell, and it was cold as hell, and there’s no doubt some of those boys wished they were dead, but none of us thought we were going to die. Not in our wildest, worst dreams.’ He’d rolled up the magazine and tapped his knee with it. After a second he concluded, ‘At least none of ‘em were thinking about it then.’
Noah got up for another cup of coffee. Outside it was still snowing, and the leafless trees were all tangled in a stiffening breeze. Inside it was still suffocating and the stove continued to ping.

'Should I make another pot of coffee?' Noah asked.

Olaf, whose hands were crossed over his lap, was thumb wrestling himself. He looked up. 'I’m coffeed out.' The few seconds of silence had clogged up his voice, and he had to clear his throat before he asked Noah how long it takes to brew a pot of coffee and make a couple turkey sandwiches.

'I don’t know,' Noah said.

'Think about it for a minute.'

'Five minutes?'

'It took me twenty minutes from the time I stepped into the little galley in the crew’s quarters to the time I had a fresh thermos of coffee and sandwiches for the boys on the bridge. The way that goddamn thing was rolling and pitching, I dropped a full jar of mayonnaise, beat the hell out of my knee on the corner of the icebox, nearly burned my left hand off making coffee. I was a goddamn fool for trying.'

'But a man’s got to eat. And he needs his coffee.'

'I guess so.'

'Was the walk back up to the bridge as scary as the walk down?' Noah asked.

'It was no stroll on deck,' Olaf said as he set his head back against the chair.

Noah, still in the kitchen, tried to place the story his father was telling in the context of what he already knew himself, or had at least read. None of the books that dealt with the wreck differed much in terms of what happened. Noah knew that his
father returned to the bridge to find a panicked Captain. He knew there were three methods of communicating with the engine room from the bridge and that none of them were working. He could picture the brass chadburn standing like a giant keyhole with a white face and black-handled lever that, when set to a certain position in the pilothouse, would signal the engine room to adjust some aspect of her speed or bearing. He knew that if the chadburn failed there was an onboard telephone line that connected the two ends of the ship. And he knew that if both of those failed, there was a system of bell messages that the bridge could send to the engine room. *Two whistles check?* He wondered. *Four whistles all right?*

In each of the histories written about the *Rag*, the authors told similar stories of the simultaneous failure of all three modes of communication. None of them knew, though, precisely why the engine room took so long to comply with the Captain’s orders. The reason they didn’t know was that the only man who had witnessed or been privy to the finer points of the communications snafu and lived to tell about it had never bothered to do so.

‘Why didn’t you ever set the record straight on why they weren’t answering Jan’s command? It makes the whole thing seem sort of fishy, doesn’t it?’ Noah asked.

‘Nothing fishy happened on that boat,’ Olaf said. ‘Not unless you consider twenty-seven men burning and drowning fishy.

‘The reason I never gave those goddamn reporters the details is because what happened out there was nobody’s business but ours. Selling newspapers on account of our bad luck seemed like horseshit to me. If people wanted to know what it was like to get out of something like that with your life, they should have signed up to ship out
at Superior Steel and taken the chance on finding out for themselves. It was between us and the lake. The big-bellied newspapermen weren’t interested in what happened, they were interested in making a circus out of us, in selling their goddamn advertisers an extra ad in a special section.’

‘Don’t you think there were plenty of people who just cared enough to know?’

Olaf dismissed him with a wave of the hand.

‘The Coast Guard and National Transportation Safety Board reports both said the same thing – that when you got back to the bridge Jan was upset because he couldn’t contact the engine room and he wanted to check down because you were about to round Isle Royale.’

‘How in the world do you know what the Coast Guard and NTSB reports say?’

‘It wasn’t just the newspapermen who wanted to know,’ Noah said.

Olaf cast a glance at Noah, one he interpreted as apologetic, even sheepish. ‘Jan’s agitation was as simple as that, yes,’ he said, steeling up his voice as best he could. ‘When I got back up to the bridge, he was trying to get them to check down. We were about to pass the northern end of Isle Royale and he wanted to be prepared to assess the seas.’

‘Were you in danger?’ Noah asked.

‘None that we knew of. It was Jan’s M.O. to be a little bit more cautious when he was blind—a good policy—but we weren’t in danger. At least not because of the weather, we weren’t going to run aground or founder under those seas.’

‘But not being able to get in touch with the engine room…’
‘That was cause for concern,’ Olaf said.

One of the things that had never added up for Noah was why—at only two minutes of trying to reach the engine room—Captain Vat had become so anxious. He remembered being on mid-summer cruises with his father when the Rag was still running on coal. He recalled his impression of the engine room after watching it in action for an hour or two. If not chaotic, it had certainly seemed perpetually hectic. All of the levers and gauges, the noise and motion, so many pipes steaming or dripping with condensation or whistling out of the blue, and so many guys, even on calm days, tending to the countless details, left him to believe that it was a miracle they had time to listen to orders of any sort. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what the commotion must have been like back there on the night she went down.

‘So what did Jan do?’

‘He nearly panicked, that’s what he did. When I got back up to the bridge he was sounding the bells for the third time. Three whistles,’ Olaf said, ‘it meant they were to check down. When they didn’t respond after the third try, he thought about sending a couple deckhands back to see what the hell was going on. In fact, he went so far as to summon them to the pilothouse.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ Olaf continued, ‘the look on the faces of those kids said as much as anything about the shape we were in. We’d been at it for years, right? Jan and myself and Joe? But these kids were just starting out, just finishing their first season. It was the first big blow any of ‘em had seen. When Jan told ‘em to put on their life vests, and they took turns looking out the window into that wildness, Jesus, you’d of thought he was sending them right to hell.’
‘But he didn’t send them, did he?’

‘Goddamn,’ Olaf said. ‘I sure as hell didn’t want him to. I thought it was a suicide mission.’

‘But you had to cross it.’

‘I did, later. But it was different when he asked me to go because I expected to. I was used to those responsibilities. These boys just wanted to go to bed. As it turned out, not sending them cost ‘em any chance they might have had.’ Here his voice trailed off again. Noah could practically see the cadre of crewmates passing through his father’s memory.

‘Anyway, Danny finally called, and Jan lit into him like I’d never seen. “Goddamnit, Oppvaskkum, I almost sent two boys across that deck. Do you have any idea how dangerous that would have been? Do you realize ignoring calls from the Captain—even in emergency situations, especially in emergency situations—is unacceptable if not outright insubordinate? We’re fighting a monster up here and you don’t have the time to heed my calls?” ’ Olaf was doing his best impression of a man with a much deeper voice than his own.

‘But he was trying to contain the leak. It wasn’t his fault,’ Noah said.

‘You’re right, it wasn’t his fault that the line was leaking, but I can’t imagine what kind of trouble they were in—or how fast that trouble must have found them—to justify not responding to the bridge. We’re talking about one of the cardinal rules here.’
‘So even if a guy’s up to his ankles in diesel in a place as combustible as that, it’s more important that he pick up the phone right away than figure out how to stop the leak?’

‘The point is that by not picking up the phone, he jeopardized the whole order of things. Because he didn’t pick up the phone, two guys were about to be sent out into that storm. Because he didn’t answer the phone, the guy in charge of the ship was paralyzed, see?’

The line of reasoning was so familiar to Noah that he almost laughed. How many times had his father used the same hierarchical theory to make Noah paint the garage or shovel the sidewalk in their old house on High Street? ‘Aren’t there exceptions to the cardinal rules?’ Noah asked.

‘I’ve never seen one,’ Olaf said. ‘And I’ve seen a lot.’

That was familiar too, his father slapping down the trump card of experience.

‘What did Danny finally say that made Jan send you across the deck?’

‘Danny knew right away how serious the problem was. As far as I could tell—and I never knew for certain—the main fuel line had ruptured near the tank, which was in the forward half of the engine room where the coalbunker had been the season before. The leak was serious enough that the entire engine room crew, including the porters and steward, were busy trying to clean it. It had to have happened so goddamn fast—gotten out of hand so goddamn fast—that there was no chance to even sound an alarm.

‘When Danny finally got around to calling the wheelhouse, there was no question about what kind of shape we were in. I only heard one side of the
conversation, but there wasn’t much doubt about our dire straits. Jan decided in an instant that we’d have to seek shelter, and his last words to Danny sent a hot chill up my back: “Double lash anything that could cause a spark, and keep a couple of those boys at the ready with fire extinguishers, we’re going to come about.”

‘Now, how’d you like to hear something like that from the boss’s mouth?’

‘It’d scare the shit out of me.’

‘Well it scared the shit out of me too. Jan and Joe and me got together in the chart room, we got our position figured out, and we decided to bring her around and head straight west for Thunder Bay, where the Lachete, Prudence and Heldig were already at anchor.

‘We had a little shelter from the worst of it, being as close as we were to the north shore, but it wasn’t like we could just tip our caps and wave goodbye to those seas. We were going to pay for it. The good news was that once we got around, the wind would have been behind us and getting to Thunder Bay would have come pretty easy. Besides, it was the only option we had.

‘Goddamn,’ Olaf almost whispered, ‘I remember like it was yesterday. He had the engine going slow astern while he waited for just the right lull—it seemed like days—and as soon as he felt it, he ordered engines full ahead and the rudder full left. Everyone in the wheelhouse swayed and lurched and grabbed for a railing or something to hold onto as she slid down one side of a trough and up another. She tilted bad for a second or two while a big swell washed over the length of the deck.

‘We took a couple more waves before we got on course, but we did manage to get turned around. We were looking at two and a half hours,’ Olaf mused. ‘Two and a
half, maybe three. That’s nothing. It’s the amount of time it takes to play a baseball
game or drive from Duluth to Misquah. It’s nothing.’

‘But it was too long,’ Noah said.

‘A half hour would have been too long,’ Olaf concluded, making to stand up.
He planted his slippers two feet apart, rested his elbows on his knees, lifted his head
from beneath his drooping shoulders, and straightened at the knees, still bent at the
waist. As he labored, a spasm of pain must have shot through his stomach because he
fell back into the chair.

Noah jumped from the sofa and found himself standing over the old man with
his hands out. His father’s face was frozen and gnarled in pain. ‘What can I do?’
Noah asked. ‘Can I help?’

Olaf took a couple deep, tremulous breaths and rolled his head back. ‘It’s cold
in here,’ he said. ‘I was going to put another log on the fire.’

Without a word, Noah opened the stove and put a heavy piece of wood in
among the embers.

‘I need a pillow for my back,’ Olaf said. ‘Could you get one?’

Noah went into the bedroom and grabbed one of the down pillows from his
father’s bed.

‘Here,’ he said as he helped his father forward, pushing the lumpy, uncovered
pillow down between the chair and his father’s lower back. ‘Do you want some
aspirin or Ibuprofen?’

‘Ibuprofen?’ Olaf wheezed.

‘It’s like aspirin. It relieves pain. I bought it at The Landing today.’
‘I don’t need anything.’ His voice was inching back to normal.

‘A glass of water?’

Olaf looked up at him. ‘Yeah, I could use a glass of water.’

Noah brought him the water. ‘Lift your head up,’ he said.

When Olaf did, Noah took the afghan from behind him. The old man’s head fell back and rested on the chair again, and the soft, white, wrinkleless flesh of his neck was exposed in the lamplight. Noah stopped and stared at his neck. He wanted to touch it, to feel it, to confirm that it was as delicate and velvety as it looked.

‘What?’ Olaf asked, rolling his eyes up to look at Noah.

‘Here,’ Noah said, handing him the glass of water and putting the afghan over his father’s lap. ‘What happened there?’

‘Just a cramp,’ Olaf said.

‘How often are you cramping?’

‘Not often,’ Olaf said. ‘Not often at all.’ Again he waved his hand. ‘Grab that book over there.’ He pointed at the bottom shelf of the chest-high bookcase next to the sofa.

‘Which book?’ Noah asked.

‘I forget what it’s called. The black one.’

Noah pulled a book from the shelf. ‘This?’

‘Let me see,’ Olaf said. He took the book and thumbed through to the back of it. ‘This is the one, it’s got transcripts of the radio contact between Jan and the Coast Guard and the other boats in the vicinity.’
'Dad, we don’t need to talk about this anymore. I mean, if you’re not feeling well maybe you should get some rest.’

‘I’m all right, it was just a cramp. Anyway, I’ve got enough coffee in me now that I might never sleep again.’

‘You don’t look very good,’ Noah insisted.

‘I haven’t looked good in years,’ he said as he handed the book back to Noah who opened it to the first transcript, a communiqué between the Ragnarök and the U.S. Coast Guard station in Grand Marais.

‘Read that,’ Olaf said.

Noah did:

22:15

Captain Vat: *Pan-pan, pan-pan, pan-pan. All stations, this is SS Ragnarök, SS Ragnarök, SS Ragnarök.* Our position is [pause] 48 degrees 10 minutes 7 seconds and 88 degrees 20 minutes 7 seconds. Repeat, 48° 10’ 7’’ and 88° 20’ 7’’. We are in heavy seas, wind gusts up to 78 knots, sustained winds 45 to 65 knots. Wave size variable to 20 feet. Report a major diesel leak in main fuel line. Repeat, major fuel leak in main line. Bearing 268° for Thunder Bay. Wish to alert any vessels in the area and U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards of our situation. Have a crew of thirty men; cargo twelve tons of taconite. *This is the SS Ragnarök, over.*

U.S. Coast Guard: SS Ragnarök, *this is U.S. Coast Guard station Grand Marais, change to channel 68, over.*

Captain Vat: *Roger.*

Coast Guard: SS Ragnarök, *do you copy?*
Captain Vat: *Roger, we copy.*

Coast Guard: **SS Ragnarok, do you require assistance?**

Captain Vat: *Negative. I only wanted to make you aware of our situation. The leak is bad, I've got a dozen men working on it, and the heavy seas aren't helping, but we should be okay. We're heading for Thunder Bay - speed of seven knots. Should be sheltered by zero thirty. Over.*

Coast Guard: *Roger, SS Ragnarok. We'll keep an eye on you.*

Captain Vat: *Roger that. [Pause] Are there any other vessels in the area?*

Coast Guard: *Negative, Ragnarok, you're alone.*

Captain Vat: *Roger. Out.*

Coast Guard: *Out.*

Noah saved his page in the book with his thumb. *'How far were you from Thunder Bay?'*

*'The last position I charted we were twenty-four nautical miles from the entrance to Thunder Bay. That's what, about twenty-eight miles?'

Noah opened the book and scanned the page. *'And how fast is seventy-eight knots?'

*'Seventy-eight knots?' Olaf closed his eyes to think. 'About ninety miles per hour.'*

*'That's like a hurricane.'*

*'It was blowing, no doubt about that.'*

Noah shook his head in disbelief. *'So you make the pan-pan. Then what?'
'Then Captain Vat made the decision that saved my life. In the chart room behind the wheelhouse, he ordered me and a crew to the stern in order to assist Danny. He told me to take three guys, one of whom he wanted at the phone the minute we got to the engine room. The rest of us were to help out any way we could.'

'Why'd he send you?' Noah asked.

'I was pretty good with mechanical things,' Olaf said. 'I guess he thought I could help.'

Noah paused, sure that the question he wanted to ask was the most delicate so far. He put himself in the position of being ordered across an icy deck with winds gusting to ninety miles per hour. He thought about Lake Superior exploding across the deck. He thought about getting to the engine room where thousands of gallons of diesel fuel were smeared across so many combustible engine parts. He thought of the nearly eight hundred feet of water that would have been beneath the keel of the ship. And he knew that he would have been terrified. 'Were you scared?'

Olaf looked up at the ceiling. 'I don't remember being scared, no. But I sure wasn't excited about what we had to do.'

'Why didn't you use the tunnels?' Noah asked.

'The Rag didn't have a tunnel.'

'But you could have just walked on top of the ballast tank.'

Olaf smiled. 'I forget how well you knew those boats. The Rag's ballast tanks didn't have square tops. They were slanted to meet the bulkhead without any straight angles.'
‘The object of the design,’ Olaf said, ‘was twofold. First, it was made to make cleaning the cargo hold easier. Without a straight ledge to sweep, we would save a half hour’s labor every time we changed cargos. That adds up over a season. It was also an engineering concept that allowed more of the ballast tank water—when the ballast tanks were full—to sit lower in the bulkhead, creating a lower center of gravity with less water. This way, it would take less time to pump the water out. The idea was a flash in the pan, and no other boats that I ever knew were built the same way.

‘It wouldn’t have mattered anyway. We got across the deck fine. It’s what we found when we got there that was the problem.

‘I stopped in my berth and changed into some dry clothes before I gathered the men to come with me. I stripped out of my damp pants and socks and shirt, and put on my union suit and dry pants, fresh socks and a turtleneck. I grabbed my pea jacket, my mittens, my watch and hat and when I was all bundled up, I topped myself off with the raincoat and the orange life preserver that had sat for years in the wooden basket above my desk.

‘For some stupid reason I checked the four porthole windows in my cabin,’ he said. There was surprise in his voice, like it was a memory that had only come back to him then, thirty-four years later. ‘I wonder why I did that.

‘Whatever the reason, it gave me the minute I needed to remember my watch. Your mother had given it to me the Christmas before. It was on a sterling chain in my desk. I kept it there for safety.
‘When your mother gave it to me she told me to keep it with me all the time, she told me it’d bring me luck. I decided that I wanted to have it with me when I died. In fact,’ Olaf said as he dug into his pocket. ‘Here it is.’ He handed it to Noah.

It was beautiful, a tarnished nickel silver pocket watch with an analemma on its face. The movement was visible behind a rear crystal and when Noah flipped it open he saw the name of the watch company engraved on the bezel. UTVIKLING URMAKER—KRISTIANIA 1920.

‘I’ve never seen this before,’ Noah said.

Olaf was settling stiffly back into the chair. ‘It needs to be polished,’ he said.

‘So you put the watch in your pocket?’ Noah asked.

‘I did.’

‘And then you went to get the other guys?’ he said, handing it back.

Olaf began fingering the clasp with one hand as he tried to remove some of the patina. ‘It’s a damn strange thing, isn’t it?’ he asked. ‘This flimsy little watch, this soft metal chain.’ He looked up at Noah. ‘And that big old boat. Steel made from the ore of her predecessors, steel they’d made army tanks from. Almost a million rivets, two football fields long, eight thousand tons. One of ‘em made it and the other one didn’t.’

Olaf worked the patina on the watch with his fingers, his jaw quivering in a now familiar way, and the look of concentration on his face had given way to drowsiness.

‘How did you pick the guys to cross the deck with you?’
‘I picked Red because he was the single strongest guy I ever knew,’ Olaf said as if the conversation had never abated. ‘Short bastard, built like a brick shithouse, with a red beard that hung to his chest and eyebrows the same color, bushy as a hedge. He had a cannon ball of a gut, rock solid and sticking out there like a pregnant woman’s. Huge shoulders,’ he hunched his shoulders up for effect, ‘but the smallest goddamn feet you ever saw. Like a bird.

‘And a goofball too. Always laughing and joking and playing pranks, good guy to have on your boat any time of year, but especially in the fall when everyone’s good and goddamn tired of each other.

‘During one of our lifesaving drills earlier that year, he hauled one of the lifeboats twenty yards up a Lake Ontario beach. Might not sound like much, but I could have picked any team of three other guys on that boat and together we wouldn’t have been able to do the same thing. Amazing. I’m sure I had that in mind when I told him to bundle up.’

‘Why Luke?’

‘Luke was the guy I trusted most on that boat. He was the only guy – aside from Jan – who I believed would do anything to save another guy’s life. You said something about heroes, well, Luke was as close as we got.

‘He was in his cabin and I poked my head in and said, “Luke, we’re going aft. We’ve got trouble,” and he was up and in his gear in thirty seconds. Keep in mind he was asleep in his skivvies at the time. Always willing to help, always had the best interest of the crew in mind.’ Olaf yawned, twitched his nose, and tried to cross his legs but couldn’t.
'And why Bjorn?'

'Bjorn was sitting closest to the door.'

Again the photograph in the maritime museum of the three men huddled on the beach came to mind. The distance between Bjorn's place at the card table and that otherworldly beach suddenly seemed like an impossible span. Noah wondered how much the picking of that particular group of men mattered. He wondered if Red had been a weakling, or if Luke had been less willing, or if Bjorn had been asleep in his bunk, whether things would have turned out differently.

Olaf interrupted Noah’s thought. ‘We were out on the deck within minutes. I instructed the boys to keep together and latched myself onto the lifeline. I went first, then Red, then Bjorn, and Luke was last. The lifeline was a taut, half inch steel cable that ran from the bow decking to the stern decking right down the middle of the boat. We each had a line attached to our waist that we clipped onto it.

‘Each of us had a flashlight. Red had a walkie-talkie. There were half a dozen lamps running down the edge of either side of the deck. On a clear night they lit the Rag up like a boulevard, but they barely cracked the darkness that night. And the spotlight Jan had shining down on us from the roof of the pilothouse was just a little glimmer in the dark. Might as well have been a star on a cloudy night for all the good it was doing.

‘The darkness wasn’t the terrible part, though. It was everything else. Even though we’d gotten the ship turned around, we were still taking some pretty heavy seas, and our big problem was the ice. The deck was covered with it, the lifeline was heavy with it, and in no time at all we were covered in it ourselves. And the wind –
Jesus Christ the wind – so strong at times that it’d just whip up behind us and send one of us sprawling face first onto the deck.

‘And the snow,’ he said finally and whistled.

‘And cold?’

‘So goddamn cold I felt like I was on fire,’ Olaf said. ‘On fucking fire.’

One of the few points of difference in the chronicles of that night was the moment at which the fire became the central fact of the catastrophe. Although Bjorn had told a reporter during an interview a few weeks after the wreck that they could smell the fire while they were crossing the deck—a detail that should have put the speculation to rest—some refused to believe that given the fact of what transpired this could have been true. They argued that it would have been impossible to smell the fire, seeing how the smoke would have been contained in the engine room alone. These same people argued that any fire would certainly have resulted in an immediate explosion that the men on the deck would have heard and felt despite the rough crossing. Noah doubted these speculations. Although it seemed fair enough to assume that they might have felt or heard the explosion, it didn’t seem out of the realm of possibility that they might not have, either. As for smelling the fire, Noah had little doubt that the stench could have escaped from any of a hundred crannies in the decking.

‘How soon did you know she was burning?’ Noah said.

‘Hard to say. We were probably better than halfway across the deck when it dawned on me that something smelled wrong. It was like burning hair is what it was, but there was so much other goddamn commotion that it must have been another
minute or two before it hit me. We’d crossed under the hatch crane and were probably only thirty or forty feet from reaching the decking when the stink took over.

‘All at once I knew what was happening, and no sooner had I put it all together than Red grabs me by the shoulder. I thought he was falling and using me for balance, so I didn’t turn around right away. But when he shook me again I turned and he was shining his flashlight on the walkie-talkie.

‘“Boss,” he said, hollering at the top of his goddamn lungs, “Boss, the Captain’s calling.”

‘There was so much static and interference from the noise in the background that I could barely hear what Jan was saying, but the long and short of it was that we were pretty well sunk.’ He looked off into the corner for a few seconds.

‘He told me that we had no steerage, that the engine room was incommunicado again. That’s what I gathered from the static anyway. But then his voice came clear: “The Rag is burning,” he said. It seemed absolutely impossible.’ He looked down and quit talking.

‘Jan must have already made the mayday, huh?’

Olaf lifted his eyes slowly. In the dim light Noah might have mistaken their glassiness for tears.

‘Hand me the book,’ Olaf said. ‘And grab my glasses off the counter.’

Noah did.

‘I don’t know exactly what time it was when Jan radioed us on the deck, but it had to have been some time around quarter of eleven. Everything was happening so fast.’ He had the open book under his nose in the lamplight and was scanning the
page with his long, thick finger. ‘He made the mayday at ten thirty-three. And I’m sure he made the mayday before he signaled us.’

‘You said something about all of the answers being in the mayday transcript,’ Noah said.

‘I said as much as we’ll ever know is in here.’ Olaf looked back down at the page for a second. ‘In the mayday,’ he said, closing the book but keeping it marked with his finger, ‘he gives them our position—which had hardly changed from the time of the pan-pan—and tells them there’s a fire in the engine room, that he’s lost contact with the stern, that he’s got four men en route to investigate, and that he’s lost his rudder.

‘We know the fuel line was leaking. We know that everyone on the stern was busy trying to contain the leak. We know that sometime between, say, ten twenty and ten thirty, the whole thing went up, and that within minutes the steerage was shot and Jan made the mayday. It’s safe to assume that there was some sort of explosion, because a fire alone wouldn’t have put the rudder out of commission so fast. It’s also safe to assume there was an explosion because we never saw any of those boys alive.

‘When we finally reached the stern, I sent Luke and Red down below to see what was going on while Bjorn and I went up to the boat deck to see about steering that son of a bitch.’

‘What do you mean steering it?’

‘At the very stern of the ship, behind the stack, up on the boat deck, there were two emergency wheels. Jan told us he’d lost the rudder, so up we went. I’ll tell
you what, there couldn’t have been a more wide-open spot for heaven to piss on us than the ass end of that ship.’

Noah was trying to piece it all together. ‘But you didn’t have a compass, you didn’t have a radar or the charts.’

‘We knew which way the wind was blowing, though. I figured if we kept it behind us, we’d be okay.’

Olaf pinched the bridge of his nose as he took off his glasses. ‘We were fighting it, you know? We had no idea what in the hell was going on but that we had to keep the boat pointed in the right direction.’ He was shaking his head and suddenly sounded as if he were pleading to a jury. ‘After a while—right before we ran aground—Red and Luke came up to the boat deck. Bear in mind, we’re still right in the middle of hell. It was cold and windy and we were soaked and coated with ice and standing up on that deck with targets on our chests, just waiting to get dead. We’ve got no idea what the hell is happening below us until Luke comes back up. In the middle of all that screaming wind he tells me we’re done, that the engine room and her crew are gone, that right below us all four decks are up in flames: The fantail deck, the windlass room, the cabins—everything—poof,’ he exploded his hands, ‘roaring away. He tells me they didn’t see anyone, that we’ve got no chance. Jesus Christ,’ he said under his breath.

‘And I’m thinking to myself, those goddamn boats sitting tight in Thunder Bay better damn well be on their way, and the Coast Guard better have a cutter and a few helicopters coming to search or we’re as good as dead.
‘My mind was all tangled up. I was sitting on a time bomb with all the water in the world exploding around me. It’s so goddamn dark and cold and my guys are telling me that right beneath our feet half the crew is cooked.’ He closed his eyes, looking. Noah thought, like he was trying to erase the picture from his mind. ‘I didn’t know what the hell to do so I grabbed Red by the arm and we went back down.

‘I told him to stay right with me, that we were going to slog it back into the engine room and see if there was anything we could do.’

‘But they’d just been down there. They said it was impossible.’

‘I had to see it for myself,’ I guess. As much as I trusted Luke, I knew that it would haunt me forever if I got off that boat without checking on those guys.

‘Jesus it was something. We entered by way of the galley, grabbed fire extinguishers and worked our way to the dining room and then towards the gangway that led into the crew’s quarters. But we had to stop, we couldn’t have gotten ten steps into those rooms without going up in flames ourselves.

‘The strange part was that nothing in particular seemed to be on fire. It was like the air was on fire, all of the air. We were getting tossed around of course, and each time I got thrown against the wall I could feel how goddamn hot it was. If I hadn’t been soaked through and halfway frozen, I probably would have come out of there with burns everywhere. Instead it was almost a relief if you can believe that.’

‘How long were you down there?’

‘Impossible to say, ten, maybe fifteen minutes I’d guess. Once our extinguishers went empty we had no choice but to get back up on deck with Luke and Bjorn.’
‘I can’t imagine.’

‘Why would you want to?’ Olaf asked. ‘Why in the world would anyone want to imagine that hell?’

Noah took the question as a cue and sat there silently for a few minutes trying to remember what he knew about the ships that had laid up in Thunder Bay—whether it was just two or all three of them that had responded—and whether it was a search plane or helicopters that the Grand Marais Coast Guard had dispatched when the wind weakened.

After a few minutes Olaf broke the silence again. ‘It had to be Canoe Rocks,’ he said.

‘What did?’

‘Where we ran aground. The death blow.’

Olaf labored to his feet again, this time staying bowed at the waist as he took a few steps across the living room towards a wall shelf that sat behind the dining table. It was cluttered with cast iron cookware and decorative Norwegian dishes, unused cookbooks and antique cans of mosquito repellent. From the top of the shelf he grabbed what looked to Noah like a poster that was rolled up and tied with blue and white string.

‘This is an old chart of Superior,’ Olaf said, as he tried to catch some of the dim light in order to read a curled up edge of it. ‘Right up your alley, come to think of it.’

‘Let’s have a look at that.’ Noah pushed the mugs and magazines and books on the coffee table to one end.
Olaf fiddled with the knot for a couple of seconds before he gave up and handed it to Noah, who fidgeted with it himself for a moment before biting through it and unrolling it on the coffee table. Olaf had grabbed a couple heavy books from the bookcase and set one at each end of the table to keep the chart from coiling back up.

It was an old Loran-C chart published by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that Noah recognized at a glance. It covered the north Superior shoreline from Grand Portage Bay, Minnesota, to Shesheeb Point, Ontario, and included the entire Isle Royale archipelago. People were always coming into his shop in Boston hoping that the folded and faded maps they found in their attics were priceless relics. More often than not, they were just like this one, worth nothing more than what it would cost to mail them.

Olaf had turned a couple lamps on and sat down knobby-kneed next to Noah on the sofa. ‘You see here?’ he asked dragging his nub pinky up the length of Isle Royale to its northeastern tip. ‘These are the Canoe Rocks. And this,’ he said dragging his thumb another couple of inches straight north, ‘is where we came about, where Jan made the mayday. The wind was coming from there,’ he said, stretching his arm towards the dark corner and then signaling the direction with his thumb by pulling it back towards them, ‘so you see, the rocks were the first things in our path.

‘We came about at ten fifteen, the fire starts at about ten thirty, you factor an hour of powerless drifting in, and we’d have hit the rocks about eleven thirty. From Canoe Rocks, we drift a little farther southwest for a half hour or so, and sink exactly here,’ he said, thumping a black X scrawled on the chart with his thumb.
Noah sat up, retraced the path his father suggested, and leaned in to have a closer look at the sounding marked on the chart. ‘It says here the water’s only five hundred and eighty-two feet deep. I thought the Rag was deeper than that.’

Olaf pointed at the fine print along the upper edge of the map. ‘This chart was published in 1964. After the Rag sank, during the investigation, they spent a lot of time using sonar equipment and what not trying to determine the exact whereabouts of the wreckage. They discovered the original soundings were off a couple hundred feet.’

‘No small error,’ Noah said.

‘Discrepancies on these lake charts only mattered if they were in shallow water, in the harbors and along the coasts. The difference between five hundred and eighty feet and eight hundred feet doesn’t mean much to a boat drafting twenty-five.’

They both sat back and sighed and turned to face each other. After an awkward second Olaf looked away and patted Noah’s knee before trying to stand up. The edge of the couch was lower than the chair, though, and he couldn’t get his legs to lift him. Rather than trying to get up again, he let himself slide back into the cushions.

Noah had stood impulsively and found himself hovering above his father for the second time in as many hours. Instead of lingering this time, he walked around the table and looked for something to distract them from the awkward moment. A couple of seconds seemed like a couple of minutes before he finally grabbed the afghan and spread it over his father’s legs.
‘Thanks,’ Olaf said, then gestured towards the stove. ‘Is there room in there for another log?’

Noah opened the stove door, knew that another log wouldn’t make any difference. He took one from the wood box and tossed it in. When it hit the smoldering pile already in the stove, the logs collapsed and spread across the bottom of the stove in a bright, pumpkin-orange flash. The new log caught fire immediately.

‘Close the damper a bit too, would you?’ Olaf asked.

Noah did. As he stood there within a few feet of the open door, watching the bark on the split oak disappear into ash, he figured the temperature in the cabin must have been at least eighty-five degrees, maybe ninety.

He closed the stove door and went to the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water. ‘If there was an explosion, isn’t it possible that that was the cause of a rupture in the hull?’ Noah asked.

‘Sure, sure,’ Olaf said. ‘In fact, I’d be surprised if serious damage hadn’t been done by an explosion, the fire alone, even. But the fatal blow was the rocks.’

‘How do you know?’

‘It wasn’t more than a couple minutes after I got back on deck that we ran aground,’ Olaf said. ‘Imagine that big boat butting against a line of rocks each as big as a house. The jolt knocked me right off my feet. We were lucky that we had time to get ourselves attached back to our lifelines. If we hadn’t, we would’ve been in the water—and probably dead.

‘You see, when the boat’s adrift in the open water, the waves are up against a moving target. When the boat’s beached on the rocks, in the shoal water, they’re free
to pound on whatever’s there. I remember trying to get my feet back under me and the water crashing up over the deck. I didn’t have a whole lot of hope right then, that’s for damn sure.’

‘It must have been terrifying,’ Noah said, imagining himself in the same situation. ‘What do you think about at a moment like that?’

Olaf looked at him from the corner of his eye. ‘Have you ever been in a rumble?’ he asked.

‘What do you mean? Like a fistfight?’

‘Yeah. You and another guy mixing it up.’

‘Nothing ever serious.’

‘I’ve been in one fight,’ Olaf said. ‘In Westby, Wisconsin, of all places. It was 1936, I was sixteen years old. I remember because it was the year I won the ski jumping tournament down there—you won there once too, didn’t you?’ he asked, but didn’t wait for an answer. ‘We were in one of the bars in town after the tournament, and some local guy got it into his head that I was trying to move in on his girl—which I probably was,’ Olaf smiled. ‘Well, he called me a few choice names and before I knew it, he’d cracked my head with a beer bottle. It wasn’t a clean hit, but it was enough to knock me down. Then he sets to work: kicking, punching, crashing bar chairs over my shoulders every time I tried to get on my feet. I didn’t know what in the hell had hit me, but I knew I had to get up. I thought that son of a bitch might’ve been crazy enough to kill me.'
‘The point is, I’d been getting the shit knocked out of me: the walk across the
deck, the time on the open boat deck, running aground and taking that pounding, that
all adds up. It would’ve been easy to just cling to that icy deck and hope.’

‘Why didn’t you give up?’

‘I guess there was some instinct to survive,’ Olaf said. ‘And I knew I probably
wouldn’t if I’d just sat there holding on for dear life.’

‘Did you think you were going to die?’

Olaf thought about it for a second. ‘I don’t suppose I thought I was going to
die, no. It was more a matter of thinking I wouldn’t survive, of thinking the whole
crew wasn’t going to survive—there’s a difference.

‘We were only hung-up on the rocks for a couple of minutes, but that was
time enough for me to put some perspective on our situation. We had no engine, no
engine crew, no stearage, no communication between ends of the ship, no
communication at all, with anyone. We were thirty miles from safe harbor, hung-up
on a rock in what might be the most remote part of the lower forty-eight states, it was
below zero, a near whiteout, with waves in the fifteen foot range. And we were
already soaked to the bone.

‘Now, I don’t care if you have two minutes or two days to make decisions
when you’re in a mess like that, the fact is there just aren’t a whole lot of options.
You asked me if I thought I was going to die. If I’d had the time, I might of. But I
didn’t. I had to decide whether to launch the lifeboats or get back with the rest of the
crew on the bow.’

‘Why would you have done that?’
‘They were my crewmates,’ Olaf said without hesitation. ‘I was an officer aboard a ship in peril.’

The notion of the crew’s importance touched an unidentifiable nerve in Noah. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said, ‘crossing back to the bow would have meant leaving the lifeboats. If you leave the lifeboats, you’ve got positively no chance.’

‘That’s true if you know the boat is sinking. We didn’t.’

Noah shook his head. ‘You didn’t know you were sinking? You’re on the rocks, the lifeboats are ten feet from where you were standing, half the crew is already dead—probably dead, anyway—and you hesitate to get off the ship?’

‘They were my goddamn crewmates, I wanted to save them more than I wanted to save myself. How could I have helped anyone by getting into a lifeboat and rowing into the goddamn night?’

‘How did you intend to save them by leaving the only means of escape?’

Olaf was clearly riled. ‘Oh hell I don’t know. Maybe I thought there would be safety in numbers, maybe I thought that one of those lifeboats out on the open water would have been suicide—I mean hell, it nearly was. Or maybe I just didn’t know what to do. There’s no manual for surviving the end of the world.’ He balled both his hands into lopsided fists and pounded them against his legs.

‘It doesn’t matter anyway,’ he concluded. ‘No sooner had the four of us met back on the deck than we came off the rocks. As soon as we did, I knew exactly what we had to do.’

Noah got up again, went to the kitchen and wiped his face with a dishtowel. Outside it was dark, and Noah caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window. His
hair was messy and on end and he looked drunk. There was condensation on the outside of the window, and he figured it would have been frost if not for the heat inside.

‘Understand something,’ Olaf said, picking up on Noah’s restlessness. ‘Until we got off the rocks, I still had the notion that everything was going to come together. I still thought—and it’s easy to see how ludicrous this sounds in hindsight—that somehow we could come out of it, you know? That we could avoid the end. Stupid, but it’s true.

‘And another thing, contrary to conventional wisdom, when you’re on the edge of life—like that—and falling off, you don’t stop and reminisce. At least I didn’t. What you do is look for something to hold onto.’

Noah hoisted himself up onto the kitchen counter and crossed his legs. ‘I guess,’ he said, but didn’t understand. The notion that the old man’s crew of nobodies should take precedence over his mother and sister and himself still didn’t make sense.

‘And maybe there was a chance up until we came free, you know? Maybe everything going through my head wasn’t just fear or indecision.’

Noah thought, he’s pleading. Maybe not to me, but he is.

‘It’s all the same, though, like I said, because when we did come off the rocks, all I wanted to do was get off that goddamn boat. It was the only thing left to do.’

Noah looked up at him. ‘So that’s when you knew she was going down.’

‘There wasn’t much doubt about it. I mean, despite the fact that we couldn’t see a thing, you could tell she was wallowing.’ He paused. ‘Whenever I imagine what she must have looked like from Gods’ view, all I can see is the diminishing light.’
‘How fast did it happen?’

‘Can’t say for sure, but between the four of us we couldn’t have gotten the lifeboat launched in any less than fifteen or twenty minutes, and considering how far from the rocks she ended up, it was probably a little longer than that.’

‘Not enough time for any of the other ships to get there?’

‘No way.’

‘Or the Coast Guard?’

‘What were they going to do even had they been able to get there? Searching for us on a night like that would’ve been like looking for a cotton ball in a cloud. They never would have found us.’

‘And the rest of the crew?’ Noah asked, almost in a whisper.

‘Don’t know what happened,’ Olaf said and put his head down.

They sat in silence for a while before Noah slid off the counter and went back to the armchair. ‘You look tired,’ he said.

‘I’m always tired.’

‘I’m tired too,’ he said, looking at his watch to find that it was only six o’clock. ‘Why don’t you get some sleep?’

‘I think I will,’ Olaf said. ‘Give me a hand up, would you?’

Noah skirted around the coffee table and took his father by the elbow. His arm was thin and soft. Noah helped him around the table.

‘Gotta hit the head,’ Olaf said.

‘Me too.’
‘You know, I never thought much about it, but the worst part of the whole goddamn night came after we got the lifeboat in the water.’

They both walked to the door and were standing in the dim light coming off the kitchen pushing their feet into a pile of unlaced boots by the door.

‘That’s the real story,’ Olaf said.

‘Why don’t you save that part for another time, huh?’

‘It was a hell of a thing, you know? A hell of a thing.’

‘I’ve no doubt about that,’ Noah said as he pushed the door open. The air was biting, and no sooner did Noah step outside than his bare legs and arms went taut and a shiver rippled up his back and through his shoulders.

‘You need to use the outhouse?’ Olaf said.

‘Only if there’s an ordinance against pissing on the pines.’

They walked to the edge of the glow from the house and stood next to each other beside a tree, their shoulders almost touching.

‘Already stars in the west,’ Olaf said, pointing through the trees. ‘It’s going to clear up.’

‘Hopefully warm up, too.’

‘What, it doesn’t get cold in Boston?’

‘Of course it does, it’s just that we usually hold off on the snow until winter.’

‘Ah hell, that wasn’t snow.’

‘It looked like snow to me.’

They zipped up and walked back towards the house, Olaf stepping cautiously across the wet, leafy yard. The wind was up again, blowing from the same direction
as the clearing sky, and in the few minutes they’d been outside, it had stripped all the uncomfortable warmth and syrupy sweat from Noah. The heavy black branches of the jackpines roiling in the breeze muffled the clicking of the bare aspen and birch trees.

‘Think there are any wolves within, say, five miles of us?’ Noah said.

‘Unless they’re on vacation. Why?’

‘I was thinking about your dog.’ Noah could picture Vikar somewhere in the middle of the woods, wet and bloody muzzled, devouring a freshly slain rabbit

‘Don’t worry about him. The wolves would have got him by now if they wanted him,’ Olaf said as he climbed the three rickety wooden steps back into the house. Noah held him steady by the elbow.

When he opened the door, Noah could feel the warm air surge out of the house. The blustery evening had cleared Noah’s head—had invigorated him—and when he stepped back into the house, he thought it smelled like boiling rutabaga. It was a smell that reminded him of his mother and the dreaded Friday night fish boils of his childhood. He was instantly sapped again.

He kicked off the boots and sat back down on the couch while Olaf filled a glass jar with water from the pitcher. He drank it, then filled it again, took two chalky looking tablets from a canister on the counter, and dropped them in the jar. Finally he dug into his mouth and pulled his teeth out and dropped them in the jar.

‘What?’ Noah said. ‘Since when do you have dentures?’

‘Six years ago. I hate the goddamn things,’ Olaf said, picking the jar up and holding it to the light. His lips seemed baggier without his teeth in, and it made him look even older.
Noah ran his tongue across the front of his own teeth. ‘I didn’t know you had them?’

‘I guess you wouldn’t.’

‘I guess not.’

Noah rolled the chart back up and put it back on the shelf. Standing at the window he thought, That’s it then. That’s the dead come back to life. ‘I’ll have some dreams tonight,’ he said.

Olaf set his teeth on the counter. ‘You’re lucky enough to still dream, huh? I haven’t dreamt since the night my boat went down.’
What a sight the old man made. On one end of the couch his bushy-rimmed head rested on a pillow. A collage of quilts covered him, leaving only his clownish feet—snug in thick wool socks—dangling over the other end of the sofa. His arms were folded over his chest, the sleeves of his union suit coming apart at the cuff. He might have looked like this in a coffin, Noah thought as he walked past, slid on a pair of boots, and stepped outside for a piss. He went to the same tree behind the truck they’d watered the night before.

I’m going to get back to that tree in the gulch today, he thought. I’ll get the whole damn thing split and stacked before I leave this place.

He started back to the house intent on trying to catch a little more sleep, but a ribbon of beguiling fog curled up the trail from the lake and he followed it down. Pockets of complete darkness still haunted the woods on either side of the path—a polka-dotted dawn—heavy, wet, and eerie. He could see the lightness above the lake and the still-black water exhaling mist.

When he reached the beach he walked to the edge of the water and kicked at a clump of limp grass. He was wearing shorts, and the cold air gripped his legs. He flexed his body to stave off the chill. All around the rim of the lake the woods hoarded a darkness that didn’t seem to make sense—coming as he had down the
faintly lit path—but when he turned around to look back at the house, it too was gone in the darkness.

Across the lake, above the rolling tree tops, the sky was turning a muted red that faded upward, seamlessly, through a hundred shades of pink and back to black. Red sky in morning, he remembered, sailors take warning. The old adage had come to him, but seemed impossible to believe in all that quiet and calm.

He stepped onto the dock, the planks and pilings creaking under his weight. The boat sat in the water, tied to the dock by two expert knots that appeared ready to hold the old thing there forever. Noah tiptoed into the boat and sat on the splintered seat, watching the ripples roll out on the otherwise placid lake. Natalie would love this place, he thought. He could picture her on a warm summer afternoon sitting on the beach with a magazine and sunhat under the shade of an umbrella. She would squint at him and smile and lick her thumb before turning the page. At lunch she would tell him peaches were out, blueberries in, according to the latest health craze she’d just finished reading about on the beach. He’d make himself a summer sausage sandwich and look at the kids, two of them—twins, he’d decided—three years old and sitting in the clearing in the yard, on a picnic blanket, in the sun. Fair-skinned and straight-haired, they picked at a caterpillar. He’d touch Nat on her knee and bowl into the sunlight, arms wide, to scoop them up. The kids would jump up and scream happiness and stutter-step in circles until he captured them. Nat, clearing the paper plates, would watch them, shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand.

A fish rolled out of the water beside the boat, a big fish, lazily, and Noah’s reverie was lost. She’s sleeping, he thought, looking at his wrist for the watch not
there. He recalled her pleading the day before, put it next to the story his father had
told him last night and realized—almost as if he'd always been aware of this fact—
that the story only mattered if Noah could someday tell it himself, to a son or
daughter, to another Torr who could keep it alive—here, on a blustery November
night—for a third generation. He stood up, chilled but resolute, and started back
towards the house.

Midway up the path, though, he froze. The trees swayed and murmured, and
when they went silent, he heard something else in the distance. It was faint, lilting,
and it stopped almost as soon as it started. He took another step and froze again,
turned back towards the lake, his back to the breeze now, and heard it again, louder
and more mournful this time. A howl, a wolf's howl. One wolf usually meant many.

He tried to move in a lull after the second cry but couldn't. The light had
come fully up but was still drab. Everything—the trees, the car-sized boulders, the
whisperless grass—blurred into the same dull hue. A third cry went up and he walked
back to the beach. God it's beautiful, he thought. And no sooner had he thought it
than the howl was answered. The wolfsong permeated the air, seemed even to warm
it. He fixed his eyes on the shoreline, scanned it from the cliff face they'd fished off
the other day to the impenetrable spruce stand on the north shore of the lake. He
couldn't see them, but the howling had entered him, he could actually feel it in his
gut, could feel it awakening something that had long been hibernating, something he
couldn't exactly locate. It filled him the way the fghorns had as a child.

They sang for a long time. He wondered if the hunt was over and they were
celebrating their prey, or if they'd simply lost each other in the night and were calling
each other back to the den. Maybe there were pups, maybe it was a long call to
danger.

When they stopped, he started back for the house. He considered its black
windows as though from a distance they might let onto something other than what
was really there. Twenty or thirty yards beneath the house, he saw a light flicker on in
one of the windows and his father’s head appear. It looked like a scene from an
impressionist painting. But the image only lasted for a second before the old man
turned and disappeared from the light.

‘Bright eyed and bushy tailed,’ Olaf said. ‘You hear the wolves?’

‘I looked for them.’ Noah stopped in the kitchen.

‘There’s a pack in the neighborhood. Their turf comes right up to the shore
across the lake. If you’re quiet and sit still long enough, sometimes you can see them
watering themselves in the morning.’

Noah filled the kettle and put it on the stove.

‘I saw you down there listening. Awfully brisk morning to be out in your gym
shorts.’ His father’s union suit hung on him and he had the afghan slung over his
shoulders like a shawl. ‘Twenty-eight degrees according to the thermometer.’ He
pointed out the kitchen window.

‘I’ll bet it’s five degrees colder once you get away from this house. You’re
killing me with these fires.’

‘I can’t feel it,’ Olaf said, dropping back on the sofa. ‘No fire’s warm
enough.’
‘That why you slept on the couch last night?’

Olaf nodded, settling back under the quilts. ‘The bedroom gets so cold.’

Noah sat in the chair. ‘I’ll get back at that tree in the gulch today. We’ll restock this place with firewood yet. And I’m going to get that chain. I’ll leave as soon as I finish the coffee. You want to come with?’

‘I’ll stay put. But take my truck, huh? Knutson’s opens at seven. Better fill the gas can, too.’

‘I will.’

Olaf laid his head down on the pillow and let out a long, quiet sigh. ‘I feel better today. Better out here on the sofa. Like I’m on vacation or something. A night at the Ritz.’

‘If only we could call for room service,’ Noah said, getting up to make the coffee. ‘I could use one of those breakfasts you were talking about last night.’

‘They’ve got good cinnamon rolls at The Landing. Bring a few back with you.’

‘I’ll do that.’ He poured a mug of coffee, offered a cup to Olaf who refused, and put a sweatshirt on. ‘I’m off then. Don’t go anywhere.’

A smile turned up half of Olaf’s mouth.

At the hardware store a half dozen men, all as old as Olaf, milled about a deer stand that, according to a handwritten sign, had just arrived in stock. Each of the men had a Styrofoam cup of coffee in his hand and plaid or blaze-orange hunting vest on. Noah walked to the back of the store and rang the service bell on the counter. One of the
men in the group excused himself from their chatter about the overwhelming deer herd and hustled back to help Noah.

'Morning,' he said, taking a sip of his coffee. 'What can I do for you?'

'I need a length of chain.'

'Chain we've got, any particulars?'

'Is there such a thing as three-quarter-inch . . . something? Polyurethane coated? I need twenty feet of it.'

'Let me show you what we've got,' he said, motioning with his long arm for Noah to follow.

A couple aisles over, spool upon spool lined the shelf. 'This what you have in mind?' the old man said. 'It's your standard high-test, shot-peened, poly coated. What do you need it for, anyway?' He put his nose up in the air and looked at Noah through the lenses of his reading glasses.

'I don't know exactly. It's not for me, but it looks like it'll do.'

'If it doesn't work, bring it right back and we'll get you what does.' He hollered towards the back of the store and a tall Indian kid with a baggy Grand Marais football jersey hanging on him stepped from behind a door. 'Cut me twenty feet of the three-quarter-inch poly, all right?'

'Sure thing, boss.' The kid hurried behind the counter for what appeared to be a giant pair of pliers.

'Kid's a good worker,' the old man said. 'Hard to find up here.'

'Good help's hard to find anywhere,' Noah said, meaning to sound conspiratorial.
‘You ain’t from around here.’ It wasn’t a question. ‘But you look familiar.’

‘My father lives up on Lake Forsone.’

‘Of course, you’re a Torr. All you Torr fellas are twelve feet tall. But I must
of known you when you were knee high to a grasshopper.’ He cleared his throat.
‘Your grandpa bought everything he needed to build that place from my pop, one of
our first big customers. He used to play poker with him right back there,’ he gestured
to an office behind the counter. ‘How’s your dad doing anyway? Haven’t seen him in
a while.’

‘He’s okay.’

‘Tell the old codger Knut says hello. Tell him to come down and have coffee
some morning.’

‘I’ll do that.’

The kid brought the chain and set it on the counter. Knut put it in a paper bag
and took eight dollars from Noah. ‘Remember,’ he said, ‘if that doesn’t work for you
bring it back.’

‘I appreciate it,’ Noah said. ‘And I’ll tell the old man you say hello.’ The bag
seemed to weigh a hundred pounds.

At The Landing he filled the gas can and the truck before he went inside. The
empty gravel parking lot and old-fashioned gas pumps finally made the place seem as
remote as it was, and he imagined everything buried in snow. He pictured himself
clamping his feet into a pair of cross-country skis and getting back to the cabin by
way of fresh tracks in the spring corn. He imagined the labor, the sweat, and reward.
He could hear the fresh klister wax singing under the skis.
When the tank was full he went inside to pay and pick up the box of cinnamon rolls his father had requested. A bell chimed as he opened the door and walked into the deserted store. No cashier greeted him, no bustling breakfast crowd sat at the café tables, only the smell of baking bread thick in the air. In the bakery case pastries as big as his feet lined the shelves. They looked better than anything he’d ever seen.

‘You’re Olaf’s boy, no?’ the same woman that had offered him the phone the day before said as she stepped from the swinging kitchen doors.

Noah looked up from the pastry case, taken aback for the second time in ten minutes. For all the wilds, all the unerring space around him, the village of Misquah kept getting smaller.

‘Well, it isn’t exactly hard to see the resemblance. Plus, your wife told me about your hair, said it was poofy. I remember you from yesterday.’

Noah patted his hair. ‘My wife?’

‘Really a sweetheart. She called this morning, in a panic. Left a message for you.’

Noah looked around the vacant store. ‘Left a message for me? My wife—Natalie—she called here?’

‘Said she had no other way of reaching you.’ She made her way behind the counter, and from a shelf under the cash register pulled a note pad. ‘Asked me to tell you that she’d be arriving this evening, early. Asked if you’d leave directions for your old man’s place here. She’s going to stop on the way up and get them.’

‘She called when?’

‘Earlier this morning, maybe an hour ago. She said you’d know all about it.’
'Know all about what?' Noah asked himself.

'Here,' she said, tearing a piece of paper from the notepad. 'Draw her a map.'

Olaf stood in the middle of the yard wearing his ancient petersham coat, mukluks, wool cargo pants with pockets ballooning on either leg, and a pair of worn choppers. He held a thermos in one hand and an unlit cigar in the other. Noah parked the truck, took the bag with the chain from the seat beside him, and met Olaf in the yard.

'What are you going to wear when it starts getting cold?' he asked.

Olaf smiled. 'Any luck with the chain?'

Noah held the bag up. 'Knut says hello. Nice guy. There’s not much you couldn’t find in that store of his either. It’s doubling as the local coffee house. Told me to tell you to come down some morning and join him for a cup.'

Olaf lifted the thermos. 'I make my own coffee. But he runs a good business, been around since the Vikings.' He looked in the bag.

'That going to work?'

'This is fine,' Olaf said.

'Where are you headed anyway? Looks like you’re ready for a polar expedition.'

Olaf suddenly seemed bashful. He slapped his hand against his thigh, turned to look towards the shed, made a tentative step in its direction, but stopped and faced Noah. 'Come here,' he said. 'I have something to show you.'

The padlock on the shed wasn’t locked. Olaf took it from the hinge, hung it on a nail pounded into the siding, and tugged the warped door open. He stepped into the
shed and pulled aside the curtain, barely illuminating the heaps of junk everywhere. There were mildew-stained cardboard boxes, old gas cans, splintered canoe paddles, busted lawn chairs, a stepladder missing every other rung, a mattress with grotesque brown stains leaning against the back wall, two pair of Noah’s childhood skis propped in the corner, vintage life preservers hanging from hooks on the wall to his right, and on the left a table that must have been his father’s workshop as evidenced by the hacksaw, the stainless steel tubing, and the mayonnaise jar full of nails and screws atop an oak door that spanned two sawhorses. The place stunk like ripe, wet wood.

Where, Noah thought, disgusted, could her ashes possibly be in this fucking mess. ‘This place is a sty,’ he said, stepping over a stack of Life magazines.

Olaf was clearing his toolbox from an old wooden barrel that sat on the floor beside the makeshift table. He shrugged his shoulders. ‘You and your sister used to sleep out here. There’s a nice cross breeze in the summer.’ He pointed the hacksaw at the cracked window. ‘Comes up off the lake.’

‘It could use a cross breeze now. It smells awful in here.’ Noah was trying to figure out how to ask about his mother’s ashes.

Olaf poured a cup of coffee from the thermos. ‘You recognize this?’ He pointed at the barrel.

‘This? Yeah, I sure do.’

Olaf pried the lid off exposing thousands of taconite pellets. ‘Your mother hated these things. Thought they were messy. She hated a mess.’
Noah picked a handful from the barrel and rolled them around in the palm of his hand. ‘They were,’ he said. ‘They still are.’ He showed his father the black smudges on his fingertips.

‘I used to bring these home for you.’

‘I remember that,’ Noah said.

‘You loved it. You thought it was the neatest damn thing.’

Noah wanted to smile at the memory but couldn’t. ‘Where are her ashes?’ he said.

Olaf had turned his attention to the chain and didn’t look up when he said, ‘Somewhere. It’s been a long time since I had them out.’ He slung the chain over his shoulders as if they were suspenders. ‘I used to keep them in the house but got scared I might use them instead of flour to bread the trout.’

‘You’re joking.’

Olaf set the chain on the workbench and said nothing.

‘And now they’re lost.’

Olaf sat down, took a piece of the stainless steel tubing and threaded the chain through it. ‘They aren’t lost. They’re somewhere here. You can spit from one wall to the other, wouldn’t take long to find them.

‘Anyway, forget about the ashes for a minute. I need help getting this down to the lake.’ He kicked the barrel at Noah’s feet, finally looked him in the eye. ‘And there’s something else. All this stuff’—he gestured towards the workbench—‘it’s for an anchor. The chain, it’s for an anchor.’

‘What anchor?’
Olaf slung the chain over his shoulders again. ‘For my burial.’

Noah looked at him for a hard moment. ‘Have you gone completely nuts? Your burial?’ Noah raked his hair back. ‘Jesus.’

‘Settle down, would you? I know what’s going on here’—he put his hands to his stomach—‘I know what’s happening to me. I’m not a fool.’

‘You’re wrong about that. You’re exactly a fool. First of all, we can take you to the doctor. We can get help for what’s happening to you. They cure this stuff nowadays. And don’t tell me we covered it already,’ Noah hissed, anticipating Olaf’s retort. ‘Listen to reason instead.’ Now he took the chain from his father’s shoulders. ‘And speaking of reason.’ He let the chain slink to the floor. ‘You’ve had too much time on your hands out here in the woods. Conjuring up ideas like this,’ he spread his arms towards the workbench, ‘it’s just plain nuts. You’re going nuts.’

In a firm voice Olaf said, ‘I’ve lived a long time and deserve as much as this.’ He bent to pick up the chain. ‘I know you think it’s ignorant or selfish or nuts, I guess, but the simple fact of the matter is that after you’ve lived as long as I have, after you’ve come to terms with everything you’ve wrecked in this world, everything you’ve loved, once it’s all tucked away and measured out, six more months or a year don’t matter anymore.’

‘Maybe it doesn’t matter to you anymore. Jesus, do I understand you?’ he took the chain again and set it on the workbench.

‘Not a fool? Do you really believe all the bullshit you’re telling yourself?’ He shook his head in disgust. ‘Listen, there’s no way I’m going to chain you up and drop you out with the fish. There’s no reason you shouldn’t go to the doctor. You know
what? There's no reason I should have come back here.' Noah looked squarely at the old man, shook his head again, and hurried for the house.

Inside he tore through his suitcase, put on a flannel shirt, took his dirty jeans from the bedpost and a pair of leather gloves from a shelf by the door and headed back outside, only stopping long enough to fetch the chainsaw and the full gas can from the back of the truck.

He hurried to the gulch both furious and already starting to regret his outburst. For all of his horror at the thought of dropping his old man in the lake when it came time to bury him, the idea was not altogether unbeautiful. Again he remembered the story his father had told him the night before, this time pausing to reflect on the type of eternity his father had so narrowly avoided. Maybe the will to be buried in the lake was born of the notion that it was his honest fate, and not merely some screwball’s version of an interminable penance. None of which meant, Noah thought, that he’d be able to carry the old man’s wishes out. Of all his father’s characteristics the one most evident in Noah himself was surely a pragmatism that never wavered. Reasonable people did not sink their dead fathers, not even if a shred of providence were rooted in the scheme.

When he reached the gulch he paused and looked down into the gully. It appeared shallower than it had a couple days earlier. He set the chainsaw on the ground, filled its quarter-gallon gas tank, and realized he had no idea how to begin the task. Instead of reasoning it all out, he swung down into the gulch, tugged on the cord, set the chain against the trunk of the tree, and pulled the trigger. An awful whine exploded into the air.
He worked first with the saw above his head. For three or four minutes, balancing against the steep incline of the gulch’s wall, he let the saw rip through the oak as it rained sawdust on him. When the saw slipped through the topside of the trunk he flinched, expecting the bottom half of the tree to teeter into the gulch. It didn’t. He set the saw down in order to inspect the precariousness of the tree and realized he couldn’t close his hands, couldn’t shake the knot in his neck or the sting in his shoulders. Hard to imagine, he thought, finishing this entire tree.

On the bank of the gulch two-foot-tall tangles of dormant grass and ropy stalks of bramble grew from the clumps of rusty soil, and he used them to pull himself up. There had to be an easier way of sawing the tree, he reasoned. He stepped onto the trunk. When he felt no give from the pressure of his foot, he put the full weight of his body onto one leg and bounced, still no give. He started the saw again and tiptoed backwards out onto the tree. It couldn’t have been much more than eight or ten feet above the floor of the gulch, but it seemed much higher from his perspective, especially when he looked towards the lake.

Measuring off a boot and a half’s length, he set the saw onto the tree and hit the trigger. From this angle the saw worked much easier. In less than half the time it had taken him to make the first pass from the underside, it cleaved the first stump, dropping it into the gulch. He made eight or ten more stumps from the trunk, and when he choked the saw off and looked behind him, he saw that he was a solid quarter of the way across and suspended above the nettle below as if he were on the bowsprit of a ship.
The tree trunk was now as big around as a truck tire and he knew he’d have to work multiple angles to saw through it. After passes from several different positions on the tree, he managed to rive a couple more stumps but soon discovered that no matter how many different angles he came at the tree from, the saw didn’t have a long enough blade to get through it. Soaked with sweat and covered with sawdust, he killed the saw again. He straddled the end of the tree and let the wind careening up the gulch cool him.

His body thrummed with the lingering vibrations from the saw. He caught his breath, tightened the gloves on his hands, and brushed the sawdust from his sleeves. Now the hard part, he thought. He dropped into the gulch, set the saw up on the bank, and stacked the stumps—a couple of which had rolled several yards down the gulch—into a pile at the base of the incline. After he collected them he began hoisting them, one at a time, out of the gulch. The first, narrower half of the bunch were light enough so that he could toss them up. The second half required a plan. He managed to get the first big stump onto his shoulder. The thick bark bit his face as he crawled up the embankment. He used his free hand to pull himself towards the rim of the gulch. His feet churned in the loose soil, and every other handful of grass came free of its roots. Laboring, slipping, the stump sliding around his neck—it must have weighed seventy-five pounds—the bark burning his neck, he imagined it crushing his Achilles. The thought of hobbling back to the house, of being weakened, caused an adrenalin surge that gave him the strength to plant one foot firmly and heave the stump out of the gulch.
He collapsed onto the bank, half standing and half sitting, and felt his pulse throbbing in his wrist. Breathing heavily, sweating profusely again, he eyed the remaining half dozen pieces of oak. If not right now, he thought, I’ll only have to deal with them tomorrow, or the next day. Besides, the wind funneling up the gulch felt so good, so invigorating. He took off a glove, felt the back of his neck, and saw blood on his fingertips. He stanched it with the collar of his shirt.

After he caught his breath he hefted the other oak blocks from the gulch. When he rolled the last one over the lip of the gulch, he crawled out himself. Covered with burrs and twigs, filthy and bone-weary, he thought: this is the kind of work a man ought to do.

The wheelbarrow was parked where they’d left it. In its rusty, dented bottom, shallow pools of melted frost had formed. Noah carted it to the edge of the gully and muscled the two biggest pieces of sawn oak into it. The trail, with its tree roots, potholes, and rocks made steering the barrow difficult. But he managed eight trips. On the ninth, he stopped midway back and looked up at the back of the old ski jump. Several times since he’d been back he’d thought of climbing the rickety old thing—of calling up those old memories that were so hard to place without being at the top of it, staring down the inrun—but each time the thought crossed his mind he’d been distracted. Now he set the empty wheelbarrow down and kicked his way through the overgrowth to the lopsided steps that led up to the base of the scaffold. There were four telephone poles supporting the top of it, and two more midway up the inrun. On the left side of the ramp thirty steps made of two-by-fours pounded into the plywood floor sat under the hand rail. He took them two at a time.
When he got to the top he stood for a minute looking down the inrun. The wind—a headwind he fondly recalled—blowing almost violently now caused the scaffold to rock. Beyond the takeoff, on the left, the coaching stand his father and grandfather used to huddle on had completely sunk in the overgrowth. It was easy to imagine both of them standing there, their hushed voices carrying up to him as he latched his boots into the cable bindings and lowered his goggles over the rim of his white leather helmet. It was the flattery he overheard on those mornings that gave him his first sense of vanity. They likened him to themselves at the same age. Given their accomplishments, visions of Olympic stardom often distracted him. Neither had patience for muddle headedness, and often the day’s training ended with a firm lecture on concentration.

He had no trouble concentrating now, as he sat down, letting his feet dangle down the inrun. It looks so damn big, he thought. Though the jump was awfully small in contrast to the Olympic-sized jumps he’d competed on as a teenager, the years of forgetting almost entirely about the sport had skewed his perspective. The landing hill was overgrown with new trees and thistle, and the takeoff was almost indistinguishable in the bushes, but he could easily imagine the whole scene packed with snow. Even though the lake frothed in the wind, he could see ski tracks narrowing in the distance. Maybe it hadn’t been so long ago.

The brightness of the sun glinting off the snow, the cold toes and wind-burned cheeks, none of it was lost after all. His gloved hands on the gate, the skis squeaking against the hard snow at the top of the jump before he pulled himself onto the inrun, the speed gained as he hurtled down the ramp, through the transition, and onto the
takeoff, the serenity and silence of the flight, the camber of both his skis and his body in flight, his chin out over his ski tips, and the light, effortless swivel of his hips to maximize lift, the exultation of flight. The perfect instinct to land and the explosion of consciousness in landing . . . none of it had been forgotten. Maybe, he thought, it was the single best thing he’d ever done, that sport, those jumps. Maybe it unified them—grandfather, father, son—maybe it made them the same men. Hadn’t his father insinuated as much the night before? Hadn’t he reminded him that they’d both been champions in Westby, Wisconsin? Hadn’t the same been true of tournaments in Ishpeming, Eau Claire and Brattleboro? Didn’t Noah still have dreams about it? Of flights that never ended?

He looked back towards the house. Why had he been so quick to condemn the old man’s project in the shed? Why had he been so quick to deny him this favor? Didn’t the million mornings standing on that coach’s platform in the wicked wind and chill of the Minnesota winter add up to something?

He wheeled the last load of wood back to the yard, noticed the door on the shed still open. He saw his father working, could see, through the papery curtain and dirty glass, that the old man had somehow managed to lift the barrel of taconite onto his workbench.

How in the hell did he get that thing up there, Noah wondered.

It made his entire morning’s labor seem feigned.
Spanning six of the barrel staves the words SUPERIOR STEEL & STEAMSHIP COMPANY were branded black. The barrel must be a hundred years old, Noah thought as he rubbed his thumb through the tarnished grooves of the lettering. He imagined piles of these barrels in the hull of an old turn-of-the-century bark, loaded with iron ore. He imagined this particular barrel hidden behind the furnace in the house on High Street.

One of the pieces of stainless steel tubing was already attached to the barrel with a dozen finely placed bolts. In a pile on the table another dozen bolts appeared ready for the same purpose, and the second piece of tubing was, apparently, being shortened by something less than an inch. At least the hacksaw blade half way through it suggested as much. Noah wrapped his arms around the barrel and lifted it off the workbench. It took all his strength. Though he could not imagine how the contraption might work, he admired the old man’s vision. No doubt he had a plan, and no doubt that plan would work. Had he not been a sailor, Olaf might have made a fine life as a builder. Noah had often wished for his father’s counsel while in agony over how to install a new toilet or hang a chandelier from the dining room ceiling. Any of a hundred household tasks he inevitably failed at. Long weekend afternoons with hammer-bruised thumbs. He smiled now, well removed from them.

The old man was at his afternoon nap now. Later today than the day before.
Noah walked outside and crossed the yard. He began stacking the wood around the splitting stumps in the yard. Sweating again, he thought back through the travails of his and Nat’s childlessness, as if his father’s anchor were some sort of admonition, among its other purposes. He remembered how the first couple years of trying had been almost magical in their ability to bring the two of them closer together. There had been such solidarity of purpose, such a marveling at prospects, that the failures, in their way, were as much a blessing as a curse. It wasn’t until after the first pregnancy and miscarriage that things actually started to seem both urgent and unlikely, if not a bit hopeless.

He could remember that morning vividly. He had startled himself awake from a deep sleep and found the bed cold and empty. He could hear the sound of the bathroom faucet, and in the dim light could see Nat’s bare legs beneath the sink. Under the stream and splashing of water, he heard her unappeasable, almost silent sobbing. When he stumbled into the hallway with the sheets still tangled in his feet and stood in the bathroom door, she didn’t even look up from the bloody underpants she washed in the sink. ‘No, no, no, no,’ she had muttered above her sobbing. For ten seconds he stood there agape before she finally looked up at him, let go a siren of a cry, and threw the stained panties into the garbage can. He tried to console her, tried to hug her quivering away, but she rejected him. For the first time in their lives together she rejected him. Rather than feeling shunned, Noah kept imagining over and over again the crib and baby bedroom set they’d bought two days earlier, the one sitting in their garage, wondering how he could hide it from her.
The second and third miscarriages had been worse in their ways, but it was the
first that had taken the deepest stab at their hope. The late night talks about rearing
the wonder child disappeared, her explanations of procedures, of drugs, and of next-steps also ceased. Over the next two years their inability to stay pregnant had come to
seem like an illness. It was mired in an unremitting despondency that might pop up at
any time. They’d see a duckling in the pond at the park, and Nat would fall miserable
for three days. If they saw a pregnant woman in the grocery store, Nat would forget
what they were there for. How many weekends at a bed and breakfast up in Vermont
had been canceled for some unexpected visit to the clinic? Too many to remember.
And though her pleading the day before had seemed only slightly more urgent than
usual, he had to admit, now that the shock had worn off, that her coming here actually
made some sense. At least inasmuch as any of their fertility troubles did.

He marveled at her resolve, felt like a wimp and a quitter, and realized he had
to get cleaned up.

Down at the lake, steely clouds mixed in the sky. The wind-whipped water
curled up in waves that washed on the beach. He stepped onto the dock and bent to
untie his boots. He took off his jeans and shirt, his socks and drawers, and stood
naked at the end of the dock. Instantly the sweat that had only a few minutes earlier
been dripping from him dried—seemed almost to encase him—as the wind curled
around him. He stood there, distracted by the cold air, and had only a single moment
of clarity, of apprehensive panic, before he jumped feet first into the lake.

From the instant he went under he could feel the water seizing him—clamp-like—slowing his blood and paralyzing him. Although he’d been anticipating
something like it, he could never have expected the crippling grip the water took on his body. If he hadn’t kicked and pulled for the surface the instant he was submerged he might have ended up sunk. But because he had planned on surfacing immediately, he managed to pull himself out of the water almost as quickly as he jumped in.

Crazy though the idea of the bath had been, it was not unprecedented. Both his father and grandfather had been inclined to take late autumn and even early winter baths. It was a Nordic thing, a point of pride between the two men. Noah could remember watching them—their long arms and lean, muscular legs, their hairy balls tucked up under the dangling cocks—as they dove into the water while the early winter snow whitened the sky. It was a right of passage Noah had not grown up fast enough for. As he climbed onto the dock he took a cracked bar of Ivory soap from its wooden nook on the dock, wetted it, and began lathering himself. The air felt warm in contrast with the water, and he washed away the day’s hard work and grime. He scrubbed his underarms, legs, and feet. He wet the soap again and lathered his hair and face, his neck and arms. He washed his back. And before he could fear it, he dove back into the lake. He experienced the same convulsions, the loss of breath, the stardust behind his closed eyes, but he needed a second to rinse himself, so he messed his hair with his hands and kicked wildly while he watched the soap disperse in the dark water.

Back on the dock he stood in the bracing wind as water puddled at his feet. He dried himself in that November gale, in that air nearly freezing, the wind so loud he did not even notice it. Nat would not have known him in this posture of Norse fecundity. He could not have known himself. He was—if only for a few long
minutes—more his father than he had ever been. More than ever he was his son. A sense that ought to have brought with it a feeling of benevolence brought instead a pale choler. Nat would be here soon—was perhaps already up at the cabin—willing herself and Noah into parenthood with her resoluteness alone, stopping literally at nothing to add a branch to the Torr family tree. And here Noah stood, half an orphan for most of his life. He’d learned to live without his father, almost without the memory of him. He’d reinvented himself in a fashion with Nat’s help, had evolved as a man even as his primary influence languished and receded ghostlike into the Minnesota wilderness. Thoughts that should have been spent on memories of the old man, on anticipating times to come, had become fixations on antique maps, on baseball games all summer long at Fenway. On what else? He toed the soap back into its nook.

Aside from Nat, from their rich life, and these few other things . . . what did he even think about? Of their childlessness, sure, but less and less even of that. Was he not entitled to recompense for the void? Would it have been better if his father had died on that lake—on that inland sea surely antic in this wind not ten miles from where he now stood naked—those years ago? Whether this last was said or only thought he did not know, but soberer for it having crossed his mind, he forgave the old man all at once. Forgave him everything. Noah would make love to his wife on this very night. She would bear a child. Noah would be a father. And in the totemics of the family Torr, order and love and paternity would be restored.

In the spirit of being his father’s son and his grandfather’s grandson, of being a child of these woods, he walked back up to the cabin in his boots alone.
‘I leave you alone for a few days and this is what I come to find?’ Nat stood at the kitchen basin, scrubbing a bunch of radishes. She turned to Olaf. ‘In Boston this one has a plush bathrobe that weighs about ten pounds and might suffice for a polar expedition.’ She paused, let Olaf smile. ‘He had one of those heating lamps installed right outside the shower. Here he is now. You’d think he lived for the cold.’

‘Hey, I grew up in Duluth,’ Noah said. Explanation enough. Strangely embarrassed, he stood with his hands before his nakedness.

‘You failed to mention company,’ Olaf said. ‘It’s not every day something this pretty comes knocking on my door. I thought for a minute I’d finally kicked it and ended up in God’s good graces, but then she said she had lutefisk.’

‘Among a tableful of other treats,’ Nat interrupted. ‘Put some clothes on, please, I’m sure we all want to keep our appetites.’

Noah kissed her. Nat patted his arm, teasing, and smiled.

In the middle of the great room, before the now tempered woodstove, the card table was prodigiously set. Noah took a piece of cheese, sniffed it, tasted it, and made a small gesture of approval. ‘Brown cheese,’ he said, then stepped into the bedroom.

When he emerged again Nat was helping Olaf to a seat at the table.

Noah said, ‘Don’t get the wrong idea, Dad, this is not how I live at home.’ He turned towards Nat. ‘When was it, three years ago you last made dinner?’

‘Tacos I think it was. Four years ago. I burned the lettuce.’
Olaf, seemingly unaware of their banter, ladled a creamy gruel from a plastic container.

‘What’s that?’ Noah said.

‘That is black pot,’ Olaf said. ‘What your grandmothers would have called sort gryte. I haven’t eaten this in decades.’

‘This I’m dying to hear about,’ Noah said, turning to Nat who stood now slicing the clean radishes.

‘There’s not much to hear. I found this place online.’ She searched for a paper bag under the tumult of take-out boxes and dishtowels that cluttered the countertop. ‘It’s called Kafe Forny. Kafe with a K. Who ever heard of such a place?’ She handed Noah the bag and an open bottle of beer. She offered Olaf a bottle but he declined with a down turned chin.

The label on the bag had a Duluth address woven into a Norwegian flag decal. The beer bottle read HANSA-BORG’S BORG BOKKØL. Noah tasted the beer. He looked at his father spooning the soupy black pot into his slack mouth, the look on his face giving away a satisfaction he couldn’t ever remember seeing before. ‘So you left Boston this morning, stopped at a Norwegian deli in Duluth, drove up here, and now you’re serving me a beer and something called black pot.’

‘And lutefisk, lefse, some kind of cheese, krumkake for dessert, this beer—I was going to get a bottle of Norwegian pinot noir, really, it had a Munch painting on the label, it was made in a place called Hallsvor . . . Hallsving . . . Hallingberg . . .’

‘Hallingstad, probably,’ Olaf said.
‘I think that was it. But then I thought about an arctic pinot. It didn’t sound so good.’

‘And radishes.’

‘And radishes,’ Nat confirmed. ‘That’s the short and long of it.’ She set the plate of radishes on the table and leaned into Noah’s ear. ‘Don’t drink the whole beer, it’s not good for your motility,’ she whispered.

‘I for one am eternally grateful,’ Olaf said. ‘I’ll die a happy man now.’

Noah and Nat said nothing, nor did Olaf notice their blanched, startled and sorry faces in the wake of his unintentional gaffe. Instead they ate. They feasted.

A taste for these flavors had long been lost to Noah, but when he saw Natalie sprinkling sugar onto a buttered sheet of lefse, when he saw her slicing another piece of Gjetost cheese onto her plate, even when he saw her daring a quivering spoonful of lutefisk into her mouth, his appetite became tremendous. He ate everything. Olaf ate everything. Despite Nat’s urging he drank one and another bottle of the surprisingly good beer. Olaf suggested they turn on the radio, which they did, but when they found no station in the twilight hours they settled on old stories told around the table. Food stories all. Natalie of always overcooked pork and dumplings stewed in cans of store-bought soup. Neither Noah nor Olaf could imagine. Noah spoke of Christmas cookies so fine they defied his power of explanation. And Olaf told of Thanksgiving turkeys cooked in the cavernous roasting pans of steamship ovens. He talked of his own mother’s lefse, made of nearly rotting potatoes for their sweetness, of her antique krumkake tins, of the homemade butter on the lutefisk she made every Friday night.
Natalie, despite her labor at setting the table and the still too-warm room, wore her favorite sweater of Icelandic wool. She looked wholly native to this spot in the woods, so far from Boston and their life and her cautionary and conservative upbringing. She looked, Noah thought as he sat back for the last sip of his beer, more like his wife in that instant than in any other moment of their life together. It wouldn’t have been possible for him to say that he loved her any better, but neither could he remember a moment in their history to match the intensity of his conviction that here was the woman whose wisdom in all things made him a finer man, finer for the life with her and finer for the child she would—he was suddenly convinced again—bear to this world and to their family. With this thought came another: that whenever that child did come, Noah would no longer reign in the boundlessness of her love, that that kingdom was forfeit to the child. He remembered his feeling on the dock not an hour earlier about his own father, about being a son, a child, and this salved him, tempered the prospect of losing what had always been so rightly and generously his, what Nat had so automatically and completely given. He was glad of this knowledge, glad for the realization he supposed many people had too late. Gladder still was he for the renewed commitment.

When Nat unpacked the krumkake and offered to make coffee, both men declined. Instead they nibbled at the waffle cookies with sad, waning enthusiasm. Enough food still lay on the table for three more such feasts, the black pot congealing in its cream, the lutefisk gelatinous in the cardboard container, the lefse stacked like tortillas in a plastic bag. They talked for an hour as if such repasts were a weekly occurrence. Natalie told Olaf about her work with her usual seriousness on the
subject. Olaf listened. Noah listened. She talked about Noah’s business in a way that he could not, speaking of it in terms both historical and fiduciary. Noah heard things he’d not heard before, things like why she really encouraged him to buy the business, how it fit into their retirement years down the road, what she herself found interesting about it. She spoke of the maps as a metaphor, but did not elaborate on meanings. Though Noah understood perfectly what she meant, he supposed that his father did not, unless, of course, old age and their estrangement had yielded in the old man a capacity for things not literal, for things not plainly said. Finally Olaf labored up.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘If I were younger now’s the time I would have gone outside for a smoke. Might have finished the night with a finger of hootch. But I’ll be goddamned lucky to make it to bed. Noah, you mind stoking the fire for me?’ He didn’t wait for Noah to respond. ‘Natalie, I don’t have thanks enough. What an unexpected treat to see you. To get to know you a little better.’

‘The treat was mine,’ she said.

‘I’m off to bed if you two will clean this mess up for me.’ He took a couple steps towards his bedroom door, turned, ‘Noah could tell you how early I rise, but I sleep like I’m dead until then. Good night.’

Noah and Nat said goodnight together.

‘Where does a girl go the bathroom around here?’

‘The outhouse is in the woods, up a path behind the shed. I’ll get the flashlight and go with you.’

‘You don’t need to go with me, just point me the right way.’

‘Really?’
‘What do you mean, really? I’m a big girl.’

While Noah cleared the table and put the food away, Natalie sat on the sofa with her feet tucked beneath her, a glass of water in her hand, and the sweater folded beside her. She commented quietly on the inventory of the cabin. ‘What does he do up here?’

‘So far he fishes and tells stories. And drinks coffee.’

‘Can you imagine living here?’

‘There’s a radio show he listens to in the morning sometimes. I guess he reads some too.’

‘Wouldn’t you get lonely?’

‘Of course I would, but I’m not him.’

Nat looked at him. ‘You two aren’t so different.’

‘Really?’

She looked at him again, a look to quell further inquiry, a look to suggest he knew of what she spoke. ‘He was so sweet, Noah. While you were down at the lake we just sat here and talked like long lost friends.’

‘How’d you know I was down at the lake?’

‘He told me.’

‘How did he know?’

‘Oh Noah, how should I know? Anyway, we talked about everything. My trip. The wildlife up here, he got me scared of the bears and wolves. We talked about food.'
Did you know he makes himself pasties every Sunday night? Can’t you picture it? I don’t even know what a pasty is.’

Noah finished cleaning. He leaned on the counter listening.

‘He’s sweet.’

‘Sweet?’

‘You know what I mean. He’s different. For sure. And he’s so happy you’re here. That’s just plainly obvious.’ She took a small wooden box from the shelf behind the sofa. She opened it. Within were photographs, a pipe, a skeleton key. An old fountain pen.

Noah sat down next to her. ‘My grandpa carved that box, I’m sure of it. I think it was a gift for my mom. Maybe it was for Solveig.’

Nat handed him the pictures. They were all of Noah’s mother. So beautiful. One of his parents on their wedding day. One with Solveig on her mother’s lap, little more than an infant. ‘Jesus, the things I’m finding around here,’ Noah said. He put the pipe in his mouth.

Natalie took the pictures from him. She took the pipe. She repacked the box and set it back on the shelf. She sipped her water. ‘So, are you glad I’m here or not?’

Noah put his arm around her, kissed her, took a deep breath. ‘It’s going to work this time. I know it. I had a premonition.’

‘Premonitions now? Well that’s good. I took a shot yesterday after work. The ovodril. I should be ready to go.’

‘Ready to go, huh?’ Noah leaned in and kissed her neck.
‘This is so weird,’ she said, pushing him away but not meaning it. ‘That’s the other bedroom right there? There’s not much room for privacy, is there?’

‘We can be quiet.’

But how to be quiet on that bed, in that house so used to its own silence? How to be quiet when the only other sound was the stovefire and a dying gale outside in the woods, in that wilderness? Noah had lit a candle, a light so faint its amber glow left the last corner of the bedroom in a still and minor darkness. He set it on the nightstand. At the foot of the bed, that narrow span of pine board floor, they undressed, hanging their clothes on the bed posts for want of anyplace else to lay them. They whispered about the quietude. When they kissed—there at the foot of the bed—the touching of their lips seemed to them as loud as a drumbeat.

Natalie said again, ‘This is so weird.’

But Noah put his finger to her lips and led her to the side of the bed. He pulled back the covers. When Nat lay down the ancient bedsprings tolled, whole bugle songs announcing their intentions. When she put her arms around him she also put her mouth to his ear, ‘Your skin is cold,’ she said. ‘You smell good. Like the air up here.’

‘What time is it?’ she wondered.

Noah angled his watch towards the candle light. ‘It’s only nine o’clock.’

‘God, it feels like three o’clock in the morning.’

‘It’s always earlier than it seems up here.’

She took his hand under the quilt. ‘So, do you think you got me? You think there’s anything going on down there?’ She moved his hand to the bottom of her
stomach. ‘The doctor said there were at least six follicles that were large enough to release. We could have sextuplets.’

‘I’d take anything, but better to start with one.’

‘What,’ she said, shifting her weight up onto an elbow and looking at Noah, the candle aglow in her eyes, ‘don’t you think I’d make a capable mother of six? I thought my performance tonight with the Norwegian food was quite a tune-up.’

‘Some of that food was pretty good.’

‘I think I’m going to eat lefse every day now.’

Noah kissed her. ‘That kafe with a K is probably the only one of its sort in the country. Better not get used to the idea of lefse everyday.’

She lay back down. The bedsprings creaked again.

‘It was terrific, all the food. My dad loved it. So did I to tell the truth.’

Outside the gale was weakening. Noah listened to the trees still swaying gently. ‘Every night the wind dies down up here,’ he said.

‘God, speaking of wind, you should have felt that plane land in Duluth this afternoon. It was terrible. But the view from the window was amazing. We circled out over Lake Superior. I could see the city below. There was a ship outside the harbor. We flew right over it. And there were these veins of reddish brown water curlicuing from the shore out into the lake.’

‘Those are the creeks and rivers. Wherever they run into the lake they bring with them the color of the rocks and soil.’

‘It was so pretty. And I love Duluth. But cold.’

‘That’s how everyone feels. The but cold part.’
She snuggled next to him. 'Not here, though.'

'Definitely not here.'

They lay silently for a while. Noah thought she had fallen asleep. He was about to get up to stoke the fire when she said, 'I hope you don't think I'm crazy, Noah. For coming here I mean.'

Noah started to say something but she kept talking. 'I'm sure this isn't even going to work, but it's like I have to try. We have to try. Why else are we on this earth?'

Noah sat up on his elbow now. 'I definitely don't think you're crazy. I'm so glad you came. I've spent all day thinking about it. I guess I decided I owe you an apology for not matching your determination. All this time trying, I guess it's just taken it out of me. You too, I know. Of course you more than me.' He lay down. 'I don't know, I think all the failing, watching you be so sad all the time . . .'

'You were sad too.'

'Of course I was, but it's different. It just is.'

'I don't know if I agree with you, but I know what you're saying.'

Again they lay silently, Noah stroking her hair, and again he thought she'd fallen asleep.

'Anyway, even if it doesn't work I'm glad I came.'

Noah squeezed her hand. 'I had this realization today, another one. If we do have a baby, when we have a baby, I realize that you're going to be the best mother ever. I also realize that I won't be the most important person in your life anymore. I'm okay with that.'
‘What in the world are you talking about?’

‘I mean once we become parents things will be different. A son or a daughter, they demand a lot of love. Especially if you’re a good parent, which you will be. That’s all.’

‘Only a man would say something like that. Only a man would be capable of thinking something like that.’ She seemed annoyed. ‘I think only the son of your father would come up with that nonsense.’

‘I didn’t mean for it to sound bad. I just thought about it.’

‘I’m not mad, Noah. It just doesn’t make any sense. Anyway, don’t worry about it. I couldn’t love you any less if I had a million kids.’

And now she did fall asleep. Noah put on his shorts. He went out and stoked the fire. He blew out the candle.

Some time before dawn in a stillness complete, Noah lay awake. Even the stove fire’s hiss was absent. Even the sound of her breath. He ought to sleep, he knew, was tired enough to do so, but the confluence of so many thoughts kept him from his slumber. Happy for its absence, he relished the feeling of being this cabin’s protector. He was happier still for the company of his wife in that old bed.

After a time he heard his father’s door open and his feet padding across the great room floor. He heard him first fill and then swallow a glass of water, heard the glass set on the counter. By his reckoning of the previous mornings, he made the time four or five. The first sight of the sun two or three hours away. Still there shone the faintest of lights in the uncurtained window. He stepped out of bed, pulled the quilt
up over Nat’s shoulder. She pushed her hair from her face but did not wake. He moved into the great room as the door outside closed with a quiet clap. Noah watched from the window his father cross the yard to the shed. Rather he watched an apparition of his father, one blurred by the flashlight’s bouncing. The windows in the shed were soon bright. When Noah stepped outside to piss, he could feel the frost melting under his bare feet. There were stars enough to see a mile.

Inside he stoked the fire and put a kettle of water on. He readied the coffee in the filter and put two of the leftover krumkake on a plate. He wished he had a newspaper to read. When the water boiled he made the coffee. He poured a cup and pulled the pea coat over his bare shoulders. With the flashlight to guide him he took the coffee and cookies to his father in the shed.

‘I thought I heard you milling around,’ Olaf said over his shoulder. He was separating two small piles of nuts and bolts on his workbench.

‘I brought you some coffee.’ Noah set the plate of cookies and the coffee on the bench. ‘This is it, huh?’ he asked, gesturing towards the anchor.

Olaf nodded his head. ‘Thanks for the coffee. Didn’t want to wake you two.’

‘I figured as much.’

Olaf took a long drink of the coffee. He took from a drawer at his knees a cigar and unwrapped it. He bit off the end but did not light it, though he held a match between his fingers. ‘You sleep okay?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Natalie staying a while?’

‘I’m afraid she has to leave this morning.’
Olaf smiled. A devilish look.

‘I know.’

‘She’s about a hundred times the woman I remember from your wedding. What I remember from your wedding, anyway.’

‘She’s the best.’

Olaf took another drink of coffee. ‘Well.’

‘Well, I guess I’m going back to bed.’

‘I’ll be out here for a while. We’ll have some oatmeal when you all wake up.’

‘Good.’

As Noah left the shed he could smell the first licks of cigar smoke.

He undressed and climbed back into bed. In a voice groggy and pleased Natalie asked him what time it was.

‘A little after five o’clock. Go back to sleep.’

‘What were you doing up?’

‘Nothing, go back to sleep.’

He had almost fallen asleep himself when he heard her whisper, ‘Look at all those stars still out.’

Noah put his arm around her.

‘Is your father still sleeping?’

‘No, he’s out working in his shed.’

‘I have terrible breath,’ she said.

‘That’s okay,’ he said, and again they made love.
When they’d finished Nat took her pillow from behind her head and put it under her bottom. There was a light beyond the stars now in the window, and they looked upon it. They lay so for a long time, both of them awake and silent. Her hair still smelled of its shampoo. Her skin so soft under his hands now rough with callous. He felt relieved of all duty, though he knew better. He felt exhausted, but oddly restored next to her there in bed. He felt gluttonous. It was, perhaps, the most luxuriant hour of his year.

Finally Noah said, ‘What time do you have to leave?’

‘My flight’s at one. I guess I should leave at nine.’

Noah didn’t say anything, only held her.

‘Unless you need me to stay for anything.’ She rolled over to look at his face, put her pillow back under her head. ‘Do you?’

‘What would I need you for?’

‘I don’t know. I could help you take care of him. We could try to bring him to the hospital. Whatever.’

‘He’ll never go to the hospital, and I don’t blame him anymore. It’s his life. We’ll be okay. I can take care of him.’

‘What about your sister?’

‘She’s going to come when she can. Whenever that is. She’s really upset, but she can’t just leave at a moment’s notice. Tom is busy. The kids are busy.’

‘I feel so weird just leaving like this. Your father must think it so strange.’

‘He knows you’re leaving. He knows what’s going on. He even told me I should have gone back to Boston.’
‘I guess this all worked out.’

‘It did. I hope it did.’

‘How long are you going to stay? What’s your plan?’

‘I have no idea. And I have no idea.’

After breakfast Nat was ready to leave. She stood at the open door of her rental car and bid Olaf thanks. It was a crisp, wintry day, the sun cold but brilliant. Noah tossed her small bag into the backseat of the car. She kissed Olaf on the cheek. She kissed Noah on the lips. She squeezed his hand.

‘Be careful driving back to Duluth,’ Olaf said. ‘The deer will be out for breakfast themselves. They sit in the ditch next to the road. Ask him about it.’ He nodded his head at Noah.

‘I hit one on the way up here.’ He pointed at the dented car next to hers.

‘I’ll call the insurance company when I get home.’

‘Okay.’

Olaf moved towards the house. ‘I’m going inside. It was good to see you. Thanks again for that meal last night. It beat hell out of instant mashed potatoes.’

‘We’ll do it again some time,’ Nat said. ‘Take care of yourself.’

Olaf nodded. ‘Goodbye.’

Nat smiled.

‘Well, I better get going. It’s two lefts and a right, right?’

‘A right at Lake Superior. And do watch out for the deer.’
She put her arms around his shoulders and hugged him. He hugged her back very hard. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘we did it.’

‘I hope you’re right, and I love you too.’ She stood back. ‘Call me when you know what you’re doing.’

‘I will.’

She stepped into the car. He leaned to kiss her again and then closed the door. She kissed her fingers and put them to the window. He mouthed goodbye. He mouthed the word love.
All day Olaf slept while Noah split and stacked wood. Vikar had emerged from the woods to watch, and at noon Noah fed him a bucket of food. His own lunch he took to the top of the ski jump again, leftover black pot and lefse unbuttered, a pocketful of peanuts he'd bought the other day at The Landing. Vikar followed him, but would not climb the scaffold. After lunch he went back to the gulch to inspect the oak. He tried to devise a plan. He needed a much bigger saw, simple as that. He would ask his father about it.

He checked on his father at one o'clock. The old man still slept, deeply but with great agitation. Noah went down to the lake to fish. He rowed across the lake to the spot off the cliff. He set his line in the water. He waited. He thought of his sister.

The last time Noah had seen Solveig was four months earlier, at little Tommy's fifth birthday party. Big Tommy, her husband, had inherited his parent's house on Lake Lida, a little place southeast of Fargo on the Minnesota prairie. The shindig had been planned for there. Noah and Nat made the trip against his better judgment and only after Solveig assured him their father would not be there. The old
man, she had told him, couldn’t come because, as he said, he was knee deep in chores and summer was closing fast. This was June.

Although Noah loved Solveig’s kids, loved his sister, too, and had even grown able to tolerate Big Tom’s backslapping and home brewed beer, he knew the sight of that brood would sadden Natalie. Knew it would crush her just to see them.

When they pulled into the paved turnaround in the Town Car they’d rented at the Fargo airport and saw the spread—the basketball hoop in the driveway, the lilacs and gladiolas and perfectly trimmed hedges, the three open garage doors with two brand new cars and his vintage Mustang, worst of all the new vinyl siding they’d heard so much about at Christmas the year before—he knew it would have been wiser to turn around without stopping. He didn’t. When Big Tom came bounding out of the house with no shirt on and three cans of beer, it was too late. Big Tom handed them each a beer. They toured the estate.

And it was an estate. After poking their heads into each of the six bedrooms, each of the five bathrooms, the family room, the dining room, the kitchen and sun porch and formal living room with the thirty foot brick fireplace, Big Tom led them to the basement and a place he inexplicably called the Aardvark room. Here hockey trophies of every size and mounted deer heads decorated the walls. A Boflex machine and dumbbells sat well-used on the floor. After he challenged either of them to punch him in his hairy gut, after both Noah and Nat laughed uncomfortably and declined, he led them out a sliding glass door onto a stone patio. The patio overlooked a two-acre back yard.
This," Big Tom had said, taking a little bow, ‘is the lawn. They ought to play the Masters here, huh?’

And goddamn if they couldn’t have, Noah thought. The lawn was perfect, the grassiest green he’d ever seen, mown in a crisscross pattern like the outfield at Fenway. On the left it sloped gently down to a border of trees and the lake. On the right up to a picket fence and carriage house complete with pastel-painted bargeboard and ornate stained glass windows. In the middle of the lawn, on a manicured knoll, a screened-in gazebo sat flanked by a flagpole and birdhouse of equal height.

‘That’s the hot tub,’ Big Tom said. He pointed at the gazebo. ‘We’ll soak our asses off in there after the kids go to bed. And that,’ he pointed now at the carriage house, ‘is where you guys will stay. Plenty of privacy, right?’ he winked lewdly at Noah.

‘Speaking of the kids, where are they?’ Nat said, trying her level best to stay cheery.

‘Down at the lake. This way.’ Big Tom drained his beer, crushed it between his hands, and dropped it in an empty flower pot on the patio. It clattered among many other such cans.

On the dock Little Tommy knelt, crushing crayfish with a ball peen hammer. Solveig towed the two toddlers around in a rubber raft, up to her waist in the inviting water. She didn’t see them at first.

‘Hey,’ Big Tom yelled, his voice booming, ‘put that hammer down. Come say hello to your aunt and uncle.’
The child persisted, flattened crayfish dropping into the water now food for turtles. Solveig waved hello and scooped the two tykes out of the raft. She waded to shore, handed the boy to Noah, the girl to Solveig. Both kids bawled.

‘Don’t feel bad,’ Solveig said, kissing first Noah then Nat. ‘They’ve been crying since the day they were born.’

The weekend did not disappoint. It was disastrous. After forty-eight hours of speedboats and pontoon cruises, after bratwurst and country music, after midnight bottle rockets lit off the dock, and finally after a Sunday birthday party with eighteen five-year-olds bobbing for apples and prancing through sprinklers on the lawn, Noah and Nat got back into the Town Car, waved goodbye, and drove back to the airport in Fargo. Natalie sat silent until the plane landed at Logan, and when they got home, she let loose. ‘Why should that guy have the three most beautiful children in the world and we can’t have one? He’s more interested in those goddamn deer heads stuffed on his wall than he is in his wife. And your poor sister—who would even let her husband walk around in his college hockey jersey? Who would let her husband wear a t-shirt that says BIG TOM on it? And that house. Does he think he’s the president of the United States? Maybe he should spend less time fertilizing that lawn and changing the oil in his Mustang and more time teaching his son that it’s not okay to kill crayfish for sport.’

Noah sat silently, sharing her dismay about Tom but having enjoyed the weekend in spite of him. ‘She’s my sister, Nat. I have to love her regardless of the t-shirts Tom wears around the house.’
‘I love her, too. But that doesn’t answer the question. Why does that guy get to have kids and not us?’

This sort of injustice plagued her, though Noah did not share in her view that it reflected some cosmological imbalance.

‘We’ll have kids, Nat,’ he had said at the time. The tone of his voice suggesting to both of them that he no longer believed it.

Now, sitting at the face of the cliff he thought otherwise, he actually believed what he’d said. Nat’s visit and their lovemaking seemed cosmological, seemed profound and affirmative in a way he’d not thought of it since the first time they’d visited the Mirendorf Clinic those years ago. He had an impulse to pray but did not. Instead he rowed back across the lake.

For the second day in a row an unexpected car sat in the yard. It had North Dakota plates.

Inside Solveig sat on the sofa beside their father, her arm around him. She wept. Olaf, his eyes glassy, his hair messed from the long day of sleep, looked both thrilled and desperate. He had a color in his cheeks Noah had not noticed was missing until now. ‘I wish you wouldn’t have asked her to come,’ Olaf said before either of his children could speak.

‘I didn’t ask her to come.’

‘Of course I’d come, Dad.’ She put her hand through his hair.

‘Well there’s no need to bawl,’ Olaf said.

‘Come on, Dad.’
‘I’m okay,’ Solveig almost sang. ‘I’m glad I’m here.’

‘When did you get here?’

‘Just now. I can only stay for a couple days. The kids are with Tom’s folks.’

She took a deep breath, trying, Noah thought, to stop crying.

‘Well this is great,’ he said. ‘Here we all are.’

As roseate as the previous night had been, this night was dour. Solveig, for her part, seemed immobilized by her grief at the sight of the old man. No question he had worsened from the day previous, but even Noah thought his sister’s worry exaggerated. Olaf could hardly stand it. The thought occurred to Noah that Solveig was handling her father’s illness much as his mother had handled his missing so many years ago. Though in many ways she was as sweet and incorruptible as his mother, Solveig was also the child of a different generation and what had been forgivable in his mother was less so in his sister.

Instead of eating dinner the three of them snacked intermittently on leftovers from the night before. They drank coffee and seemed incapable of coherent conversation. Finally Olaf asked Noah to bring the piano in from the porch.

The old Acrosonic sat in a corner of the porch, buried beneath mounds of old junk—a fishing net, empty boot boxes, a telescope with a cracked lens, empty bags of dog food—against the lake wall. Noah cleared a path, unlocked the wheels on the legs of the piano, and rolled it into the living room. A long time ago, Noah remembered, the piano had been refinished with a deep, wine-colored varnish. Now the glassy finish was obscured by a patina of something gauze-like, something borne by years of neglect and the harsh extremes and moisture on the porch. Solveig had cleared the
books from the shelves beside the chair and was sliding one of them into the second bedroom.

‘It’s a ghost piano,’ Noah said. ‘Doesn’t it look like a ghost?’

‘Been on that porch for the better part of ten years,’ Olaf said. ‘I should have taken better care of it.’

‘It’s not as if you play, Dad,’ Solveig consoled. ‘And besides, this house isn’t exactly built for a piano. They take up a lot of room.’

‘Even so,’ Olaf said. ‘It’s a shame.’

Noah had wheeled it across the floor and was positioning it against the wall. ‘Toss me a dishrag,’ he said to Solveig, who stood at the kitchen counter now with her hands on her hips. She flipped him the rag.

Noah had hoped that dusting it off and getting it in the soft lamplight might restore some of its luster. It looked perhaps worse, looked even more like a ghost. When he lifted the cover off the keys and stood over them playing chopsticks, its wail startled him. Every third or fourth key failed to strike any note at all, and the keys that did hit the strings sounded more like shrieks than music.

He looked over his shoulder at Solveig who covered her ears with her hands. ‘We’ll get a piano tuner up here. You can’t play on this now.’ He stood, closed the keyboard cover, and wiped his hands on his pants.

‘Good luck getting a piano tuner up here,’ Olaf said. ‘You’re in Misquah, not Boston or Fargo.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Noah said as he headed back onto the porch to retrieve the bench. ‘We’ll find a piano tuner.’
As he rummaged through the mounds of rubbish he could hear Solveig giving the piano another try, some wail approximating a classical number. By the time he’d found the bench under an old kerosene stove Solveig had mercifully quit playing. He lugged the bench into the living room, set it before the piano, and wiped his hands. ‘We’ve got to clean that porch up,’ Noah said.

Olaf said nothing, a look of despondency conveying all. He stood, kissed Solveig atop the head, and adjourned to his bedroom.

Noah and Solveig sat opposite each other on the sofa. Noah was flush again from the heat of the fire. He felt exhausted beyond sleep. ‘I’m not wrong about this, am I?’ he said. ‘He’s in as bad of shape as I thought, right?’

‘I think so,’ Solveig said. Her voice quavered, but she kept from crying again.

‘He’s building some goddamn contraption out in the shed.’

‘I know. He told me about what happened this morning.’

‘Saying what?’

‘That he wants you to bury him in the lake. He said nothing more than that, nothing to my pleading.’ She paused. ‘We can’t bury him in the lake, Noah.’

‘Of course we can’t.’

‘I told him we would bury him in a cemetery properly. I told him he didn’t need to do an eternal penance for something that happened thirty-five years ago and was entirely out of his control.’

‘I bet he loved hearing that.’

‘He didn’t say anything.’

‘Of course he didn’t.’
She folded the afghan and draped it over the back of the sofa. 'I talked to Tom about having him come to stay with us. He was wonderful. He said he'd do whatever I wanted to, that we could hire a nurse to live with us.'

'That's awfully generous.'

'I'm sure there's no way he'll do it, though,' she said. 'He's got other plans in mind now. I can see that clearly.'

Olaf came out of his bedroom. He stepped outside and returned in a moment. He prepared the water and effervescing tablets for his teeth. He said goodnight again.

'Where were we,' Solveig said.

'We were getting nowhere as fast as anyone ever has,' Noah replied.

They talked for a couple more hours about what to do. Answers loomed impossibly behind their father's bedroom door, loomed in his curmudgeonly resolve to do things his own way. Solveig was inconsolable. Noah finally realized how necessary sleep was. His body ached. Somewhere in the intersection of his fatigue and forlornness he caught a glimpse of the old man's reason, saw how it might all measure out, even saw the point of Olaf's willingness to call it quits. He shared none of this with Solveig. They decided to sleep on it.

But before they could sleep Solveig needed to use the loo.

Outside the wind drove sleet into the nape of Noah's neck. He shone the flashlight down the trail while Solveig held his arm. They might have been walking to the theater. When they got to the rickety outhouse, Noah pulled the door open, shined the light into the stinking wooden box, and handed her the flashlight as she stepped in. It was cold outside but not bitter. He doubted he'd have even heard the wolves
were they howling, the wind was that strong. In the crack between the rotten outhouse floor and the mossy door, a dim strip of light disrupted the otherwise imperturbable darkness. He ought to have felt the old fears but he did not. In the few minutes he stood there waiting he began to feel almost reckless. He lifted his face to the piercing sleet, raised his arms to expose all of himself, and laughed out loud, though he could not hear himself.

Back inside Solveig said, ‘God that place is creepy, especially at night. I’ve hated it my whole life.’

Noah said, ‘Just think of all the times someone’s gone out to that shithole in the middle of the night. Has anything ever happened to anyone? The odds are on your side.’

‘I guess, but it still gives me the willies.’ She was turning out the lamps.

Noah had already collapsed onto the sofa, already slipped off his jeans.

‘Doesn’t it give you the willies?’ she asked. But Noah was fast falling asleep.

Goddamn, the dreams.

Serpents wound around sinking ships with icicles for fangs, fandangoed to piano songs in harmony with the wailing of a wounded wolf, one bleeding from the rectum. Fire and lightning. And in the middle of the pandemonium, Noah himself swinging the blunt end of the splitting maul at the storm. Over and over the scenes repeated themselves until they diffused into a grayer sleep and he dreamt about softer things.

He dreamt about Nat.
It was a heavy sleep, and deep. Sometime in the middle of the night Noah woke with a start for one groggy second. He saw his father asleep on the chair, collapsed at the neck as if he were only flesh and billowing gray hair.
The patter of rainwater on the roof woke him. As he strained to hear his father or sister stirring in their bedrooms he could only make out the thumping in his own head. The rain streaming over the gutters and cascading down the windows blurred the morning. He thought of going back to sleep, even rolled over to do so, but decided he’d already slept too long and too hard. He stepped out of bed, felt the entirety of his fatigue, remembered his labor the day before. He remembered his dreams, too, and he replayed them with a child’s intuitiveness. The meaning never arrived.

Both of the bedrooms were empty, both beds made. The fire was as temperate as it had been since he arrived. He looked out the window and saw only his father’s antique Suburban. He wondered where they were for the few seconds it took him to don his boots and the rain slicker, but as he stepped outside to go to the outhouse—his body loosening with each movement—he gave up on the thought of them and felt an enormous relief in their absence. Given the weather, he could justify a day on the couch.

Except for the torrential, freezing rain, the morning had ascended as calmly as the night before had set riotously. All of the pine trees sagged under the deluge. Even the hardwoods—the poplar and aspen and birch—were limp of limb. The wind,
though, was gone, and as he sat on the stoop with the outhouse door open watching the rainfall, he imagined the rain was quelling the wind, was drowning it.

When he got back inside he put a kettle of water on the stove for coffee. He stirred the embers with the poker, set another log into the stove, fanned it with the bellows. Since he’d been here he’d felt a near constant sense of responsibility. Any moment not spent doing something was one spent wondering what he ought to be doing. Now, though, as the stove fire warmed the room and loosened his taut shoulders, he felt no obligation whatever. He sat on the floor in front of the stove and waited for the water to boil. When it did he got up and made a pot of coffee.

He looked through the refrigerator for breakfast but found nothing. He took his coffee to the piano and tried to finger the first few bars of an old piano lesson standard, but between the lamentable tune and his own sorry playing, he gave up after his first try. He washed what few dishes lay in the sink. He put another kettle of water on for bathwater. He stood at the window for a long while watching the rain. Finally he took two magazines from the table and settled back onto the sofa.

The first was a two-year-old hunting magazine full of Remington rifle and NRA advertisements, features on hoof and mouth disease and elk hunting in Wyoming. Nothing to interest him at all. The second magazine was the Wisconsin Lawyer his father had been reading a few days earlier. He checked the table of contents, turned to the shipwreck article.

He read it twice, bored first by the tedious and arcane legal language and rules, and then by the clichéd images of Spanish frigates sunk with Kings’ ransoms off the coast of America. And though the article was pedantic and forgettable, it did
trick him into a question that he spent much of the morning pondering: What was left of his father, his mother, his sister, even himself on the bottom of Lake Superior?

He pictured his father's berth on the Ragnarok, a place he knew well from the summer cruises to Toledo and Cleveland and Ashtabula that he'd taken as a child. He could envision the porthole windows and the steel bulkheads, the riveted floor and the braided rug his father kept at the foot of the diminutive bed—too short by two feet for his father—that he made every morning. He remembered the officer's desk opposite the bed—mahogany, indestructible, stately, with an inlaid glass top—bolted to the bulkhead. He remembered pictures of the four of them beneath the desktop, the sense of awe it gave him to think that a picture of him should be included in a place so sacred. He remembered the narrow locker in the corner of the berth, the black steel-toed boots polished to a dead flat shine that sat on the floor beneath the sweaters and coats hanging from pegs. Pictures hung on the inside of the locker door, too, one of them Noah himself, mid-flight on the bunny ears jump in Chester Bowl at the age of five. He tried to recall the contents of the dresser drawers but of that he never knew, so he filled them with the necessities: black socks, crisp BVDs, a shaving kit, a framed picture of his mother.

As far as Noah understood, the article suggested that all of these things no longer belonged to his father but to the state of Michigan or Minnesota, depending on which state's territorial water the wreckage rested in. It seemed unfair that some state historical society owned that part of his past, that the calamity of November sixth, 1967, hadn't been damaging enough, hadn't taken the perfection of his childhood and
crushed it, but that any proof of that perfection, even were it salvageable, wouldn't be his for the taking.

The kettle whistle blew. Noah mixed it with cold water from the ten-gallon drum under the sink. He washed and shaved, stood naked at the kitchen basin. He felt a firmness in his shoulders he'd not noticed for many years. He dressed in clean clothes, the last such pair of drawers, the last such t-shirt and pants. A pair of cotton socks. He took the key to his father's truck from a nail pounded into the window sill and went out to the truck. The torrent had given over to drizzle, lucky for Noah. The windshield wipers only worked on one slow intermittent speed.

From the payphone at The Landing he called Natalie. Now even the drizzle had ceased and reddish water lay in pools all over the gravel parking lot, none of them reflecting sky. She answered on the second ring. 'I was hoping you'd call,' she said.

'How are you? How was the trip home?'

'I'm good, it was uneventful. When I got here there was a package waiting for me.'

Noah remembered the agate.

'I love it. It's so pretty.'

'I'm glad.'

'It's the exact color of my eyes. Did you plan that?'

'Of course.' Noah felt giddy, almost as he had when they first dated. The sound of her voice then filled him with boyish glee.

'How's your father.'
'We’re a stopover for damsels in distress now. Solveig came yesterday, the two of them are off somewhere.'

'Solveig’s there?'

'Unannounced. I didn’t think she’d be coming so soon.'

'How is she?'

'A complete wreck. So is my Dad. It’s like he’s worse for her company. I don’t get it.'

'I’m sure it’s hard for both of them. I missed you this morning. It’s not the same reading the paper in bed without you.'

'Is it Sunday?' he asked. 'I had no idea.'

She filled him in on several details. Her travel plans for the week. A conversation she’d had with Ed about the shop. He was fine. She was going to go to her parents’ house to watch the Patriots game later that afternoon. ‘But no beer for this one,’ she said. ‘I really feel like I’m pregnant.’

'It was one day ago, Nat.'

'I don’t mean physically feel, I mean I have a feeling.'

'I hope you’re right.'

She took an audible breath, a pleased breath. She said, ‘When are you coming home?’

‘I didn’t tell you this, but the day you got here, my father asked me to bury him in the lake when he dies.’

‘What do you mean, bury him in the lake?’
He replayed for her the conversation in the shed. He described as well as he could the anchor his father was fashioning from the barrel. He told her how he fled that conversation, how the prospect mortified him and his sister both. He described his utter confusion on all things relating to the old man. ‘And he told me about the wreck, most of it anyway.’

‘About his ship?’ the surprise in her voice was born of the countless conversations the two of them had had, conversations during which Noah had practically begged for details he knew only one man possessed. ‘What did he say?’

‘It would take me all day to tell you everything.’

‘Tell me something.’

‘Let’s just say I’m much wiser now. Still, I have no idea what to do with him, no idea at all. No idea when I’ll be home, that’s what I was getting at.’

In a tone very much at ease, she told him to take as long as he needed. She acknowledged that she was singing a different tune now, and for this she was both sorry and glad. He understood. He told her he would call her again when he knew anything. They each said I love you and goodbye.

He hadn’t noticed, standing outside The Landing, but the day had become frigid. Already in the middle afternoon ice had formed along the edges of the shallow pools atop the splitting stumps. Solveig’s car was still gone. Vikar lay curled atop the steps, the stink of his wet coat pervasive as Noah stepped over him. Only the dog’s eyes moved to check Noah’s step. The feeling of relief that had greeted him that morning
had given over to something between agitation and annoyance as he wondered where they had gone. Would a note have been too much trouble?

He boiled hot dogs for an early dinner and lay sprawled on the sofa afterwards, the walls and all they held becoming familiar now. He dozed and then got up to stoke the fire. Then he slept, waking to darkness and the sound of Olaf and Solveig returning.

When they came inside—his father first, held at the elbow by Solveig, the old man swaddled in full winter wear again—Noah sat up to meet them. Olaf looked at Noah with faraway eyes. Solveig appeared drained, her eyes swollen, her face splotchy.

‘Where have you been?’ Noah asked. ‘I’ve been worried.’

Solveig helped Olaf out of his coat, she led him to the chair. ‘I left you a note,’ she said.

‘Where?’ Noah looked under the magazines and mess on the table.

‘We left so early this morning. I didn’t want to wake you.’

Olaf sat down heavily.

‘Are you all right?’ Noah said.

Olaf looked at Solveig

‘He’s okay. We went to the hospital in Duluth. That’s where we’ve been, that’s why we’ve been gone so long.’

‘You went to the hospital?’ Noah asked his father.
Solveig spoke for Olaf. 'We talked about it yesterday, Noah. While you were outside I guess.' Solveig had found the note under the table. She handed it to Noah. 'Don't be mad.'

Noah read, *Took Dad to St. Mary's. Be gone all day. Wanted to tell you but he wouldn't let me. Sorry. Love, Sol.*

Noah was shocked. He read the note again, folded it, put it in his shirt pocket. 'Well?' he said, at a loss for words.

'Let's get Dad to bed, then we can talk.'

'Good idea,' Olaf said, his first words since arriving. 'I can get to bed myself.'

While Olaf tended to his dentures, Solveig took several small plastic bottles from a white paper bag. She sorted a half dozen prescriptions. After Olaf stashed his teeth and poured himself a glass of water he kissed Solveig goodnight. 'Will you stoke the fire?' he asked Noah.

Noah stood immediately, fetched two logs for the fire.

Solveig caught Olaf by the arm. 'Take these, Dad,' she said.

Olaf looked at the pills in the palm of her hand. He took them from her and went into his bedroom.

'How did you... all those pills... he looked so...'

'Come sit over here,' she said, patting the couch. She straightened up, wiped her eyes dry with the heels of her hands.

'I'll stand,' Noah said.

'Don't be upset, Noah.'
‘Of course I’m not upset,’ he assured her. ‘I just don’t understand how you got him to the hospital. What did they say?’

‘They did tests. They took a lot of blood. They did a proctology exam and took tissue samples. X-rays. They wanted him to stay of course.’

‘Of course he wouldn’t.’

‘No.’ She trembled visibly. ‘I’m so sorry we went without you. I wanted you to come, but Dad wouldn’t hear of it.’

‘Don’t worry. Just tell me what they said.’

‘The prescriptions, they’re mainly to help with pain. The doctor said he must have a lot of discomfort. The proctology exam showed advanced signs. She said the first test results would be ready on Tuesday. You’re to call her at noon.’ She wrote the number down. ‘She said she’d be surprised—very surprised, she said—if they don’t confirm what she suspects, that the cancer is beyond treatment, that it is probably only a matter of time. She said he was a big strong man. That doesn’t mean anything, but it doesn’t hurt.’

‘How was Dad?’ Noah motioned to the bedroom door.

‘He hasn’t heard any of this. He told the doctor to tell me, said he didn’t want to know. I wish we hadn’t gone. I just thought maybe there was something they could do.’ She began to tear up again.

Noah sat down, put his arm around her. ‘Hey, they gave you prescriptions for the pain, that’s something at least. It’s good you took him. He should have gone sooner. Listen, we knew, like you said. You seem surprised.’
‘I’m not surprised, Noah. I’m sad. My father—our father—he’s dying. We should be sad. I should be able to cry.’

Noah only tightened his grip on her shoulder.

Soon she gathered herself. She asked for a glass of water, which Noah poured and brought her. She drank it all at once. She wiped her eyes with the sleeves of her shirt. ‘I only got him to go because he wanted to see the old house.’

‘In Duluth? The house on High Street?’

She nodded. ‘We went first thing, before the hospital. We were sitting there idling in front of it. The man who lived there, who must have lived there, was cleaning his gutters. He was up on a ladder. Dad just stared out the window. God, it was weird. It looked the same, just exactly the same. I felt ten years old again.’ She handed Noah the glass as if to ask for more water. Again he filled it and brought it to her.

‘After about ten minutes Dad said, “Enough.” Halfway to the hospital he said, just out of the blue he said, “A lot of times I couldn’t remember what our house looked like. Not lately, I mean when I was gone, out on the lakes. I’d try to picture it but couldn’t. I should have taken that for a bad sign.”

‘God it was sad, Noah. I told him how I used to wait for him to get home. I’d sit in the window in the living room and watch the harbor entrance.’

‘I’d do the same thing,’ Noah interrupted. ‘Before the wreck.’ He paused. ‘Maybe we were waiting for two different people.’

Solveig looked at him. ‘He loved us the same before and after. He just didn’t know how to feel about himself.’
‘It’s not so simple,’ Noah said.

‘What’s not simple?’

‘There’s a long list of things that aren’t simple about it.’

‘Maybe. Anyway, I could use a drink.’

‘So could I. Want me to make coffee?’

‘No, I don’t think so. I just want to talk about Dad.’

They recalled many things, pages from their childhoods missing in the other’s knowledge until then. Noah told her an abridged version of the story of their father’s boat. She marveled. She told Noah about Olaf’s tenderness with her children. She told Noah that she had to leave the next day, said they had to discuss what to do with Olaf. They talked long into the night and were exhausted in the end, retiring past midnight, Noah to a sleep absent of rest.

‘You baking a pie?’ Noah said, one eye closed, the other squinting at the dull shimmer of the kitchen light.

‘You could say that,’ Olaf said.

There were a dozen or more Mason jars sitting on the kitchen counter, each fuzzy with freezer burn. Olaf had two others under his arm. He was already dressed.

‘Seriously, what is all that?’

Olaf set the last jars on the counter. ‘This is for you and your sister.’

Noah had rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He stood and stretched. He yawned. He walked to the counter, picked up one of the jars and held it to the light.
Olaf took it from him and put it back on the counter. ‘Wait until your sister gets up. There’s coffee on the stove.’

Noah’s jeans hung on the chair. He hiked them on and poured a cup of coffee. ‘Want to tell me about the trip to Duluth yesterday?’

Olaf rearranged the jars into neat rows on the counter. ‘Your sister didn’t tell you about it?’

‘She told me some.’

‘I went for her.’

‘What did the doctor say?’

‘You’ll have to ask your sister that.’

‘Those prescriptions they gave you, are they making any difference?’

‘Will you grab that box and put it on the coffee table?’ Olaf said, pointing at the wooden whiskey crate from the restaurant.

Noah picked it up and moved it to the table. ‘The prescriptions?’

‘I didn’t take them.’

‘Of course you didn’t.’

Olaf poured himself another cup of coffee and sat down on the sofa. ‘Solveig drove me by the old house,’ he said.

‘She told me.’

‘It’s a nice house. Someone’s taking care of it.’

‘I give up, Dad.’

‘You give up?’

‘The doctor, the prescriptions, everything.’
Olaf smiled. ‘You promise?’

Together they reminisced about the old house. Memories like photographs. They laughed. Olaf told Noah about the night of his birth. Noah told Olaf about his forays into the old man’s office, how he’d pretend to be his father while the elder sailed the Great Lakes. After the sun rose Solveig emerged from her bedroom.

‘That coffee smells good,’ she said.

Noah got her a cup, stirred in a thimbleful of sugar. He put more water on to boil.

‘What’s all this?’ Solveig asked.

‘Noah,’ Olaf said, ‘there’s a box on the dresser in my room. Would you grab it for me?’

Noah did. He placed it before his father.

‘This,’ Olaf said, making a wide gesture that encompassed the room, the jars on the counter, the two boxes on the table, the house in general, ‘this stuff all belongs to you two. We have some business to take care of.’ He unscrewed a Mason jar. ‘This is your inheritance,’ he said, pulling a block of frozen hundred dollar bills from the jar. ‘Roundabout two hundred thousand dollars. You split it. On top of that, there’s another ten grand, plus or minus, in the bank. And a bunch of uncashed pension checks. I’ve endorsed them. They’re all in this file marked Lake Superior Savings and Loan. The bank is in Grand Marais. You’re both listed on the account.’

‘Jesus, Dad,’ Noah said, looking at Solveig whose face was frozen in shock. ‘That’s an awful lot of cash to have in the freezer.’
Olaf shook his head as if to agree. ‘A lifetime of savings,’ he said. ‘I don’t know how it works in terms of claiming the inheritance—tax-wise I mean—but you two can figure it out. You’re both beneficiaries on a small life insurance policy, too. By small I mean small, probably not worth a bag of bread crumbs.’ He furnished another file marked LIFE INSURANCE POLICY.

‘Aside from the cash all I have is the house and the land. People say property values up here are booming, but I have no idea what it’s worth. Anyway, don’t sell it. Your grandpa built this house and it belongs in the family.’

‘Slow down a minute,’ Noah said. He stood up, looked at the mason jars lining the counter. He counted them. There were eleven. ‘Hold on.’

‘Dad,’ Solveig said, her voice uncertain. ‘This is all very shocking.’

Olaf looked back and forth between them. ‘What’s shocking? I’m executing my will. This is something we have to do. Bear up, will you?’

‘If you give us all your money,’ Noah said, ‘what are you going to live on yourself?’

‘Oh Christ,’ Olaf said. ‘I don’t need money to live on. What do I need money for?’

At this Solveig buried her face in her hands. Noah stood in the middle of the room equidistant from the two of them. He felt his pulse quickening.

‘Sit down, would you, Noah? And stop moping, Solveig. You’ve moped enough, there’s no need for it.’

Solveig persisted. Noah could not move.

‘Please.’ Olaf said without kindness. ‘Sit down.’
Noah stepped to the chair and sat down with his arm around Solveig.

Olaf cleared his throat. ‘Listen you two, there are things you need to know about. Business, all right?’ Without waiting for a reply he continued. ‘This is the deed for the house. Taxes are paid through next year. They were twenty-eight hundred dollars this year. I’m putting all this information in a file called ESTATE.’ He held up a brown accordion file, then tied it shut.

‘The rest of this stuff is all yours.’ He took from the box something wrapped in newspaper. He tore it away. It was a ski jumping trophy. ‘Class five, first place, 1966,’ he read. ‘Duluth Junior Invitational.’

It was, Noah remembered, the first trophy he’d ever won. A brass-plated ski jumper in flight sat on a white marble base. He took it from his father. ‘I remember this. I remember the day. Before I got the trophy you told me I had to shake the man’s hand.’

‘There’s a box of these things out in the shed. I pulled this one. I remembered it too.’ He searched the box for a red folder. ‘This is yours,’ he said to Solveig, handing her the folder. Inside there was a Chopin score with a pink ribbon stapled to it.

She clearly recognized it.

‘You were a freshman in high school,’ Olaf said. ‘1979, third prize at the city competition. The only night I managed to keep sober between 1967 and 1997. I loved to listen to you play.’

He presented each of them with relics of their youth. Old report cards and school projects, acceptance letters to colleges, pictures of prom dates, newspaper
articles from the *Herald* about ski jumping tournaments, piano recitals, commendations for planting trees on Arbor Day. The right person might have fashioned a biography for either of them from the miscellany that now sat spread out on the coffee table. By the time he’d finished unpacking the folders and boxes, his energy was flagging. He had one box left.

‘These are your mother’s figurines,’ he said, unwrapping a miniature ceramic ballerina. ‘For the goddamn life of me I never understood her appreciation of these things.’ He unwrapped another figure, a two-inch-tall man in a tuxedo and top hat. He held it up as if to prove his point. ‘You get the picture,’ he said, wrapping them back in newspaper. ‘There’s other stuff too. Just be careful going through it. Who knows what’s hidden in this house.’

Noah got up, made another pot of coffee. When it was finished he refilled each of their cups. After he’d set the pot back on the stove he said, ‘Dad, who keeps their life savings in Mason jars? Why isn’t the money in the bank like it should be? Why isn’t it invested?’

‘Never my thing,’ Olaf said, as if the matter had but one simple answer. ‘The way I understood money is you got your paycheck, you cashed it, put a little in savings, a little in checking, otherwise you managed with what you had.’

‘We’re talking about two hundred thousand dollars as you tell it, Dad.’

‘And you want me to gamble all that money on the stock market?’

Solveig said, ‘What are we supposed to do with all of it?’

‘Whatever you want. Solveig, sweetheart, it’s yours now.’
Olaf’s voice, Noah thought, was deteriorating with each word he spoke. No amount of coughing or throat clearing helped. This lent his words an almost religious timbre that was as hypnotic as it was sad. Noah thought it beautiful.

‘We are not dropping you in the middle of this lake,’ Solveig said suddenly, in a voice now controlled. ‘It’s a ridiculous idea. Absolutely ridiculous.’

‘Please listen to me,’ Olaf pleaded.

Solveig started again but stopped. Noah could not speak.

‘Are you done? If you’re done I’d like to say what I have to say,’ Olaf said. He looked at each of them in turn. ‘When you get to be as old as me, and when you look back on your life, it’s impossible not to regret every other step you took. I do, anyway. But you also get to see the wonderful things. The most wonderful of the wonderful things for me were days spent here, with the two of you, when you were little kids, before so much went to shit. The happiest days of my life were our Christmas mornings here. I remember the looks on your faces as you pulled toys and candy from your stockings. I remember that feeling like, my God, these are my children! And those afternoons in summertime while I was on vacation. Sometimes the only good things I can remember are those mornings and the huge feeling that came with them.’ He paused, set his chin on his chest in that gesture now familiar to Noah. ‘If that sounds sad or like I’m feeling sorry for myself, it’s not meant to.

‘Anyway, I’m not a religious man. I reckon the nearest we come to an afterlife is how we’re remembered by our children. I figure the more often you think of me when I’m gone, the happier my ghost will be. If I’m here, where I belong, as opposed
to some cemetery in Duluth or Fargo where you’d come once every ten years, you’ll
remember me a little more often.

‘So,’ he said, putting his hands together as if to pray, ‘I’m sorry if it makes
you uncomfortable, but a dead man’s a dead man no matter where he rests. I want you
to bury me here. The lake is more than a hundred and fifty feet deep over by the falls.
Do it there. Nobody will ever know.’

Noah looked at his father. He looked at Solveig. ‘Since when are you so
eloquent?’ he asked his father.

‘I’ve been practicing that speech for five years.’

Solveig left that afternoon, apologizing and promising to be back no later than Friday.
Her bid to take Olaf with her had been rebuffed as swiftly as it had been offered.
Noah and Olaf stood shoulder to shoulder in the yard and watched as her SUV
bounced up the road. When it disappeared beyond the last curve Noah turned to his
father. ‘If you’re up to it, why don’t you show me how that contraption works?’

Without a word, as if he’d expected Noah to come around, Olaf led him to the
shed. There he explained how the tubing was attached to the barrel. He demonstrated
how the barrel should rest on his chest, while the tubing extended down the length of
his legs. He showed him how the chain should cross his back, under his arms—which
would be bound behind his back—and through the tubing. Noah stood with his hand
on his chin trying to comprehend the instructions.

‘Do you think it will work?’ Olaf asked.
‘What happens after you’ve been down there for a while. What about decomposition, things like that?’

‘The water is cold enough at that depth I won’t decompose. Cold and dark both.’

‘How will I know where to do it?’

‘Anywhere under the falls is fine. It’s plenty deep over there.’

‘I just toss you into the boat and row over there? Lug you over the side? Between you and the barrel that’s a lot of weight.’

Olaf pulled something like a section of dock from between the table and the wall. ‘This will fit across the boat, gunwale to gunwale. Lay me across it. When you get across the lake slide it right over. Keep your weight opposite the side you drop me. The boat should be okay.’

Noah stood there dumb, trying to imagine actually doing it. ‘What about everything that goes along with it? I mean, what about a death certificate? What about notifying Social Security and Superior Steel? How can I drop you over there and still take care of that?’

The elegance of his father’s earlier plea was getting lost in the crude details. Olaf didn’t know about death certificates and pensions, nor did he seem to care. He said, ‘You’re a smart boy,’ and that encouragement was to suffice in answer to Noah’s questions.

‘I still have to get the chain threaded in there. I’ll do that tomorrow. Right now I need some rest.’
Noah led him out of the shed and helped him across the yard. Inside, sitting opposite of each other in the sofa and chair, Noah said, ‘What if I can’t do it?’

Quietly, Olaf said, ‘You will.’
In 1972, five years after the wreck of the *Ragnarok*, a poet from the Ontario town of Point au Baril on Georgian Bay and a woodcut artist from Duluth collaborated on a short book to commemorate the anniversary of the disaster. It was a poem—billed as an “epic”—called *The Darkest Place in the Night*, and unless you were a friend of either artist or a fringe aficionado of the Superior shipery, or perhaps a librarian at the Duluth public library, you would never have heard of it. That is, you wouldn’t have heard of it until five years later, in 1977, when the *Herald* ran a feature on the ten-year anniversary of the wreck. Rather than leading with the customary, now famous photograph of the washed-up survivors—the same photograph that hung in the maritime museum in Duluth—they printed one of the woodcuts from the book and the last two lines of the poem. The woodcut showed three abstract figures clutching the icy gunwales of a life boat in portentous, black, fine-lined seas. A striking image. The lifeboat rode the crest of a wave, and each of the three faces diminished into abstraction so that only the first was clearly a face at all, one meant to exude the nightmare. The clear-faced figure raised a giant Thor-like hammer above his shoulders, poised to strike the ice from the boat.

The poem itself became something like a belated anthem for the wreck, its final lines the standard epigraph for anything written about it after 1977. Strange,
Noah thought, watching his father sleep with difficulty on the sofa in the wake of Solveig’s leaving, how one verse of an obscure, mediocre poem could become so automatically associated with the fact of the disaster, but it had. Enough so, in fact, that even for Noah the famous quote and the wreck had become irrevocably linked. In the five minutes he’d been looking at the book he’d managed to memorize again the last couplet. He sang it to himself, *The slaves of the lake beseeching the light, Adrift in the darkest place in the night.*

After Solveig had left and they’d finished in the shed, Olaf lay down to sleep on the sofa without a word of any sort. Noah, at a loss again, tidied the house, stoked the fire, refilled the wood box, and took the thawing cash from the mason jars. His plan was to deposit it first thing in the morning. He should have been awed both by the sum of his inheritance and the manner in which Olaf had presented it, but the fact of the matter was, nothing surprised him anymore. The week had cured him of his wonder. Now he sat with the book open on his lap, staring at the page.

‘That guy came to visit me once,’ Olaf said, startling Noah who had almost dozed off himself, the heat in the house stunning again.

‘The poet or the artist?’

‘The poet. Said he wanted to make sure he got it right.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I told him I didn’t understand his poem, that I was more of a plainspoken sort.’

Noah tried to imagine the conversation, tried to imagine the poet’s horror in confronting his father. ‘You didn’t toss him out, I hope.’
‘Why should I? He was a nice guy.’

‘I prefer the woodcuts to the poem,’ Noah said. ‘I like this one.’ He showed him the opened page.

Olaf looked at it over the rim of his glasses and shook his head as if to agree.

‘Whatever I thought about the poem, I liked the title. It’s a good title.’

‘The other night, you were telling me about the wreck. You never told me what happened once you were in the lifeboat.’

‘I ran out of gas, didn’t I?’

‘I think we both did.’

Olaf struggled with the afghan. Noah helped it across his shoulders.

‘Why did you think it was a good title?’

‘What?’

‘The Darkest Place in the Night.’

‘You know, it’s been a long time now. A long, long time. But I still remember the darkness. Maybe it’s just easy to imagine the dark, especially up here. I don’t know.’

‘You must remember other things too. I suppose it’s hard to forget something like that.’

‘Not so hard when you’re as old as me,’ He smiled. ‘But I remember things, sure. We were at the mercy of many things back there. Don’t forget, we had an inferno blazing beneath us, a snow squall suffocating us, seas still washing the deck. And wind. Holy shit that wind. The thought of launching one of those lifeboats, because of all that, seemed like the greater of two evils. I mean, those things were
made for Sunday picnics on a lake like this here,' he gestured towards Lake Forsone.

‘Not all-nighters on a stormy Superior. They had no real keel to speak of, no cover, they were just big rowboats with a few supplies stowed under the seats. I’ll tell you what, it was awful damn hard to imagine rowing that thing across the lake.

‘Where did you put that chart?’

Noah stood. ‘Here,’ he fetched it from the shelf and unrolled it on the coffee table.

‘We were here, remember? I more or less knew our position, knew what neighborhood we were in leastways. What I figured we’d do was simply make our way west, figured we’d end up in Thunder Bay or some spot south of there. In all the commotion I didn’t spend much time factoring in all the hell working against us. No thought of wind, no thought of the currents. This was an oversight, I guess, but even after I decided to launch the boat I didn’t think about the ordeal we’d have ahead of us until we were actually in the process of lowering.

‘There was some light back there. Floods on either side of the stack, the creepy glow from the fire beneath us, the flashlights we carried, but it was still hell to see anything. The lifeboat was set to two davits, the davits to two cables, the cables to winches that you lowered manually. There was a canvas tarp covering the boat lashed with Manila rope who knows how old? On a sunny day in July, lowering that boat might have taken three minutes. Clip the rope, pull the tarp off, unlock the winches, swing it out over the deck and crank it down. The ladder went over the side was just sort of piled atop the deck. Made of chain and steel rungs. Toss that over the deck too. You could have had the whole crew in boats in five minutes. That night, the whole
goddamn operation was set in ice six inches thick. Might as well of been set in concrete.'

'What did you do?'

'Red cut the rope off the tarp. Got two hammers from the toolbox in the lifeboat. He and Luke went crazy at the ice. I crossed the deck to the stack. You might not believe this, but I ripped a rung from the ladder that climbed the stack. I worked on the davits. Bjorn was in charge of the ladder. I don't know what he used, but by the time we got the boat over the deck, ready to lower it, Bjorn tossed the ladder over too. We must have been at work on that thing for half an hour.'

'It's amazing what people are capable of in times of desperation,' Noah said.

'Listen, the four of us might have been able to portage that whole goddamn ship up the Soo we were so desperate. Far cry from now,' he said, rubbing his bicep as if to demonstrate his flagging strength.

'I suspect you're stronger than you think,' Noah said, remembering the barrel in the shed, how the old man must have lifted it onto the workbench.

'Anyway, we were ready to lower it. I ordered Luke and Bjorn into the boat. By then the ship had come about in the storm so the port side of her was taking all the seas. That created a lee for us on starboard. This was both good and bad. Good because it gave us a calmer spot to load the lifeboat, bad because that foundering son of a bitch was going to be right on top of us when we got in the water.'

'Wasn't it dangerous to lower the lifeboats with guys in it?'

'No more dangerous than anything else that was happening. Normally there wouldn't be anyone in the boat while it was lowered, no. But I figured there was an
awful lot that could have gone wrong once the boat was in the water and a couple
guys down there to mitigate the damages wouldn’t be a bad thing. It was a gamble,
sure, but we were so short on odds anyway that it didn’t matter.’

‘What did you and Red do once the boat was in the water?’

‘We scuttled our asses over the side of that boat, that’s what we did. Now, if
you want to talk about spooky, let’s talk about getting down that ladder. You take the
wind, the water, the ice, the fire. You take the darkness. You put it all together and try
to imagine hanging over the side of that ship, climbing down to that boat bobbing all
over the water.’ Here Olaf stopped, a look of intense concentration on his face. Noah
read it as the look of a man trying desperately to remember something he’d worked
his whole life at forgetting.

‘Did you see Red?’

‘Did I see Red, what, go into the water?’ He looked away with a surprising
suddenness. He appeared culpable, he appeared a child.

‘Yeah, did you see anything?’

It was well-documented in the annals of the wreck that after Olaf and Red
were over the side of the ship, first Red then Olaf, and after they’d passed the fantail
deck and the flames without, Red dropped from the ladder not to be seen again until
his body washed ashore on the rocks at Hat Point. The only scenario ever suggested
was that he’d simply lost footing in the chaos, managed to get hold of a rope once he
was in the lake, and then managed to attach himself to the rope, and so been towed
behind it through the night.
‘I did not see him fall,’ Olaf faltered. ‘I did not hear a splash. Or a scream. There was nothing, I didn’t even know he was gone.’ He let out a soft moan.

‘I’d sent Red over first thinking the sooner he was in the lifeboat the safer he’d be. I thought it must have been written into my rank. Hell if I knew.’

Again he paused. Longer this time. Noah felt certain his father was on the verge of admission. He looked, about the face, Noah thought, like a man in a confessional mood. Without prompting Noah stoked the fire. He could tell that it was very cold outside, could see a fine frost had formed in the corners of the window panes.

‘I remember getting down that ladder. Rung by rung. Remember passing the decking, feeling the warmth of the fire as I passed the engine room. I remember the smell. I thought of all those guys in there. Cooked. I felt greedy for being on that ladder, greedy for being so close to the lifeboat. I didn’t even have much faith in surviving the night, but I was glad of the chance. I still wonder why that chance fell on me. It seemed to me all these years that something more than luck had its hand in it. But for all the many thousand times I’ve replayed it, that’s all I come up with. Dumb luck. I was lucky Jan sent me across the deck. I was lucky to get across the deck, lucky not to have been washed off the deck once we were aft, lucky I didn’t fall from the ladder like Red. Fucksakes that’s all it was. Luck. Rotten luck.’

‘What’s wrong with a little luck in a situation like that?’ Noah asked, interpreting his father’s words as an act of contrition.

‘Oh hell, there’s nothing wrong with it. I was damn glad for it. But when it comes time to add it all up, saying you were lucky just isn’t a very good explanation.’
‘Maybe there’s no need for an explanation. Maybe there isn’t one.’

‘Maybe not. Just don’t ask me not to look for one.’

‘Did you see him again, I mean before morning?’

‘Did I see him again?’ Olaf said, turning his eyes to the ceiling. ‘Jesus Christ did I.

‘When I got into the boat Luke and Bjorn were already bailing. I asked about Red. And just so simply we knew. We turned our flashlights out into the lake, trying while we looked to keep the damn boat from capsizing. Screaming his name. We’d already started to drift from the ship, even in the lee of it the wind moved us around. The water, it was churning.’ He spit his words, made great gestures with his arms, whorling gestures that sufficed as testament to the nature of that lake. ‘That dark. Couldn’t see a damn thing, not at first. But then he was there. In the water. Next to the boat. I saw him, Noah.’

This fact, to Noah’s knowledge, had never been revealed. Not to the investigators at the NTSB, not to the brass at Superior Steel, not to anyone. ‘You saw him?’

‘I did.’

‘Was he dead?’

Olaf closed his eyes slowly. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I had the flashlight pointing into the lake. Ten, maybe fifteen feet to starboard, between the lifeboat and the ship, bobbing in the water like a goddamn buoy, there was Red. I hollered to him. I saw his hand go up for help. I saw his eyes blinking for fucksakes.’ He stopped, opened his eyes.
‘Why didn’t you ever tell anyone this?’

‘That I saw Red alive? It’s my fault he died, that’s why. I should have saved him. I should have jumped in after him. Maybe he had broken bones, he was probably hypothermic already. We probably all were. What do I do? I toss him a line. All he saw was the light from the flashlight and a goddamn rope coming towards him. I should have done more. I could have done more.’

‘How could he have survived?’

Olaf shot him a cold stare. ‘We did.’

‘You hadn’t fallen from the ladder. You hadn’t fallen into the lake.’

‘That’s horseshit. His soul is on me.’

Olaf got up. He walked to the door and outside without saying anything. Noah went to the window, watched him go behind a tree. My god, Noah thought. What do you do with a lifetime of that on your mind?

When Olaf came back in Noah steered him to the chair.

‘And I bet you were sure you couldn’t think less of me,’ Olaf said.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Letting Red go like that.’

‘It’s not your fault. You have to understand that.’

‘You’re wrong. I took a few tugs on that rope once it was in the water. I might have thought about him for a minute. Then it was time to go on. I don’t think Luke and Bjorn ever even knew about it.’

‘Why is Red more important than any of the other guys? Why are you lugging his ghost around and none of the others?’
‘None of the others had a chance. Red had a chance. I was his chance.’

They sat silently in the flotsam of his father’s avowal for a half hour. Perhaps longer. The evolution of Olaf’s face in those minutes like a man relieved. Did Noah feel differently now? History had lied. Noah thought much about this.

‘Anyway,’ Olaf said finally, breaking a silence that had become tangible.

‘It doesn’t change anything,’ Noah said. He had decided this was true.

‘It’s not supposed to.’

They fell silent for another minute. ‘I always wondered about the others. Why didn’t they ever make a run for the lifeboats?’

Olaf looked out of words, like he couldn’t say another thing. But he did. ‘Do you know the story of the Mataafa?’

‘It rings a bell.’

‘I think it was 1905. Maybe the worst weather Superior’s ever seen. The Mataafa was from the Pittsburgh line. It’s morning, the boat steams out of Duluth. Right away they know they’ve made the wrong choice. So she comes about. Other ships had done the same thing, started only to reenter the harbor. The Mataafa, unlike the other boats, towed a barge behind her. She couldn’t get back into safe water, was hung up on the rocks just outside the harbor. There were nine men on the aft end of the ship, the rest of the crew was in the bow decking. They’re all taking a beating. Incredible waves. Wind. The day goes on and half the population of Duluth is on shore watching her wallow. They see a handful of men attempt to cross the deck. Three made it. One of the guys washed over but got back on board. He stayed astern.
The water was so rough the Coast Guard couldn’t even get out of the harbor. This ship is sitting literally a couple hundred yards off the shore and nobody can help.

‘All night it storms. The temperature drops. Snow piles up. Now hordes of people are lining the shore to see what happens to this ship and her crew. At dawn the seas have settled some and a rescue boat is dispatched. They make one pass and get the men off the bow. Fifteen of them. When they go back for the guys on the stern, they’re all frozen. Literally encased in ice. Nine of them dead. Frozen to death, you see? They probably could have smelled the bonfires ashore, burning all night long. That’s Superior.

‘You asked why nobody else made a run for the lifeboats and the answer is simple—I don’t know. I don’t know why or even if they thought it would be best to stay put. Maybe Jan had a plan. Maybe he thought there would be a rescue attempt and the odds were better up there. Hell, maybe they did try and get back to the lifeboat and simply lost. It’s impossible to say.

‘All I can say for sure is we were off that boat. Bjorn and Luke. And Red, somewhere in the water. We were a mess all over again. Hopeless I thought. All we had for light were two of the flashlights. Some light still came from the Rag but mostly it was just us and the darkness. Bjorn was on the tiller and with the wind behind us it didn’t take long before we were a fair distance from the ship.’ He stared down at the chart spread across the coffee table. ‘It seems impossible to me now to think that the whole night he was riding behind us like a goddamn anchor. How he got himself hooked onto that line I’ll never know. Why didn’t it snap? How in the hell did he come crashing up onto that rocky beach in the morning?’
‘How did you guys manage?’

‘Believe me, we managed nothing. Right away we were pumping water and
still we had it coming in the tops of our boots. Not just water, Superior water, water
so cold it would’ve hurt to drink. I was rowing, trying to keep it between troughs so
we’d take less. But it did little good. Too many waves from too many directions.
Luke was working on the gunwale ice while he pumped.’ Again he went silent. Noah
didn’t dare to ask any more questions.

‘I remember all of it. The cold. The wet. The dark. It should have been
impossible for me to notice the glow behind us with all that commotion, but I did. It
was like a ghost already. In the snow and sea-spray, I could see just a hazy light
where the ship was. Maybe two hundred yards behind us. The flames I guess, and
whatever onboard lights were still working. That spot just flickered, coming in and
out of view as we rode the waves. The farther we got the fainter it got, of course, until
it was just gone. We rode up a wave and I looked and there was nothing but the night.
Poof.’

Noah had scooted to the edge of his chair in order to hear better. Olaf’s voice
weakened with each word, or seemed to. By the time he said ‘poof’ there was almost
no sound at all, just a little flap of his lips and an indiscriminate wave of his hands.
Despite the ebbing and softening of his voice—or maybe because of it—the image of
the receding light from the sinking ship resounded in Noah, seemed especially
important in light of all the darkness to come.

‘The wind was coming from every direction. So was the water,’ Olaf
continued, his voice now barely more than a whisper. ‘We were soaked. Every thirty
seconds another wave would wash over the gunwales and swamp us. Sometimes they were waves so big I thought we’d sink right under them. Sometimes they were easier. So, we managed to keep it afloat. I don’t know how to say except like this: it was like the water wanted us, but the darkness wanted us more. Sounds ridiculous, I know, but it’s the truth. There were times I couldn’t even see the other guys in the boat. I’d yell as loud as I could and they didn’t hear me six feet away.’

The utter silence of the house, a silence broken only by the pinging stove and Olaf’s labored breathing, compounded the image of the riotous night in the boat. The old man elbowed himself up on the couch. He rearranged the afghan over his shoulders. He cleared his throat.

‘We kept the gunwales clear as we could. Kept from freezing by working so goddamn hard. Somehow we stayed in the boat. I mentioned luck before. No amount of luck earlier in the night measured up to staying alive all night in that mess. By the time morning broke I ought to have learned to believe in God.’

‘It truly is a miracle,’ Noah said, more to himself than to his father.

But Olaf heard him. ‘Here’s the thing.’ He coughed to clear something in his throat not there. ‘It’s a whole lot more remarkable sounding now than it seemed at the time. Maybe that’s obvious, maybe not, but the fact is for those eight hours it was like we weren’t really there. It was just downright impossible that we could be so cold, so wet. That it could be so dark. And even though we were working so hard to stay alive, I suspect that each of us was just waiting to die. I know I was.

‘I’d spend ten minutes woolgathering about you kids and your mother all tucked under your quilts at home without realizing that my hands were so cold I could
hardly grip the oars. When I'd snap out of it it was like I'd been shot. All the pain would surge up, all the panic. But just as quick I'd be back in some other trance, thinking about getting ready for church when I was a tyke back in Norway, thinking about my mother pulling the curlers from her hair. And the whole time we were just frantically working, rowing and hammering and bailing. I suppose I kept at it with thoughts of all of you because I knew that any minute the boat would heave me out into the lake and that would be it. That would be the end.’ He closed his eyes. Rested.

Noah had ceased with questions altogether. He looked at his father there on the sofa, bereft of the vitality he had once possessed so abundantly. For the old man’s son there was as much sadness in the moment as there was relief. He suspected that his father felt little of either, was likely unmoved and unchanged. Perhaps emptiness filled the place where once a secret had resided.

‘I don’t know,’ Olaf said. ‘It’s amazing the memories you carry around with you. Never once had I thought of my mother getting ready for church until that night. But there she was. Those memories are in you all the time. On a night like that they’re just hurrying up for one last trip across your mind. I suppose a wise man might have learned something from a night like that. But what did I do? I ended up wrapped around a tree growing out of the rocks on a frozen beach not sixty miles as the gull flies from where we sit now. You start wondering, why me?’ He pointed feebly at his own chest.

Noah wanted to console him but didn’t know how.

‘You end up as the line in a poem, as the face in a picture, from someone else’s imagination. Meanwhile your crewmates are dead and your wife is fucking the
moron across the street and your kids grow to fear you. And instead of making it right you let it ride. You drink in the raunchiest bars in eight states. Jesus, do you drink.’ He cleared his voice now and said more loudly than he had said anything in an hour. ‘And you lose all shame.’

Noah stood. He walked over to the sofa and sat down next to his father as if his proximity might ease the pain of the memory, as if the gesture could speak. He put his hand on his father’s shoulder, moved the afghan to make the moment less awkward.

‘So there’s your story, Noah. Sorry as it is, that’s it. We washed onto the beach at Hat Point and all I had in me was jetsam and you suffered for it. So did your mother and sister.’

Noah thought, I wonder if he’s dying right now. In this instant. I imagine this is what it might look like.

Instead Olaf said, ‘The morning broke and we could see the shoreline. We rowed like hell to get there. Did you know it was below zero that morning? We were sitting there like we’d just been for a swim for christsakes. We thought about trying to build a fire but the only thing we might have burned on that barren shore was the lifeboat, and it was covered with ice. Bjorn, he was trying to light his coat on fire with his lighter.’ He mimicked Bjorn trying to start his sleeve ablaze. ‘But his thumb was just a lump of ice. Could have used it for a hammer.

‘It’s strange, but had we been out on the lake, on a clear day, passing Hat Point, I could have given you our coordinates to within a degree each way. But pressed up against those woods and rocks, that cliff looming behind us, snowy as the
morning was, I wouldn’t have guessed it with ten tries. Delirious, that’s what we were, all of us. Hallucinating. We had one blanket among us, from one of the stows in the lifeboat. That was it. We were just waiting to die again.’

‘How long before they found you?’

‘Seemed like days but it wasn’t long. We didn’t have time to freeze to death, so that tells you something. First a plane circled above us, then we saw a cutter offshore. I tried to get up and wave but I couldn’t. I think we were all in shock. Everything was blurry. My eyes were coated with ice. None of us could talk. Soon enough an army of highway patrolmen and paramedics were there, coming out of the woods like so many dreams.’

‘And you were saved.’

Olaf looked at Noah, put his hand on the son’s shoulder now. ‘That’s one way of saying it. They got us out of our clothes, bundled us up in blankets and parkas and whatever else they had around. First they took us to a lodge, a place in Grand Portage. They worked on us there until the helicopters came to bring us down to Duluth. I asked for a cup of coffee I remember, like we were getting up for breakfast.’ He actually smiled, half ways and to himself to be sure. ‘Just like that the whole thing was over.’

Noah started to say he was sorry but Olaf interrupted him, not acknowledging his son or his son’s word in that instant. ‘Actually, it wasn’t over.’ He leaned over the coffee table, traced a line from the black X off Isle Royale to Hat Point. He traced it back. After a few minutes Olaf looked up at Noah again. ‘For more than thirty years I’ve used that night as an excuse. Not because I wanted or needed one, but because I
had no control over what it did to me. I should have. Hard as it would’ve been, I
should have beaten it.

‘I never told anyone any of this before, son. Never told your mother, even
though she deserved to know. Never told your sister. Never told any of the guys down
at the Freighter, not even on my worst night. I never told it on the bridge of a single
ship I later sailed. Hell, I never even told the NTSB or the bosses at Superior Steel the
whole story. Everything I just told you, it’s been rotting in me all this time.’

‘Why,’ Noah said, his own voice now faint, ‘did you tell me?’

Olaf looked at him. He leaned towards him. He took off his glasses. ‘You
asked me, Noah. That’s why. And you deserved to know. Aside from your mother,
you deserved it more than anyone.’
PART V

DEAD RECKONING

Cold the next morning, as cold as it could be in early November. He drove a half hour up the rutted highway to Grand Marais with the sunrise, the road unwinding to lake vistas magnificent in the metallic onset of morning and winter. There seemed equal resolve among both day and season. He’d passed only two cars at that hour, one north of Misquah and one slowly pulling out of a lakeside lodge at the Cascade River.

On the south end of town a pickup truck waited outside the Ranger station at the head of the Gunflint, a solitary man leaning against the bumper smoking a cigarette. Otherwise the town hunkered ghostlike, a few streets along the lake that gave way behind them to an incalculable wilderness. No Tuesday morning rush hour here. The semblance of a village nestled around the harbor. Here there was some stirring. Cars were filling up at the Holiday store, a smattering of cars idled. One before the bakery, one the outfitters. Noah stopped at a traffic signal on Wisconsin Street. Next to him a white-haired woman in a Chevy sedan almost as old as his
father's truck smiled as if expecting the codger. When she saw Noah she waved anyway and rolled off slowly.

The bank was on the north end of town and except for two raccoons, its parking lot was empty. He looked at his watch. The bank opened at eight. All morning he'd been feeling mixed up about hastening off with the money. Though it was exhilarating in its way to think about the sudden boon of all that money—how could it not be?—he also thought anyone glancing at the situation would think it peculiar. A father so sick left alone, if only for a morning. A son estranged reaping a financial reward so significant. The simple fact was, he had assured himself repeatedly during the drive, that he'd never once imagined the possibility of an inheritance from the moment his father had called him until the first wad of frozen cash had been pulled from the first jar. And the reason he was at the bank first thing in the morning was the same reason his father would have been thirty years earlier: because they were fastidious men each in their middle-age, and Noah could not have rested—much less taken care of tasks around the house—until the money was safely deposited. His nature would not allow it. The sign before the bank flashed the temperature. Three degrees.

Inside the bank two tellers stood behind the counter and a receptionist sat at a desk on the right. He walked towards the tellers, passing a table piled with jumper cables and a sign hanging above it enticing people with a free gift for opening a home equity line of credit. It struck Noah as he hefted the duffle off his shoulder and onto the counter that it must be tough for a bank like this to stick it out, how with people like his father living in the hills above town, business must have been difficult. Signs
hung everywhere on those walls advertising auto loans, low interest credit cards, and free ATM withdrawals. All for naught, Noah presumed.

‘Good morning,’ one of the young women behind the counter fairly shrilled. Her name, according to the placard before her, was Ellsie. Her cheery disposition seemed misplaced in that sullen town.

Noah explained his situation. ‘My father’s a customer,’ he said. ‘So am I if he tells the truth. He hasn’t been here in a while. I’ve never been here. I’m not sure if you can help or not.’

She interrupted, ‘If you’re a customer here, I can help.’

Noah smiled. He nodded as if skeptical. ‘Here’s the thing, I have a huge deposit to make.’

‘Have you filled out a deposit slip?’

‘I mean huge. It’s cash.’

‘We accept cash deposits,’ she said. It took Noah a moment to realize she was joking.

‘I have to count it,’ he said, unzipping the bag to show her. ‘I’m sure this looks a little strange, but I promise there’s nothing fishy.’

Without a word Ellsie set a THIS TELLER CLOSED sign before her workspace and asked Noah to follow with a wave of her hand. She led him to an office with an empty desk. She asked him for the account number and for his and his father’s names. She copied this information on a post-it note. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘You start counting it here, I’ll get the forms we need and fill them out. Put the money in stacks of one
hundred. Here,’ she opened a desk drawer, took from it a box of rubber bands. ‘Remember, stacks of one hundred, I’ll double check it when I get back.’

For the next hour Noah counted the still-cold hundred dollar bills. Ellsie joined him a few minutes after she’d left. She verified his tally by running the stacks of money through a counting machine. Together they counted two thousand and sixty-two one hundred dollar bills. They spoke of the money and how it had ended up on that table, Ellsie assured Noah that stranger things had come to pass during her tenure at the bank. She moved the stacks of money from the table to heavy canvas bags. When they were finished she moved the bags into the vault. He signed the paperwork, inquired about wiring the money to banks in Boston and Fargo, and confirmed with her that his sister had equal access to all the funds. This, she assured him, was true.

‘Great,’ Noah said. The transaction felt somehow incomplete but he thanked her, took his empty duffle from the table, and turned to leave.

‘We certainly appreciate your business, Mr. Torr. And tell your father we all say hello.’

He said he would do so.

A couple blocks back towards the harbor there was a place called the Blue Sky Café. He stopped for something to eat, ravenous as he was.

A stack of the Duluth Herald leaned against the cash register. He bought one. In a booth that overlooked the village, he ordered coffee from a waitress whose gray hair rose in three layers of buns to a peak atop her head. Her apron was starched sheet
iron stiff. She brought the coffee served on a plate with sugar cubes and a miniature
pitcher of cream. He ordered the Number One Combination.

‘How do you want your eggs?’

‘Over easy, please.’

‘Cakes or toast?’

‘Cakes.’

‘Buttermilk or buckwheat?’

‘Buttermilk.’

‘Blueberries?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Steak or chop?’

‘Steak.’

‘Cooked?’

‘Medium, please.’ He sipped his coffee between questions.

‘Bacon, sausage or ham?’

‘Bacon.’

‘What kind of juice?’

‘Cranberry.’

‘Anything else, Hungry Jack?’ she winked.

Noah pointed over his shoulder towards a bakery case under the cash register.

‘Did I see pecan rolls over there?’

‘You want me to warm that up?’

‘Please.’
‘You read your paper. I’ll be right back with enough food for you, me, and the three kids we could have had.’ Again she winked.

Seated around a horseshoe-shaped counter ten or twelve men dressed in hunting gear smoked and ate and drank coffee. Noah had noticed them when he walked in but avoided their deprecating gaze. Now he felt it settling on him again. Outside the placid harbor water shone black under the gray sky. He could see the street of boutiques and galleries ringing the harbor, but commerce in late morning was no more enthusiastic than it had been at eight. A woman walked her dog. Three men and a child stood before a pizzeria talking. The trees on the hills above town appeared bronzed, the sky above them offered little illumination. The stink of griddle grease and cigarette smoke and bad coffee was heavy in the café.

While he waited for the food to arrive, an uneasy and unspecific feeling of guilt overtook him. He attributed it to his being in the café at all while his father nestled sick in the woods back in the hills above Misquah. Though there was business to tend to—he had to call the hospital and his sister, and he had had to deposit the money—it seemed extravagant to him to be back in civilization. He thought about this as his food arrived and he ate voraciously. He drank four or five glasses of water, his juice, and was finally brought a coffee pot for himself when the waitress admitted she’d had enough visiting his table with the burnished pot. He buttered the pecan roll, salted the steak, and soaked the pancakes in maple syrup. As he ate he realized that the guilty feelings were easily enough explained. What difficulty there had been in the years of their estrangement—indeed in their week of days—was absent now. Not just absent but erroneous. What he’d mistaken for feelings of guilt were actually
feelings of longing. He wanted to be back in the cabin, even felt a pull for the too hot stove and the bland food, for the tepid coffee and trips to the outhouse. This came as an enormous relief to him, and not just because it staved off the guilt but because it meant he could venture freely in the full range of his memories now. No more caveats next to good times, nor whole years forbidden existence.

When he finished breakfast he pushed the plate across the table and spread the paper before him. It was eleven o’clock and he still had an hour before he had to call the doctor at St. Mary’s. He skimmed the election coverage—polities bored him intensely—and read a feature on the economic doldrums gripping the shipping and steel industries. Everything suffered: taconite production, ship traffic, grain shipments, coal shipments. There were problems with the stevedore union, with the railways, with the mines. The economic implications were far-reaching, of course, to say nothing of grim. The forecast even grimmer. The mayors of Duluth and Superior—in reelection mode no doubt—were calling for tariffs on imported steel. Though interesting Noah thought the article little more than a refrain. Some version of this story had been told since the first iron ore was ever mined in Minnesota, since the first ship full of taconite ever left Duluth harbor. Though it would have been impossible for Noah to dismiss the political and economic realities set forth in the article, it was also not impossible for him to see it all in a new light: that some things never change.

But some things do, he realized very much pleased. Some things have. Something enduring had been built during the last eight days between him and his father. He could not name it, he only knew that it gave him permission to live the rest
of his life. That was it. That huge, teetering part of him that for years had been resting on his resentment had been replaced by the whole story, bitterroot and all. He had license to carry on.

The bill at the restaurant was $10.29. He put a twenty on the table, rolled the paper under his arm, and walked back out into the cold hour before noon. He stopped at The Gunflint Trading Post and bought new socks and long underwear, a t-shirt with a moose silhouette stenciled on the front, a pair of Carhart jeans in a size too big, and a pair of flannel boxers. He had the tags cut from everything. The idea of getting cleaned up had occurred to him when he realized he still had a half hour before he needed to call the doctor.

The truck was parked in front of a hotel called the Poplar Inn. Inside the lobby, which boasted a gas fireplace and more fish mounted above the mantel, a man stood behind the counter. It smelled of new carpet and disinfectant and in the background he could hear a hum, industrial sounding. The heater maybe, or the indoor pool’s filtration system.

‘Good morning,’ Noah said.

‘Howdy.’

‘Do you have vacancies?’

‘For how many nights?’

‘No nights, just for an hour or so.’

The man looked concerned. He flushed. ‘Well, we don’t rent rooms by the hour,’ he managed.
‘Of course not,’ Noah said. ‘No, not that. I’ll pay for a full night. I just need a
place to clean up, a place to take a shower.’

The man still looked suspicious. ‘Our single room rate is forty-nine dollars.’

‘Okay.’

‘Smoking or nonsmoking?’ He began readying a card.

‘Nonsmoking. Any room will do as long as it has a shower and clean towels.’

‘All of our rooms have showers and clean towels.’ Now he seemed annoyed.

‘Of course they do. I’m sorry.’

He checked two boxes on the card and set it before Noah to sign, marking the
top line with an X. ‘How will you pay?’

Noah handed him his Visa. The man handed Noah an electronic card key.

The room was nice. A queen size bed. Two nightstands. A picture above the
headboard of pioneer-era fur trappers portaging a river rapids. A TV on a hutch. He
flicked it on. The Duluth CBS affiliate was re-airing the morning’s newscast. Sports.
The Vikings had lost on Monday Night Football. So had the professional hockey and
basketball teams. The UMD hockey team was mired in an early season slump, so was
the East high school team, if an opening season loss to a Minneapolis suburban
powerhouse could be considered a slump. He unpacked his new clothes on the bed.
He began to undress. Sports gave over to weather. The forecast called for continued
cold and snow, possibly heavy, by Thursday or Friday. The thought of it appealed to
Noah. Twelve inches, he thought. A foot of snow to finish everything off.

The hotel soap smelled of almonds, the shampoo like a fourth rate barbershop.
He took a long, scalding shower, washing and rinsing and washing again until the
small bar of soap disappeared in his hand. He would have liked to shave but he had no razor. When he got out of the shower the mirror above the sink dripped with condensation. He could actually see steam wafting through the bathroom door. He towed off.

In the nightstand drawer was a Cook County phone book. He looked in the yellow pages for a piano tuner. There were two listings, both in Grand Marais. He called the first and made arrangements for him to come the next day at lunchtime and have a look. Noah gave careful directions. Then he turned the TV off. He fished from his pocket the phone number left by Solveig for the doctor’s office at St. Mary’s. He looked at his watch. It was noon.

A one-sided and dispiriting conversation passed between Noah and the doctor, whose authority and competence were as unquestionable as the news was bad. She informed Noah that though not all of the tests had been completed, she nevertheless had no doubt as to the severity of his father’s illness. She spoke brusquely but with compassion of biopsies and polyps, of tumors and blood, and of stages of sickness, particularly of a stage designated Duke’s D. A terminal stage, she assured him. She spoke of a cancer spreading rapidly and out of control. She spoke of pain. She did not speak of treatment. ‘Under normal circumstances,’ she concluded, ‘I’d suggest your father visit us again immediately. Though I understand that’s not likely.’

Noah agreed.

‘The truth is it doesn’t matter much. If he were admitted he wouldn’t leave again. His sickness is that advanced. The drugs we prescribed won’t do for the pain
what we would do here, but I suspect your father might not want them regardless. He may as well be at peace where he is.’

She asked Noah was he able to stay with Olaf. She asked if there was anything she could do? She begged Noah to give him the drugs, said he might not be able to watch his father if he didn’t. In the end she apologized for bringing such news. Noah might have said ten words during the entire conversation.

His conversation with Solveig required more speech, and he left no detail unspoken. He’d expected his sister to articulate sadness or horror or perturbation. Instead she was almost calculating. She revisited the instructions for their father’s drugs as if she herself had prescribed them. She reiterated what the two of them had earlier agreed upon, that the death of their father was not news. She said that the doctor’s call ought to be viewed as proof of their knowledge, not as a new development. She assured Noah she’d be back soon, as early as Friday if everything went as planned with Tom’s folks and the kids. Maybe even Thursday if Tom could clear a court date. She told Noah to go back and take care of their father.

He did.

When he’d finished on the phone with Solveig he dressed quickly in his new, clean clothes. He paid the hotel receptionist for the phone calls made. He’d nearly flooded the truck while starting it, and driven out of town with white plumes of smoke huffing from the tailpipe.

The truck didn’t handle the sharp curves of Highway 61 very well at high speeds. It would lurch and slide and grumble when Noah braked hard mid-curve, then
sputter and moan when he’d step on the accelerator coming out of one. Rounding one of the steep, uphill curves, he came upon an awesome panorama of the lake and skies. A battlement of cinder-colored clouds broke and the sun reflected off the water in a million different directions. The lake was well below him, down a granite cliff, and the distance eclipsed the reflection. He could stare right on the sun’s image off the lake.

A pall draped the house. Noah could sense it more than see it but its presence could not have been disputed. No smoke rose from the tin chimney. The midday light settled more like dusk. He rushed to park the car. He hurried into the house.

‘Oh god you’re home,’ Olaf rasped. He lay on the sofa, the blankets and quilt knotted in his long legs.

‘What’s going on here? Are you okay?’ Noah spoke quickly as he hurried to his father’s side and knelt.

Olaf only moaned.

‘Dad? Are you okay?’

Olaf dropped his head on the pillow. He coughed a pathetic cough. ‘Where have you been?’ It was not a question but a condemnation. This Noah knew.

Noah could smell something now, very faintly, like the stink of a paper mill town ten miles before you reach it. ‘Talk to me, Dad. What’s going on?’

Olaf reached into the front of his union suit and tried to twist it around. His eyes rolled back, his desiccated and cracked lips fluttered. His pillow was covered with silvery strands of wiry hair.
Noah pulled his father’s hand from the union suit. ‘Did you have an accident?’

Huh? It’s okay. Don’t worry. We can take care of this.’

‘Where were you?’ Now it was a question.

‘I went to Grand Marais,’ he said, untangling the blankets from Olaf’s legs. He tossed them onto the floor. ‘What’ve we got here?’ He rolled Olaf onto his side.

‘I couldn’t get up,’ Olaf said, his voice practically inaudible. ‘It just happened. I just woke up.’

‘I said don’t worry. This is no problem.’

Noah stood and went to the kitchen. ‘Sit tight for a minute, Dad. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.’ He grabbed three towels from a drawer beneath the counter. He wet two of them.

Olaf was on his back again, breathing heavily. Noah smoothed his father’s hair before he rolled him back on his side. ‘We’re going to clean you up, okay?’

He unbuttoned the soiled flap on the backside of the union suit.’

‘I had to go,’ Olaf said. A certain apology.

‘It’s okay.’

‘You weren’t here.’

‘I’m sorry. I won’t leave you again.’

He wiped as much as he could through the flap before rolling his father onto his back again and unbuttoning the front of the union suit. He eased it over his father’s shoulders and slid it down his legs. All he wore under the suit were a pair of red wool socks. His hairy legs and stomach were gruelingly thin. Bones jutted from
his knees and ankles, from his hips. The stink of urine and shit lingered as if it were in
the dust.

‘Fucksakes I’m cold,’ Olaf said. He shivered as if to prove it.

‘I’ll have you bundled back up in a minute.’

He wiped Olaf’s thighs and belly with a second rag. He helped him up and
wiped his legs. He told Olaf to stand for a moment, told him to hold onto the sofa.
Noah went quickly to his father’s room and reappeared as fast with a clean but
threadbare pair of underwear and a v-neck undershirt yellowing at the collar and pits.
He helped his father into them and eased him back onto the sofa. He spread the
afghan from the chair over him and again smoothed his hair. From a peg beside the
doors he took a knit cap and put it on his father’s head.

‘I’m going to clean you better in a minute. I need to stoke the fire and make
some hot water, okay?’

Without waiting for confirmation Noah did just that. The labor kept his mind
clear. He stoked the fire. He put a kettle of water on the stove. He dropped the messy
rags into the garbage and put the union suit on the porch. He retrieved more towels
from his bedroom and piled them next to Olaf on the couch, his father’s gaze as
vacant as the woods around them. When the kettle simmered Noah stopped the sink
and mixed it with cold water. He took soap from a cupboard beneath the sink and wet
more towels.

He had Olaf stand and washed him again. With soap this time. Olaf held his
son’s shoulders while the younger man lathered the old man’s legs. He rinsed them.
He washed all of him and redressed him, this time in a pair of long johns and a
turtleneck he'd found in his father's room. He helped Olaf to the chair and again covered him with the afghan. Covered him also with one of the Hudson Bay blankets he'd bought at The Landing. Olaf said not a word.

Noah warmed more water and cleaned the sofa. He put a five-gallon pot on the stove and let the already rinsed rags and union suit boil in soapy water. He rinsed them. The whole episode had taken an hour and by the time Noah finished Olaf had slept and woken. He had regained some sensibility, some voice.

'Fucksakes, I'm sorry,' he said.

Noah sat on the coffee table very near the old man's waxen face. 'Don't worry about it. Can you tell me what happened?'

'Couldn't get up.'

'I'm sorry, Dad.'

'You're sorry because I'm a goddam invalid?'

'I should have been here.'

Now Olaf smoothed his own hair. He ran both his hands through it twice. Whispering, he asked. 'What am I going to do, Noah?'

'I'm here,' Noah said definitely. 'I will not leave again. Okay?'

Olaf said nothing, only lay there pale and deflated. Noah thought of telling him about the call from the doctor, about the trip to the bank, his conversation with Solveig. Instead he told him about the weather. 'It's going to snow,' he said.

'Sure it will.'

'I mean it's in the forecast. We might get socked.'

'Socked,' Olaf said, searching, Noah presumed, for the meaning.
‘It might snow a lot.’

Olaf nodded.

‘What do we do about the road?’

‘Laksonenn,’ Olaf said. ‘Laksonenn plows.’ Each word seemed a triumph from the old man.

‘Someone named Laksonenn plows the road?’

‘He does.’

‘Do I call him or anything?’

Olaf shook his head no. During the next few minutes Noah watched the old man’s lips puckering and his face twitching, an expression between pain and exhaustion. He fell back to sleep.
In what remained of that day, Noah trimmed the house. He refilled the ten-gallon buckets at the well. He restocked the wood box. He hung the wet towels to dry on the porch, hung the union suit. Olaf slept motionless on the chair. Before dusk Noah went to the shed. He stood in the doorway and tried to imagine the spot his mother’s ashes occupied. He may have even hoped that some ghost or ghost’s messenger would present itself, would guide him in the looking. Instead he began where he stood, on the threshold of that welter of junk. He kicked over stacks of magazines, he moved unmarked boxes filled with old tools, truck parts, fishing tackle old enough that the barbs had rusted. He picked a lure from among many, held it to the dying light, and when he flicked the hook with his finger it disintegrated into dust.

He cleared a path to the back wall and here he went through the contents of an old dresser. Clothes from his childhood. A kitchen mixer. A ledger marked 1972. Herein Olaf’s blocked scrawl tallied the year’s receipts coming and going, a column for each. Noah studied the expenditures: groceries, oil to heat the house on High Street, electricity, clothes. There were two columns marked ALLOWANCE, one for his mother, one for himself. This, Noah thought, is how you end up with two hundred thousand dollars in your freezer.
Noah saw a metal box beneath the dresser. In the second it took him to recognize it he knew what it held. He lifted it from the floor, set it on the dresser and studied it. It appeared waterproof, it was clasped shut tightly, unrusted. Clearly something made to last. He unlatched the clasp. Within a clear plastic bag her ashes were interred. They appeared almost to scintillate. Why he could not have imagined, but he sniffed them. Only the other smells of the shack. He closed the box. He brought it with him into the house.

His father still slept. Noah set the ashes on the coffee table. At six o’clock he ate a few crackers and half a jar of pickled herring. He thought of waking Olaf but didn’t. The old man’s sleep was fitful. He’d hiccup and sigh and his face would twist and fold in a hundred unnatural ways, all the while his hands fidgeted among the afghan and his feet kept time to some dreamsong. Twice during Noah’s light supper Olaf’s eyes plunged open and he stared at Noah, but as quickly they’d close again and the dreams or whatever afflicted his sleep would begin again.

Noah himself fell asleep soon. When he woke at midnight he stoked the fire, stepped out for a piss. He put another blanket over his father and went to bed himself. He awoke at five-thirty to check on his father and stoke the fire again. During the night Olaf had moved back onto the couch. He slept peacefully now, his chest rising under the mound of blankets, a silent snore from his hang-jawed mouth. Noah put water on for coffee.

It was another sunless, sooty morning. Noah took a cup of coffee to the shed with him. He wanted to study the anchor. He wanted to be prepared for whatever he might do.
Noah inspected the bolts that fastened the first piece of tubing to the barrel. He saw the holes had already been drilled for the second piece of tubing. He finished sawing through the tubing and began to fasten it to the barrel. He worked for an hour, breaking midway to check on his father. When he’d attached the last piece, he puzzled the chain through the tubing. He could envision it now, could see his father sinking in the black water, splayed to his own design. It looked, as he stopped on the way out to inspect it one more time, like a torture device from some earlier century.

Finally his father was awake. He stood at the sink basin rinsing his empty mouth with a glass of water. He had dressed himself in wool pants and a sweater thin at the elbows. The clothes fairly hung on him.

‘Some sleep,’ Olaf said.

‘I’d say.’ Noah looked at his watch. It was almost eight o’clock. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘I’ve had better mornings.’

‘You want coffee? Something to eat?’

‘I don’t think I could eat.’

‘How about more water? Could you drink? You should take these pills.’

Olaf consented. Rather than expecting his father to swallow the pills—some were the size of almonds—Noah ground them on the counter with a spoon and stirred them into the water. Even drinking looked difficult. When he’d finished Olaf let a soft burp. He handed the glass to Noah and went to the chair, his walk across the room a feat unto itself.
He hung the afghan over the back of the chair. He sat. He motioned Noah across the room. When Noah sat on the couch next to him Olaf said, ‘About yesterday.’ His words trailed off and he merely shook his head.

‘It’s nothing, Dad. Nothing. Don’t worry about it.’

‘The whole thing’s just shutting down.’

Again Noah thought of telling him about the conversation with the doctor. Again he did not. ‘It was an accident, that’s all. I guess you probably changed a few of my diapers in your day.’

‘Diapers, huh? And a grown man.’

‘That’s not what I meant. Listen, I’m here to take care of you.’

Olaf settled back into the chair. ‘Anyway, we’ll try not to make it a habit.’

‘Fair enough.’

Olaf pointed at the box on the coffee table. ‘Son of a bitch,’ he said.

‘I found those out in the shed. I hope it’s okay I brought them in.’

His father replied with a look of deep regret, or what Noah took for one. ‘At least it explains my dreams last night.’ He sighed. ‘I always meant to bring them in. I knew it was a crime to leave them out in the shed.’

‘They’re here now.’

Olaf agreed. ‘She was beautiful,’ he whispered, his voice cotty with the memory.

‘Always,’ Noah said.

‘She was the love of my life.’
These words startled Noah. Not because he was surprised at their meaning, but because he’d never expected to hear his father say them. He’d always known it, he guessed. ‘She was mine too, for a long time.’

Now Olaf smiled. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. When he laid his hands across his lap the smile disappeared. ‘What I did to her.’ He shook his head. ‘She broke my heart, Noah.’ The words were like something spoken years before. The sadness in them, the contrition, was absolute.

‘There were a lot of broken hearts back then.’

‘There still are,’ Olaf said, looking Noah square in the eyes. ‘But I guess it’s a small price to pay. Everyone pays it one way or another.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘A small price for the memories. Broken hearts or none, we all have them.’

Noah thought about that. ‘You know what scares me more than anything? That I’m going to end up an old man without Natalie. That I won’t have all the memories I want. Sometimes I don’t care about anything but making it to old age with her. I see folks in restaurants or walking down the street and I get terrified we’ll end up apart. It’s a terrible feeling.’

Olaf listened with a look of intense concentration. ‘You feel that way because you figure once you’ve made it to old age, the hard times will be behind you. You’ll have made it.’ He paused. ‘I think I used to believe that too, when your mother and I were young. But our lives changed. Those thoughts of mine changed. Hers too, if she ever had them.’

‘I know she did.’
This put another smile on the old man’s face. ‘The problem with your mother was she was too smart for her own good. She was so much smarter than me. It was impossible sometimes.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I met that wife of yours. I suspect you know what I mean.’

Noah said, ‘I guess you’re right.’

‘She got stuck with me, your mother.’

‘I don’t think I believe that,’ Noah said. He didn’t believe it at all, in fact. ‘She loved you.’

Olaf wedged himself up so his feet were flat on the floor. It was not an easy task. He took the afghan from behind the chair and spread it across his lap. ‘She may have learned to, but she was stuck with me to begin with. Your mother was pregnant when we got married. In the middle of her third month.’

‘She was what?’ Noah did the math in his head. It didn’t add up.

‘She miscarried two weeks later. Gave him a name. Per Olaf. She wanted to bury what came out.’

‘Per Olaf?’

‘That’s what I wanted to name you.’ Olaf scratched his neck beneath his beard. ‘I wanted to tell you when you were talking about Natalie. Figured it wasn’t the best time.’

‘She named a miscarriage? I don’t get it.’ Noah had gotten lost in the memories of his and Nat’s own ill fated pregnancies. That there was something like a pedigree in the family was surprising.
‘I was passing through the Soo when I found out about it. July, 1958. I was never so confused in my life.’

‘Why confused?’

‘I thought maybe the end of the pregnancy meant the end of our marriage. Your mother was so damn pretty, so damn good, and I thought the only reason she’d settled down with me in the first place was because she got herself pregnant.’

‘You got her pregnant.’

Olaf seemed almost to blush. ‘We met at a dance hall of all the goddamn places. This was back when people still danced. She told me right off she didn’t want a sailor. I told her she should dance with someone else then. But she didn’t. There was something underneath all that primness.’

‘We’re talking about Mom.’

‘Sure we are. We danced and danced. She smelled like rosewater I remember. She always did. She had on a white dress and a white sweater and with that blond hair it was like she had claim on half the purity in the world.’ He shook his head. ‘But she knew what she was doing. It was unfair is all.’

‘You were defenseless, huh?’

‘Anyone would have been, that’s the truth. I would have bought anything she had to sell. But she wasn’t selling anything. That’s the thing. At the end of the night I walked her back home. She still lived with her parents over on the west end, by Wade Stadium. Warm March evening. At the door she told me she didn’t want to get old before her time. Said that’s what sailors did to you.’

Olaf paused, clearly reveling in the memory of it all.
‘Well I know it didn’t end there. Something must have happened between then and, what, May? April?’

‘We were already shipping that year. I had two days.’

‘So?’

‘So the next morning I’m walking back to my apartment from the diner on the corner and I get home and your mother is sitting on the stoop outside my building. I said, “I thought sailors were off limits.”’

‘What did she say?’

‘Said she changed her mind. Said she’d make an exception.’

‘And she did.’

‘The thing is I fell in love with her like a kid. Immediately. I was stupid in love with her. Your mother? I was practically an old man when we met—thirty-eight years old—and your mother was no spring chicken, not by the standards of 1958. She fell in love with me, ended up with me anyway, because twenty-eight-year-old women weren’t single in Duluth back then.’

‘I saw enough reason to the contrary to believe that. Mom loved you. Very much.’

‘Ah, she might have grown to love me, but not how I loved her from the start.’ He paused. ‘That day, that Sunday in March, right after I met her, she invited me out for a lemonade. Right then. We walked down to Wahl’s, sat at the counter, and sipped our lemonade from paper straws. She told me everything I’d ever need to know about her. Then she put me through the wringer. Where did I grow up? Did I miss Norway? Did I wish I still lived there? Why did I work the boats? Why wasn’t I married? What
about girlfriends? Did I like my job? What about my parents? Did I love them? Did I want to have my own kids some day? A goddamn deposition.

‘At the end of the afternoon I walked her home again. I told her I had to leave the next day. I told her I wanted to see her again. We were standing there on the porch of her parents’ house and you know what she said? She said come in, she said her parents were in Minneapolis.’ He shook his old head slowly no. ‘I told her I had to go, that I had too much to do before the next day. That was hard.’

‘You were smitten just like that,’ Noah said, relishing greatly this last story.

Olaf nodded.

‘You’ve never struck me as the smitten type. You’ve always been pretty tough to crack.’

‘Your mother never had any trouble cracking me.’

‘Just the rest of us.’

‘Solveig never had any trouble either.’

‘I guess not.’

‘She was waiting for me when I got back. Like a bird, sitting on the stoop again when the cab dropped me off. She came up. We listened to the radio on the couch. Rosewater all over the place. I had no chance. None.’

‘And from this you decided she was only in it for the husband?’

‘Ah, what the hell do I know?’

‘A lot more than I thought,’ Noah said.

There was enough freight in the words that passed between them to require one of his father’s old ships, but Noah let it pass by way of fond memories. Amazing
as the story of the wreck told from his father had been, the story of how the old man fell in love with his mother resonated even more deeply. Noah had always possessed a romantic inclination. This story was tailor-made. He recalled mornings from his early childhood, mornings when the three of them—father, mother, son—luxuriated in their luckiness. The feeling of security in the booming laughter of his father. The way he would wrestle Noah on the living room floor, the Duluth winter outside the big bay window little more than a backdrop for the times of his life. In many ways they were simply that. It had been years since he’d thought of them.

‘Of course, a lot changed,’ Olaf said, as if to check the mood.

Noah looked at his father. ‘What did you expect her to do?’ he said. ‘You set her up for a very lonely life.’

‘It’s not all your mother’s fault, what happened. Phil Hember.’

Noah got up and poured his father another glass of water. He brought it to him. ‘Phil came along ten years after your boat sank. What happened in between?’

‘What happened,’ Olaf said, pausing to take a long drink of the water, ‘was life. She was pregnant with you pretty damn quick. We bought the house on High Street. You were born. Solveig was born. My boat sank. I sank. Your mother and I sank. Hember took over for me while I kept the Freighter and the Tallahassee in business. That’s the story. Here I am today.’

‘A little simplistic, isn’t it?’

‘No,’ Olaf said.

‘No cause and effect? No regrets?’

‘There was nothing but regret.’
‘It’s not that simple, Dad.’ For twenty-five years Noah had been scratching his head over it, trying to see all the angles, to measure his disdain in proportion to the events that formed it. ‘Mom was screwing the dope across the street. You were sopping up gin drops in those rat holes. And your kids were at home trying to figure it all out. That’s as complicated as it gets?’

The old man looked at him as if in slow motion. ‘Are you looking for answers? For explanations?’

‘I don’t know what I’m looking for,’ Noah said. ‘I just know it’s not so simple, what happened between us all.’

‘Listen, Noah. I hated myself. It’s true I hated your mother, too, and I hated what our problems were doing to you kids. But your mother did take up with Phil.’

‘Mom didn’t want Phil Hember. He was your fill-in, like you said. He was the cat in the yard while you disappeared.’

‘How do you know that? You were a kid.’

‘I grew up pretty fast, Dad.’

‘And you were an expert on marital relations?’

‘I didn’t need to be. I heard Mom crying herself to sleep every night. I saw her sitting in the living room window watching the harbor. I watched her sitting in the hospital, holding on for one last look at you.’

Olaf put his chin on his chest. He said nothing.

‘That’s all true.’

‘She still shouldn’t have done what she did. I may have checked out, your mother may have wanted more, but she shouldn’t have done it the way she did.’
Olaf leaned forward. He picked the box of ashes from the table and held them on his lap. For ten minutes, maybe longer, he stared at the box while Noah stared at his father. The silence in the room a tribute to sadness if nothing else. Finally Olaf set the box back on the table. He looked at Noah. When he spoke his voice cracked. ‘I’m very glad you love your mother so much. I’m glad you loved her through it all. I loved her myself.’

Noah looked at his father. He saw the age in the lines of his face. He saw the grayness of his long beard. He saw him as a younger man, as the father of a young child. Of two young children. ‘I love you, too.’

To this Olaf smiled. ‘Take care of those for me, okay?’ He gestured towards the ashes.

‘I will. Solveig and I will.’

‘Good.’ Olaf stood with much evident pain. Noah helped him. ‘I’m going to try and sleep in my bed for a little while. Stoke the fire, okay?’

‘Sure.’ Noah helped him across the room. He helped him into bed and spread the quilt. ‘You want me to draw the blinds?’

‘No. Leave the blinds open. Maybe I won’t sleep so long.’
Now passed an hour of sadness beyond words. Noah had poured the last of the coffee into his mug and stood at the kitchen window staring into the yard. The wood was split and stacked. The ground had frozen during the last two days. It sat hard as bedrock under the brown grass. It would not thaw until April. There had never passed a moment better made for reckoning, still Noah could not think past the moment.

He watched as the clouds broke. He saw noon come. The draft from the kitchen window tempered the warm room. He ate the second half of the jar of herring. He knew he had to call Solveig. Had a strong inclination to call his wife. He thought the sound of her voice might quell his somber mood, thought, in any case, it would help him through the afternoon. But he had made a promise to his father and he would not leave him again, come what might.

It was soon after lunch that he saw the truck driving down the hill. A red piano painted on the driver’s side door. In the heaviness of the morning’s conversation Noah had forgotten about the tuner. The man stepped from his truck, an ox and a slob. His shirt tails hung from behind his barn coat, his haunches filled it out. His boots were untied and what hair he had appeared greasy. His black pants were flecked with something, paint perhaps. He took from the back of his truck a toolbox
the size of a suitcase and carried it to the door. Noah met him, let him into the house, said hello.

‘I almost forgot you were coming,’ Noah said. ‘Any trouble finding the place?’

‘None at all.’ He held his hand before him. ‘Gordy Nelsen.’

‘I’m Noah.’ They shook hands.

‘Nice spot here. Quiet, peaceful.’

Noah raised an eyebrow, one of his father’s gestures. ‘That’s one way of looking at it.’

‘Here’s our culprit?’ Gordy pointed at the piano sitting against the wall.

‘It is.’

Gordy tapped a key. He tapped another. He opened the top of the piano, took a flashlight from his toolbox, shined it into the piano. ‘I’ve seen worse,’ he said. ‘Though not much.’

‘Can it be fixed?’

He sat at the bench, put a foot on one of the pedals. He ran his fingers across the keyboard. ‘I can fix it, but god’s truth is it ain’t worth it. What it’d cost you could nearly have a new one.’

‘All I want is to be able to get a sound out of it. One that won’t hurt the ears.’

Gordy was up and in the piano again. He had already pulled two strings from the guts of it. ‘It’ll take all day. I’ll have to restring it. Realistically the whole action needs to be replaced. I think I see a crack in the soundboard.’ His head disappeared
into the piano. It came back out. ‘There’s a crack. Not the end of the world, but not
good either.’ He got on one knee, looked at the pedals. ‘Is it an heirloom?’

‘It is.’

‘I can restring it. Check the action. Fix the pedal. I do all that and you’ll be
able to play it. I can’t promise it’ll hold a tune for more than minute or two. But I can
do it. Heirlooms are heirlooms.’

‘Do whatever you can, okay?’

‘Right. You have a cup of coffee to go with the sauna?’ He smiled.

‘Of course. I’ll make some. And sorry about the heat. My father’s sick—this
is his house—he needs it warm. He’s sleeping in there.’ Noah gestured towards his
bedroom.

A look of genuine concern spread across Gordy’s face. ‘I can come back
another time,’ he offered.

‘Oh no. No. Thanks, but it’s not necessary. He probably won’t even know
you’re here.’

Gordy took off his sweater. Already his undershirt was wet with sweat. ‘This
his place?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, maybe a little music will make him feel better.’

‘That’s the idea,’ Noah said. He’d set water on for coffee.

‘You have any more light in this place?’

‘Not much,’ Noah said, stepping from lamp to lamp and turning them both on.

‘How’s that?’
‘That’ll help.’

Gordy unscrewed the top of the piano and removed it. His big arms reached into the instrument. ‘This is going to be some job.’

Noah readied a coffee filter and spooned grounds into it. He took a cup from the cupboard. ‘Milk or sugar for your coffee?’ he asked.

‘Black’s fine.’

Noah waited for the water to simmer.

For two hours Gordy worked, pulling busted hammers and rusty strings from the piano, looking over his shoulder with a wrinkled brow and puckered lips as if he were a customer at a restaurant pulling a long black hair from his plate of spaghetti. He hummed while he worked and talked of all manner of things. He kept returning to the topic of the weather, specifically the snow that was on the way. He assured Noah it would start that night. At one point he warned Noah to get the truck up on the county road. ‘Unless you’ve got a trick up your sleeve, or unless that thing can fly, I’d move it up there. If you don’t, you’ll be buried down here for the next five months.’

Noah thanked him, made a note to move his father’s truck up to the road. ‘Isn’t it early for so much snow?’ he asked.

Gordy took a break from his work. ‘We’ve had less snow the last few years, but we can still get walloped. They’re talking about one of those el Niño winters again. Warmer but wetter. I’ll make that trade every year.’

‘It’s been a long time since I’ve been here in the wintertime,’ Noah said.
At this Gordy plied him with questions about Boston and Boston winters. He spoke repeatedly about wanting to visit Florida, a place he’d seen only in brochures. He set back to work, still humming.

Noah got up to check on Olaf. The curtains were drawn in the room but Olaf sat up in bed with his arms folded across his chest. His eyes were open.

‘How are you?’ Noah whispered.

‘Okay. I could use some water.’

‘I’ll get a glass.’ Noah stepped back into the kitchen and got one. He ground another round of pills and stirred them into the glass. He brought it back to his father. ‘The guy’s here fixing the piano,’ he said.

Olaf nodded as he drank the water. He wiped his bottom lip with the sleeve of his turtleneck. He was out of breath from drinking. He closed his eyes.

‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

‘This thing’s working overtime now.’

Noah sat on the edge of the bed. ‘And there’s nothing I can do?’

‘I think I’ll sleep again. Let me know when he’s done with the piano. Maybe I can come out to the great room.’

‘I’ll do that.’ Noah tucked his father in again. Took the empty glass back to the kitchen, rinsed it, filled it, and returned it to his father’s bedside table.

When he came back out Gordy was refilling his own coffee mug. ‘I hope you don’t mind.’

‘Of course not,’ Noah said. ‘Should I make more?’
'No need, but thanks. Maybe on my way out of here. We'll see how the weather's holding up.' He went to the window, looked up at the sky as if to gauge its intentions. ‘Sixty-one is a hell of a road in a blizzard, that I can tell you. Especially spots where the highway’s exposed to the lake. You can get some pretty deep drifts.’

Noah watched him work. He had by now gutted the piano of all its strings, had examined the action and soundboard and decided to leave well enough alone, to simply restring it and hope for the best. This plan he passed by Noah. Noah agreed. He told Noah he could have it done in the next couple hours.

For all of his ambling around and small talk Gordy worked quickly and with apparent precision. He never had to correct something he’d already fixed. Except for the sweat now soaking his shirt, he appeared completely at ease handling the instrument.

Noah sat on the couch watching him restring the piano.

‘What did your father do that he could get away living up here?’

‘He worked on the ore boats,’ Noah said. ‘This was his father’s place before him. My grandpa built it.’

‘Ore boats, huh? What did he do on them?’

‘He retired captain,’ Noah said. ‘More than fifteen years ago now. He worked for Superior Steel.’

‘How about that? What about you, what line of work are you in?’

‘I have a small business. I sell antique maps.’
Gordy worked with both hands in the piano now. ‘Couple of interesting guys you two. There aren’t too many antique map sellers, I don’t suspect. Nor too many ore boat Captains.’

‘I guess not,’ Noah said. ‘Nor many piano tuners for that matter.’

‘Fewer and fewer all the time,’ Gordy said. He worked with great efficiency, seemed to be accelerating as the daylight faded. ‘My own grandpa worked on the docks in Two Harbors. He was a stevedore. Died on the job when I was only in kindergarten. Fell into a cargo hold, was crushed by a basketful of iron ore.’

‘Are you kidding?’

‘No sir. Happened a long time ago.’

‘My father survived the wreck of the Ragnarok.’

‘Your father was on the Rag?’ Gordy said. He stopped what he was doing and looked seriously at Noah. ‘My grandpa used to load the Rag. Can you believe that? Small world.’

‘It is a small world.’

Gordy set back to work. ‘So he was one of the three.’ It wasn’t a question so much as a statement of awe. ‘I was in high school back then. Remember it like yesterday.’

‘So do I,’ Noah said.

‘And he kept sailing after that?’

‘For almost twenty years.’

‘No way you’d of gotten me back out on that lake.’

‘He could hardly be seen on land,’ Noah said.
‘He’s damn near famous I guess.’

‘Don’t tell him that.’

Gordy rested his arms atop the piano. ‘So, you know the real story I bet.’

Noah smiled. ‘As a matter of fact I do.’

‘I’ll have to tell my son about this. He loves the shippery.’

Gordy finished an hour earlier than he thought he would. After he reattached the lid he pulled the bench up, cracked his knuckles, and launched into a beautiful rendition of *Rondo Capriccioso*. He played like a virtuoso, the mass of his body ecstatic as he moved from one end of the keyboard to the other, an exultant look on his face. When he finished the air literally vibrated with the last notes. Noah applauded as if he were cheering the soloist from the Boston Pops. ‘That was my mother’s favorite piece,’ Noah said. ‘She played it all the time.’

‘My favorite too. I play it after every piano I tune.’

‘I hope my father was awake to listen. Maybe you could play another?’

He cracked his knuckles again, let his fingers hover over the keyboard for a moment. ‘Grieg?’ he said, and without waiting for reply began.

Again it was beautiful. Noah listened transported.

Gordy slid off the bench finishing the last few notes. ‘That’s the opening to his concerto in A minor. I love it’

‘I’m no expert, but I know a pianist when I hear one. That was just terrific.’

He was packing his tool box. ‘Thank you. It’s what I do.’ His modesty was as genuine as his look of concern for Olaf had been when he first arrived. ‘Not much use for it, but it’s what I enjoy.’
‘The world would be a better place if more people could play like that.’

‘The world’s not such a bad place,’ Gordy said.

He wrote a receipt for Noah. Noah paid. He walked him to the door. It was darkening. It was cold.

‘Tell your father I hope he feels better. I hope the music cheered him up.’

‘I’m sure it did. I really appreciate your coming. On such short notice too.’

He turned the collar of his barn coat up. ‘My pleasure.’ He looked skyward.

‘It is on the way. Get that truck up this hill.’

‘I will.’

And with that he left.

Back inside he heard moaning coming from his father’s room. Noah opened the door. The light from the living room filtered in and he could see his father stabbing the air with his fingertips. What he’d mistaken for a moan was actually humming that sounded vaguely like music. The smile on his father’s sleeping face belied his voice, which was clotted and out of tune. Noah stood in the doorway and watched for a minute. His father soon set his arms down, quit humming, and settled back into sleep.

Noah moved the truck up the hill as Gordy had suggested. Darkness was upon that day, and the coldness fierce. It even smelled of snow.

For a couple hours Noah worked on one of his piano lesson standards. It must have cut quite a contrast to the effortlessness of Gordy’s playing. When, between notes, Noah heard his father coughing, he went in to check on him. Olaf sat up in bed,
his eyes sunken in the darkness. Noah opened the bedroom door fully for the light. He saw clumps of hair in his father’s hands.

‘Hey, you okay?’

Olaf looked at him, appeared stunned. ‘Noah? Is your mother here?’

Noah went to his father’s bedside. He sat. ‘No, Dad, Mom’s not here.’

His voice was so soft. ‘That’s funny. I heard her playing the piano. She was playing my favorite song.’

‘That was the piano tuner. He’s gone now.’

‘Tell her I’d like to see her,’ Olaf said, looking up into Noah’s face. A look both empty and full of something.

‘You’ll see her soon,’ Noah said, though he had no faith in heaven, nor any in hell. ‘I want to talk to her.’

‘Tell me and I’ll tell her for you.’

Olaf began to hum *Rondo Capriccioso*, the sound a whir, barely a sound at all.

Mid-song Olaf stopped. ‘Tell her I’ll be home soon. Tell the kids too.’

‘You are home, Dad. I’m here with you. I see you.’

Again Olaf looked at him. ‘Good,’ he said, then shut his eyes and eased back into his slumber, silent now.

Noah stayed at his bedside for some time. He watched him sleep. The wind had returned, he could hear it innate in the wilderness. It assailed the house. When he rose to turn in himself he looked from his father’s bedroom window. He could see the first of the snow slanting through the darkness, offering its whiteness to the night.

Noah stoked the fire properly. Abundantly. His watch said seven-thirty.
Try as he might Noah could not sleep. He lay in the bed and watched the snow radiating such paleness in the dark frame of the window. It fell furiously. He thought only of his wife now. He longed for her in a way he hadn’t in years, with a kind of abandon he attributed to his father’s love story. He staggered thoughts of his own marriage with thoughts of his parents’. The designs of each seeming less distinct from this view. He thought of his father’s suggestion not so many nights ago that the reason Noah feared being alone in old age, without Natalie beside him, had more to do with the reasons than the outcome, and he reckoned the old man might be right. He’d come to realize, without any effort of thought, that he and Natalie had probably endured their bouts with failure. Those many failed pregnancies had been their trial, and now closer to fifty than to thirty years old, and with the education of the last ten days, he figured they had a pretty good chance. This thought appeased him deeply, but also kept him awake when he wanted to sleep. There was a kind of euphoria attached to it.

Outside he could see the spooky glow of the falling snow. He strained to listen, thought he could actually hear it. After a while he got up. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. The temperature in the great room must have been twenty degrees warmer than it was in the bedroom. He pulled his t-shirt over his head and stood bare-chested at the window.

The snow. The snow.
At nine o’clock he heard groaning from his father’s room. It stopped. It started again. When he cracked the door to peek in, he could see Olaf struggling to rise from the bed. He turned on the lamp near his father’s bedroom door and stepped into his room.

Olaf’s eyes cringed shut. His big hand went up to shield the light. The moan went baritone, as if the light had changed the severity of his pain. ‘Fucksakes,’ Olaf said, his voice slurring the profanity. ‘Goddamnit, goddamnit.’

Noah hurried to the bedside. ‘What is it, Dad?’ he said, helping his father remove the blankets and quilt from his legs. ‘Are you too hot?’

‘Ah shit.’

‘It’s okay. Tell me what to do.’

‘Shit,’ Olaf repeated. His legs were free of the bed covers. He swore again.

Noah took him first by the elbow, then sat next to him and put his arm around his shoulder. ‘Tell me what’s wrong.’

Olaf’s shoulders crumpled, his chin fell, and his eyes and arms went limp. His feet were on the floor now, his lips crusty and shuddering. In a voice barely more than a whisper he spoke into Noah’s chest, ‘I have to go, Noah. To the outhouse. Last one.’

Without a word, Noah helped his father stand. He helped him into his wool trousers. He helped him walk into the great room. In the light the old man’s pain became evident. He leaned lightly against Noah, would not have been able to stand without him.
Noah hurried him into his coat. He had him hold onto the doorjamb while he put the old man’s boots on. He tied them tightly. He took from the shelf the blaze orange hunting hat and a pair of leather mittens. He helped his father into these. Then he put his own coat and boots on and took the flashlight. He put his arms around his father again and opened the door.

Already snow had drifted six inches deep in front of the door. Noah kicked it away as they stepped into the mean wind. The going was slow. Olaf relied entirely on Noah for balance. He felt light in his son’s arms and after a few more difficult steps Noah simply handed the old man the flashlight and picked him up. He carried him up the path to the outhouse. Once there Noah helped him with his pants. He unbuttoned the flap of his union suit and helped him to sit. Snow blew into the outhouse and Noah could feel his father shuddering as held him upright on the seat.

For fifteen minutes, maybe more, Noah held him steady, the two men alone in the utter dark now that Noah had turned the flashlight out. He’d hoped it would lend a hint of privacy to the ordeal. It was so cold.

When Olaf finally reached for the coffee can, Noah himself had begun to shiver. He stomped his feet in the deepening snow. He shrugged his shoulders hoping to stir his blood. He turned the light back on for his father to see. Olaf wiped himself with great difficulty. He wiped himself again. He looked up at Noah.

‘You done?’ Noah asked.

Olaf shook his head yes.

‘Okay. Let’s get you all hiked up and back into the house. You feel better?’

This he said already helping the old man up.
Again Olaf nodded.

‘Put your arms around my shoulders,’ Noah instructed, setting the flashlight on the bench.

Olaf clutched helplessly at Noah.

‘Like this, Dad,’ Noah said, demonstrating with his own arms. ‘Pretend I’m Mom, pretend you’re dancing.’

Olaf got his arms around Noah’s neck, a grip so feeble. He pulled the old man’s pants up, he buttoned them. He buttoned his father’s coat, he buttoned his own.

He carried his father back to the house, snow now creeping over the tops of his boots.

Back inside Noah undressed Olaf to his union suit. He offered him something to drink. Olaf declined. When Noah began to help him back into his bedroom, Olaf stopped.

‘I’ll sleep in here,’ he whispered, pointing at the couch. ‘Warmer.’

‘Okay. Good,’ Noah said, somehow buoyed by the suggestion. ‘You’ll be more comfortable in here.’

Noah helped his father into the chair while he fixed a bed for him on the sofa. He then carried him over to it. The old man’s head disappeared into the pillow. Noah covered him with the quilt and afghan. He tucked both under his feet. He stoked the fire and turned out the lamp. A dim slant of light from the window shone in the room.

He could only see his father’s outline on the couch.

‘You all set? You comfortable?’ he asked.

‘Goddamn baby,’ Olaf said, barely loud enough for Noah to hear.

‘Who’s a baby?’
Olaf reached for Noah's arm. 'Good son,' he rasped.

Noah touched his father's hand. He held it there. 'I'll be right in there if you need anything. Just call.'

Olaf was already fighting sleep.
The morning blazed bright, sunny and white and windless. A profound silence had beset the house, beset the wilderness around it. Noah stood at the window inspecting the weight of snow hanging on the pine trees, the whiteness everywhere a testimony to the vagaries of that place. The whiteness was disturbed only by the bark on the south side of the trees, on the limbs of hardwoods too thin to hold snow. There were not many of them. He tried to gauge the snow’s depth, but the drifts confused him. Snow sloped gently on the north side of the shed to the eaves but had been blown nearly clear on the south side of the roof.

He turned to look at his father still asleep on the couch. His rest appeared easy now, the rising and falling of his chest steady if not slowing. His thoughts gazing on the old man were thoughts of love.

He put water on for coffee and stepped into his boots. Snow knee-deep had drifted onto the top step. He kicked as much away as he could and pissed beside the house. He thought he’d never felt air so cold, nor seen any so clear. He surveyed the yard again, contemplated the fate of the wolves in the deep snow, contemplated the fate of Vikar. He lingered there, bracing himself against the cold, a new abundance of faith in the days ahead.
When he returned to the kitchen the kettle was whistling. It woke his father. The old man appeared better, as if the long sleep had done something to whittle away at his dying. Noah asked him how he felt.

In a voice practically inaudible he asked, ‘You seen the dog?’

‘I haven’t. I’d almost forgotten about him.’

Olaf coughed. He cleared his throat and sat up to spit in the water glass on the coffee table. ‘Usually comes around after a snow. Builds a den under the steps.’

Noah opened all the curtains. ‘Will he be all right?’

‘He usually is. Maybe he finally ran off with the wolves.’

‘The call of the wild.’

‘Your favorite story when you were a boy.’

‘Get out in the woods and stay,’ Noah said.

Olaf propped himself up on an elbow. ‘I need a hat. Something to keep me warm.’

‘I’ll find you one.’

Before he did, Noah stoked the fire again. He fetched the orange hat from its peg on the porch. He gave it to his father who struggled for a moment before handing it back to Noah and lifting his head slightly. Noah put his hands inside the cap, stretched it out, and set it over the old man’s ears. He leaned back on his pillow.

Noah went back to the kitchen counter. He ground more pills and mixed them with another glass of water. He helped his father drink the potion.

‘What day is it?’ Olaf said.

‘It’s Thursday.’
‘In the morning?’

Noah looked at his watch. ‘It’s ten o’clock, a little after.’

Olaf closed his eyes. ‘How much did it snow?’

‘More than a foot I think. There’s a drift to the eaves on the shed. And it’s cold. Below zero.’

‘The high after the low,’ Olaf said.

Knowledge like that I’ll never possess, Noah thought.

Now Olaf opened his eyes. He looked at Noah. ‘It hurts. Bad.’

Noah sat on the coffee table facing his father. ‘What can I do?’

‘There’s nothing to do.’

‘I wanted to call Solveig but I’m not leaving.’

‘I’m glad she’s not here. I’ve got to be a sight.’

He was. ‘You look good. Better than last night.’

Olaf looked at the piano. ‘Some dreams I had.’

‘You slept pretty peacefully last night.’

‘I feel better when I sleep.’

‘You want to sleep now?’

‘Wish I could.’ He took a deep unsteady breath. ‘I feel hollow.’

Noah thought of carrying him through the woods the night before. ‘Is there anything else you want?’ he said.

‘Pull the quilt over my feet,’ Olaf said. ‘And just sit here with me.’

The words thrilled Noah. He tucked the quilt around the old man.
Olaf began humming, more tunefully this time than the night before. Midway through the song he looked at Noah. He almost smiled through his baggy lips. Noah smiled back. He put his hand on his father’s.

After a moment Olaf said, ‘Your child, name him well.’

‘Or her,’ Noah said.

‘Or her,’ he echoed.

‘Tell you what. Take all the love I never gave you and heap it on your own child. Maybe you’ll remember me a little more kindly that way.’ He picked up the tune right where he left off.

‘You don’t need to worry about me remembering you kindly, Dad.’

He hummed the rest of the song. ‘My watch is on the nightstand. I want you to have it. Get it fixed.’

‘I will. I’ll treasure it.’

‘I wish we could call Solveig. I should have had a phone line put in here years ago.’

Noah got up to look at his cell phone. As had been the case since he arrived, there was no service. ‘I can go into town and call her. Do you want that?’

‘There’s no time for that. Just tell her that I love her, too. And the kids.’

‘I will.’

‘Is it November yet?’ Olaf said.

‘It is,’ Noah said, again checking his watch. ‘November eighth.’

‘It’s always November,’ Olaf said. Now he looked out the window. ‘Sit down for another minute, would you?’
Noah did. Olaf reached up to touch his face. He held his son’s look. He pulled the boy to him exactly as he had thirty-five years ago. He kissed his forehead. Noah stayed there, close enough he could feel his father’s breath. He wanted to tell him that he understood now. That he knew how his love had become cruel, but that he also knew he was better for it now. He wanted to tell him he loved him. He couldn’t say anything.

Soon his father said, ‘I’m going to get some rest. I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad you came back.’

Noah sat up. He’d closed his eyes in his father’s embrace but opened them now. When he did, the old man was already sleeping again. He slept through the morning and the afternoon. He slept through the evening. He was still asleep when Noah himself dozed off on the chair sometime late at night.

The next morning Noah dressed warmly and shoveled a path down to the lake. Two hours labor that proved he’d underestimated the snowfall by half if not more. Again the sun shone and again the whiteness nearly blinded. He looked upon the lake half-frozen with skim ice, an arc of placid black water disrupted beyond the ice by thin ripples that flared under the cold, easy breeze. He felt a moment’s reprieve before he stepped on the dock. The ice cracked under the sway of the posts and he realized it was paper-thin, that the rowboat could easily break through it. As for the boat, it was buried like everything under the snow. He shoveled it out, shoveled the dock too.

The room had been very cold when he awoke. He had not stoked the fire during the night. In that lightness he’d seen his father, seen the quilt not rising, seen
no heave of the old man's chest. Noah stood. He’d watched, hoping to convince himself that what he knew, was wrong, that the light was insufficient or that the old man’s breathing had become that short. When he finally stepped to him and touched his cheek his knowledge became irrefutable. His father’s face was as chill as the air. Noah simply pulled the quilt up over his father’s face and knelt beside the sofa. Anyone passing by would have thought he was praying.

Back up in the yard he cleared a path to the shed. The sun did little to warm him and his fingers and toes grew numb despite his exertion. He took first the wheelbarrow from the shed. Looking down the hill to the lake, at the snow everywhere, he pushed it aside and retrieved instead the old Radio Flyer ski sled from the rafters. He tied a rope to the back end of it. Now he stood before the anchor, the consequences of its purpose beyond any thought he might have. Solveig was not there. Nor Natalie. He put his arms around it. With great effort he carried it to the sled sitting in the snow. He set it upon the seat, took one of the pieces of tubing in one hand and the rope in the other and guided it down the hill. At the lakeshore he set it on the dock. He towed the sled back up the hill and retrieved the platform his father had fashioned to sit on the gunwales. By now the sting of the cold on his face drew his skin tightly to his cheekbones. The lobes of his ears had gone numb. He brought the platform to the dock and set it across the boat with some difficulty. The ice around the boat cracked as it had when he first stepped on the dock, its sound full in the otherwise silent day.

Finally he returned to the house. He scratched the frost from the kitchen window and read the temperature on the thermometer. It was below zero. He turned
to regard his father. For a long time he looked at the shape beneath the quilt. He counted back the hours. It had been only some hundred and sixty hours, a simple week ago, that he and his father and Natalie had eaten so festively the Norwegian feast she’d brought. Only three days before that he’d arrived here at the lake. And just two days before arriving he’d received his father’s call. The measuring of those days and hours confounded him in contrast to what lay ahead for the old man now. To what lay ahead for himself, too.

Against his instincts Noah stoked the fire. He stood before it blowing into his hands and tapping his toes. The question of whether or not to dress his father now came to him. He walked to his father on the couch. He lifted back the quilt. That ratty union suit appalled him. So did the messed hair, the toothless mouth, that pinky half gone. Noah covered him again and went into his father’s bedroom. It smelled faintly of urine. In the small closet he saw the old man’s wardrobe. A corduroy jacket. Three pair of woolen trousers sewn by Noah’s mother and only distinguishable by the wear at the cuff, at the knee. A white cotton shirt with a button down collar. An assortment of plaid flannel shirts. On the shelf above these meager hangings a short stack of sweaters. Noah found the thickest one. He held it up. It had a roll neck collar and patches on the elbows. He slid a pair of the wool trousers from a hanger. From the top drawer of the small chest in the room, Noah took a pair of red wool socks and went back into the great room.

He pulled the covers back again. With as much difficulty as trepidation he dressed his dead father. After the socks he got his father’s boots and put them on. He took mittens and a hat and his petersham coat and when he had him fully dressed he
took the afghan which seemed to be constantly on the old man these days since Noah’s arrival and put it too over the old man's shoulders. So attired Noah took him to the sled at the top of the hill. He took the afghan from his father’s shoulders and covered his face. One more time he returned to the house.

To no avail he checked his cell phone for a signal a last time. He thought of hiking up the hill to the truck, of driving into Misquah to call his sister. He decided against it. Instead he removed his mother’s ashes from the shelf on which he’d placed them. He set them on the kitchen counter and stared at them as if she might materialize and give him counsel. His capacity for thought had diminished with his tasks, and when his mother offered no advice he decided to row his father across the lake.

He guided the sled down the hill a last time. On the dock he untied the rope from the sled. He put his father’s hands behind him and tied them together. He thought how his father might have chastised him for the knot. It satisfied him in any case and he proceeded with the barrel. It weighed more than his father, or so Noah reckoned. He laid the contraption on his father’s chest. He aligned the pieces of tubing with the old man’s legs and crisscrossed the chain behind his back, around his ankles, his father’s instructions returning to Noah unexpectedly. Noah could hardly believe how it all went together. He felt a small sense of pride at his part in its execution.

He managed to load his father onto the boat. He centered the old man and his anchor and stepped cautiously into the boat himself. The oars broke the ice easily. Between pulls the bow could be heard cutting the ice before it. Midway across the
lake the ice cleared and he was in open water. With his back facing his destination, he used the dock in front of him as his point of reference, knowing that if he kept in a straight line at about a forty-five degree angle from the dock posts he'd end up abutting the cliff in the deep water he needed.

He rowed. The wind biting at his neck and wrists and pouring through his coat. He worked with absolute purpose, steadily and smoothly, his father balanced safely between the gunwales. The labor warmed him. He began to breathe hard. He kept his gaze on the dock now so small a point of reference in the distance. He figured he was near the cliff, and when he paused to check saw that he was right. Again he turned, looked towards the dock. He saw upon it his father's dog, his nose raised to the wind. Noah wiped his eyes to clear his vision. Then the dog was gone. He put his head down, let the oars rest in the water.

Here was the spot, here where they'd fished so recently, so long ago. The sun at its apex reflected off the small waves that came with the winter wind. Except for the sound of them against the boat's wooden hull there was no sound at all. He looked all around. He didn't know what he was looking for, but neither could he find it. He heard Solveig's plea not to sink him. He thought again of his mother's ashes. He thought of Natalie's innate confidence in him and knew instantaneously that she would not do it. With this he realized that whatever clarity he'd lacked she more than made up for him. And thankfully so. He took the oars again, steered the boat around, and sculled back across the lake, thankful for the blinding whiteness.
Natalie still slept as he crested the last rise heading east into Duluth. The sun had just risen and cast its light onto the budding trees east and north of the city. A color green beyond his capacity to describe, but not to relish, which he did. It was the opposite season of his last arriving here and the contrast in every way was lovely.

He followed the interstate down into the city. At this hour on a Saturday the roads were nearly vacant. He passed the first neighborhoods, the first industry. His ears popped. The harbor bloomed in the distance, all grays and inky blacks, the water coursing brilliantly and white beneath the sun. At the top of his view he saw the aerial bridge.

He nudged Nat. ‘Hey, sleepy head. Look at this.’

She pulled her head from the pillow on which it lay next to the window. Her eyes adjusting to the light. She stretched. ‘Where are we?’

‘This is Duluth. Breakfast in five minutes.’

She sat up. She scanned the view. ‘It looks a lot different.’

‘It’s May, not November.’
He drove on. They’d planned on having breakfast at Canal Park so he exited at Fifth Avenue. He turned over the tracks and stopped at Commerce and Railroad streets. To his right the elevator silos and docks beckoned. ‘You mind if we take a detour? Five minutes.’

‘What for?’

‘I want to show you something.’

He turned right. He passed two vacant slips not fifty feet from the road. The pier that jutted between them was wholly derelict. Next came six pyramids of taconite five stories tall and black as obsidian. Natalie inquired of it.

‘That’s what this town survives on. That’s taconite.’

‘What your father spent all those years lugging around in his boat.’

Noah looked at her. ‘The same stuff. What he wanted me to bury him with last year.’

He turned onto Garfield and drove past a slip on his left with two tugs tied to cleats on the quay. He drove past two more slips. In the third a small freighter was docked under a loading complex. Men were about her deck.

‘This is so interesting,’ she said. ‘Look at those barges. What would they carry?’


They passed three or four more slips. They drove parallel to railroad tracks and abandoned-looking buildings, warehouses. At an unmarked dirt alleyway he turned left. The weeds along the road were greening. They stopped at a chain link fence. He turned off the car. They got out and stood at the fence. In the short distance
they saw a minor civilization abandoned by time: train tracks sunk in the iodized soil, scrap yards tangled and twined with heaps of rusted steel, old cement silos unpainted in decades, a shack with windows of broken glass. Not far from the gate a pick-up truck rounded a dirt bend. It stopped. A man opened the door and looked at them. He did not nod. He did not wave. Noah would not have needed to raise his voice to greet him, but neither did he do so. The man wore coveralls and a watchman’s cap. He stepped to the back of his truck and let the gate down. A silver and white Siberian Husky jumped from the bed and ran to the gate to sniff Noah and Nat’s shoes. They were both startled but the dog turned as fast as it came and walked away from them, heeling at the watchman’s left. The dog had swollen teats they could see from behind, irrefutable evidence of a new shipyard progeny.

Noah said, ‘How would you like his job?’

Natalie was still watching man and dog walk away. ‘What is his job?’

‘To guard this paradise, I guess.’

Together they surveyed the vista for a few minutes more. Finally, Nat said, ‘I could eat a horse, and I have to pee.’

After scones and coffee—decaf for Nat—at a coffee shop on Canal Park, Noah gave her a tour of the city. He drove her past his high school and the house on High Street. He took her to Chester Park and showed her the ski jumps. He drove her around downtown and through the college campus. Finally they drove north, past the mansions along Lake Superior, and out of town.

‘How long does it take to get to Misquah? I don’t remember.’
‘An hour and a half, maybe a little more,’ Noah said. ‘We’re meeting Solveig and Tom at noon at The Landing. We have plenty of time.’

So they drove again the Superior coast. The leaves that had fallen last year were soil now. The trees were budding, and beautiful. The lake, when they turned upon it, churned not at all. The water gunmetal gray and placid as a tabletop. They talked all morning of possibilities. After their weekend at the cabin they were going back to Duluth to see if they could live there. Noah had planned it this way, hoping for a few days of kindly spring weather to trick Nat into loving his native city. He wanted to move back, wanted to start everything anew. Natalie, amazingly, did not reject the idea outright, though she needed to be convinced, no doubt. Noah had a strategy. So far the weather was cooperating.

They stopped along the way at the Split Rock Lighthouse, up among the trees, resting atop a cliff one hundred feet above the water. The image was fit for a tourism brochure. They stopped also at Gooseberry Falls. They walked a way up the well-tended trails and marveled at the flowing water. Noah told her about the bear and wolves that drank from this river five miles up the current. She nodded, teased him about being a boy scout.

He slowed at the enormous loading facility at Taconite Harbor. Again great cones of taconite stood at the roadside. His father’s ships had loaded here, he told her, and at countless other such harbors. She listened intently.

In Misquah they met Solveig and Tom as arranged. They had lunch in the little café. He told Nat how he’d stood at the counter talking to her on the phone, told her how he’d bought the place out of its supplies back in November. Solveig
reminisced about the taffy their mother would buy her every time they stopped there. Natalie told the story of stopping here for directions up to Lake Forsone. Tom, in all his good nature, ate quietly, devouring two bowls of soup and a sandwich. When they left he bought a t-shirt that said A LOON A TICK and had a caricature of both creatures. He thought it hilarious. Noah managed to smile. So did Natalie. After lunch they drove to the house on Lake Forsone.

There were still small mounds of snow beside the shed and at the top of the hill where the plow had piled it all winter long. The gutter along the front of the house had come free of the roofline and hung to the ground. Icicles, Noah thought—it had been a snowy winter—and age. The grass in the yard had hints of green, but not like the grass they’d seen in Duluth.

They all stood in the yard, silent for a spell.
‘This is how I left it,’ Noah finally said.
‘And you think you can restore this place?’ Solveig asked. She pointed to the gutter.
‘That gutter’s nothing to fix,’ Tom said.
‘It’d be nothing for you to fix, honey.’
‘Hey, I’ll manage,’ Noah said. ‘Don’t worry.’

Nat took his arm, squeezed it.
‘I’m going to fix the shed up like your guesthouse on Lake Lida, Tom. I already ordered the windows. The plumber just sent me an estimate for running a waterline from the well to the house. By this time next year I’ll be running a four-star lodge here.’
‘Just show me where the hot spot is on that lake,’ Tom said. ‘I want a twenty-
pound lake trout to hang in the Aardvark Room.’

‘Just what you need,’ Solveig said.

They smiled all around. The sound of birds erupted from a treetop. Ravens.

They lifted into flight, arced once, and disappeared.

‘Well?’ Solveig said.

‘No time like the present,’ Noah said. He stepped to the trunk of his car.

Neatly packed in a canvas book bag the two urns sat side by side. He took the bag
from the trunk and led the three of them down the path to the lake.

The last time Noah had trod that path he’d done so with his dead father slung over his
shoulder. On that November morning, after Noah lost his will, he rowed the boat back
across the lake. He’d removed his father from the anchor, removed the platform from
the boat, pulled the boat up the beach and turned it upside down. He’d carried his
father back to the house.

Inside he’d removed his father’s coat and hat and mittens. He’d removed his
boots. He’d brought him back into his bedroom and there laid him gently upon his
bed. Gazing down at the old man, Noah had cried for the first time since he’d
returned to the house on Lake Forsone. It was sadness provoked it, it was sadness
sustained it. But there resided in that sadness a paradoxical bliss for all that had come
to pass. For an hour or more he stood at his father’s bedside. He spoke to his father,
aloud and in silence, pleading with him for counsel and forgiveness both. In the end,
satisfied that he could and should not bring his father back down to the lake, could and should not row him back to the deep water, he covered his father’s face.

He trudged through the snow up to the road. A plow had already been through and covered the truck so that all he could see was the faded green roof. Expecting as much, Noah had brought a shovel and in the last hour of daylight he dug the truck free. He drove into Misquah and called the Cook County sheriff. He called his sister. He called his wife. Within a half hour they were all on their way.

The sheriff’s deputy arrived after dark with an ambulance and two paramedics, their pulsing lights so bizarre in the wilderness. Noah walked them down to the house. The deputy offered Noah condolences before documenting the scene. Within an hour they were all four of them lugging Olaf’s corpse back up the road on a gurney.

Noah followed the ambulance up highway 61 to Grand Marais. They went to the morgue and for an hour Noah filed paperwork with the county. He declined an autopsy. He asked to have the old man cremated.

The hour of nine had come and gone by the time Noah stood again in front of the potbellied stove. The ashes radiated the last of their heat. He tried to imagine the list of necessary actions for closing the house for winter. He took the food from the refrigerator and packed it into the trunk of the rental car. He scrubbed the kitchen basin and counters. He swept the floor and woodbox. He tidied the porch. He covered the piano with the sheet he’d been sleeping on those several days. He checked the windows and the back door to see they were locked. He packed his bags.
Satisfied, he’d stoked the fire and went to sleep on the couch. Sometime in the middle of the night an enormous ray of white light came into the house. He awoke startled and fearing what he could not imagine. A hum and a clattering, the light rising and falling. He sat up. He went to the window. There was Laksonenn and his plow as ordained.

The next morning he waited at The Landing for his wife and sister. He was greeted as a regular and condolences were many. People spoke to him with such solemnity in their voice, such compassion in their expressions. The proprietor bought him his coffee and cinnamon roll. That morning and the looks on those faces were as close as Olaf would ever get to a visitation, to a wake. Two days later he and Nat were on their way back to Boston with both urns in his carry-on.

His father’s obituary had appeared on the front page of the Herald.

Now they all stood on the shore, unsure of the dock’s capacity. At The Landing that afternoon they’d been told that ice-out had only come two weeks earlier, and the water proved this, so cold to the touch. The rowboat was upside down on the beach, the hull splintered and warped.

‘That thing is safe for the water?’ Nat asked, pointing at it.

Noah had promised her a cruise. It did not look promising. ‘Six months ago I rowed that thing across the lake, hard as it is to imagine.’

Tom went over to inspect it. When he lifted it he pulled the gunwale free. He stood holding it while the rest of the boat crashed again to the earth.
‘I guess that answers your question,’ Noah said. ‘Doesn’t matter. I was going to buy a canoe anyway. A nice wooden one. There’s a guy in Misquah who builds them.’

Nat walked up and put her arm around his waist. They stood with their toes nearly on the shoreline.

‘We can use this for kindling,’ Tom said.

Solveig took the bag from Noah’s shoulder. She removed her mother’s ashes and set them on the first plank of the dock. She did the same with her father’s urn. She stood facing Noah.

‘Well,’ Noah said. ‘I guess we could each say something. Who wants to start?’

Tom said, ‘I never knew your mother, but if my wife is any testament she was the best woman that ever was.’

‘She was,’ Noah said.

Solveig nodded.

‘And your father was so kind to my children.’

Solveig took Tom’s arm. ‘He was very good to the kids. He had a lonely life, but I’ll remember him every day for the rest of my life.’ She closed her eyes not to quell tears, Noah didn’t think, but to try and remember something. ‘They belong together here.’

‘You’re right,’ Noah said. ‘They do belong together.’ He looked at Natalie.

‘Do you want to say anything?’
‘I love your parents, even though I never really knew either of them.’ She smiled at Solveig, she held more tightly to Noah. ‘Because of them I have this family now.’

Solveig stepped over to Natalie. She hugged her, then looked at Noah.

‘On the day Dad died he told me to love my children better than he loved me. I said I would, I didn’t realize that any capacity I had to love I owed to him. Him and Mom. That’s really all that matters.’ He stared down at the urns. He looked out on the water, at the wilderness surrounding the lake. ‘They’ll be happy here.’

He uncapped his mother’s urn and handed it to Solveig. He took his father’s urn and led Solveig to the end of the rickety dock. Together they spread the ashes on the water. Together they watched as they dispersed.

Solveig and Tom walked back up to the cabin under the pretense of making dinner. Noah led Natalie along the water’s edge. At the base of the ski jump’s landing hill they stopped. Noah pointed up at it. He’d told her all about it.

‘It’s so big,’ she said.

Noah only smiled. They stood silently for a few minutes.

‘What time is it?’ she asked.

Noah removed his father’s old watch from his pocket. Before he left Boston he’d had it repaired, had the escapement and jewel replaced, had a new crystal put on it. He opened it. ‘It’s almost four.’

‘I can’t believe I’m already hungry again,’ she said.
‘I can,’ Noah said. He closed the watch but then opened it again. He read the words his mother had had engraved on the caseback all those years ago, read them for the thousandth time since his father’d bequeathed it to him. YOU WILL COME SAFE FROM THE SEA.

I have, he thought. He turned to face Natalie. He put his hand on her stomach which had only recently begun to show. She held his hand where it lay.