

# *Confusing the Seasons*

--Dan Cavallari

# I.

## *Comings and Goings...*

Einar William Coates. The name his mother gave him. Carved in wood and hanging next to his front door. He pressed his fingers against the letters as he stood in the doorway, a cup of coffee steaming in his other hand and the cold from the morning spearing at his face, and felt each swing and curl of the carving: EINAR. Then, WILLIAM. Then, COATES. The trees rustled in an effort to fight the inevitable: they would lose their leaves with each gust—a stealing thief of moving air, taking bits of those trees with it to the ground or to the lake just past the yard. Einar William Coates looked away from the disk of a long-dead tree with his name carved into it, the one that hung next to his front door, and looked out at the dirt driveway before him and the trees beyond. He saw nothing worth noting.

Willie, as his wife and friends had called him for so many years, no longer felt like a Willie. He felt like an Einar William Coates, a relic, a story in a book, a dead leaf that didn't know it had died and still clung to the tree on which it had grown for so many years. He stood on his front porch and sipped his coffee, too old now for shivering against the cold and yet still alive enough to feel it in his bones. His daughter and two sons had left late yesterday afternoon, and the tracks from their car tires were still noticeable in the dirt of the driveway. Bethany had brought her new husband with her—a hulk of a man in a business suit and a cell phone permanently attached to his right ear, whose name was, stupidly, Askar—and Einar disliked him immediately. What good was

all that muscle if all you were lifting was a cell phone and a pen? How the hell could you swing an axe if you were chatting away about stocks on the goddamn phone? Einar didn't like him at all.

His sons, Robert and Jason, had stayed a bit longer than Bethany and Askar, and they, too, had brought their girlfriend and wife respectively. Jason had spent a good part of yesterday in the axe yard splitting the first of what would be two cords of wood even though Einar told him not to, and at first this obvious challenge of Einar's authority angered him. Then he got tired again, tired thinking about their mother, tired thinking about how he'd burn all that wood alone this winter. He let Jason wield the maul and split almost all of it. Damned if he wasn't a strong boy. Jason's wife, Ginny, whom Einar very much liked, baked two apple pies and made a helluva lunch for all of them yesterday.

Robert had also spent a good portion of his visit on the phone, his cell phone almost permanently attached to his left hand—he was a lefty, despite how hard Einar had tried to make him use his right hand as a kid—but he had good reason. Someone had to arrange the funeral, and Einar just wasn't up for it. He felt like a little baby at times, sitting up on the porch and watching it all happen in the late October mornings, watching people arrive and leave, letting his children cart him into the cars and to the funeral and then to a reception and then back to the house where the house was still just the house and the lake was still just the lake. And when they'd finally left yesterday afternoon, hugs, kisses and handshakes thrown around like so many of those leaves in the dirt on the ground, Einar stood on his porch and watched the cars turn and disappear down the driveway. He was still just Einar William Coates.

As he walked down the steps from the porch, his coffee still in one hand and his name still carved on a piece of wood next to the door, Einar and the morning air mixed and mingled, fought and laughed and tried to reconcile all the years in which he'd

forgotten their importance together. How did one find a new companion after spending forty-six years with the same person? Einar William Coates had this breeze, this cold air, and it seemed to fit just right. Sarah Gamble Coates's warmth had been a welcome distraction for forty-six years, but now here was the cold. Here was the air. Here was the morning and its chill.

His legs felt the cold more than any other part of him, and as he made his way down toward the lake, his knees ached in the way they would throughout the winter, a sign of things to come for the next several months. It took some effort to get to the felled log by the bank of the lake, and even as he let his weight rest on the old wood, his knees gave out a creak and a pop that told Einar his walking days were nearing their end. He sipped his coffee and felt the breeze kick up again, watched as a group of leaves swirled in mid-air for a moment, maybe gaining a slight sense of hope that they might escape the ground and find their way to the heights again, then settle slowly back onto the dirt where they would rot. This was how Einar spent the next hour, until his coffee was drained and the cold was too much for him to bear. He retreated back inside and sat at the kitchen table, an empty coffee mug and an unread newspaper in front of him.

That was a Tuesday. Wednesday was much the same, as was Thursday and Friday. But on Saturday, Jason showed up. Einar did not expect to see his son, and the drive from Portland was not a short one, but Einar did not ask questions, either. He was happy to have the company, though Jason looked troubled. Fine, Einar thought, because misery did, in fact, love company.

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Night had fallen on Saturday. Jason had spent much of the day stacking the wood he had cut the week before, or cleaning the shed out back, or repairing the gutter over the porch. Einar watched his son work, wondered what had brought him here, but said

nothing. Jason had lived in Portland now for almost ten years and had gotten himself a damn fine job writing for the Portland Press Herald, a wonderful wife in Ginny, and one comfortable apartment near the water. Any time he made it up this far north was just fine by Einar, and until very recently, just fine by Sarah. But Sarah was gone now, dead and buried, left for the good one above to enjoy. Einar knew that.

“Been meaning to get up there,” Einar said to Jason as he finished hammering a nail into a twisted bit of the gutter above the porch. Though night had already fallen, there was enough light from the floodlight above the barn for Jason to see his work.

“Certainly needed some attention,” Jason said. He pulled another nail out of his pocket and began hammering.

“Come on down now,” Einar said. “Let’s have us some dinner.”

Jason finished hammering the last nail and sighed, then climbed back down the ladder. He said nothing and followed his father into the house where they made themselves some steaks with beans and rice. They spoke very little, if at all beyond trivialities. When Einar finished his meal, he sat and watched his son eat. Jason’s eyes never left his plate.

“Ginny have work?” Einar asked.

“Huh?”

“She didn’t come up with you. She have work to do?”

“Oh,” Jason said. “She didn’t come. She...”

Jason had speared a piece of steak with his fork but had not picked it up off the plate. He stared down at it as if he didn’t quite know what he was supposed to do with it. It may as well have been a novel written in German, by the look on his face.

“We’re going to be getting a divorce, Pop. At least I think so.”

“You think so?”

“Yes.” Jason finally raised the fork to his mouth and ate the piece of steak. Einar did not press on.

They cleared the plates off the table and cleaned up. Einar retired to his chair in the living room and Jason sat in the guest bedroom upstairs reading a book until he fell asleep with the light on. Einar climbed the stairs an hour and a half later, turned off the light by Jason’s bedside, and went to his own room. He’d not slept in his own bedroom since Sarah died. Instead, he’d dozed off on the couch or in his chair, opting not to face the empty space that he knew would make him miss Sarah. As he crawled into bed this night, his knees popping and creaking again, a strange thought rushed through his head: *this is what it’s like to love the cold*. The thought so struck him as odd that he sat up in bed and stared at his hands in disbelief that it had come from his own head. But he let it pass, turned off the light and went to sleep.

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“Hi Pop.”

The phone rang at eight a.m. Einar had already been awake for four hours.

“Robert,” Einar said to his eldest son.

“Jason there?”

“Came up yesterday.”

“So he told you, then?” Robert’s voice sounded slightly accusatory, but soft nonetheless. He loved his brother and had never had any contempt toward Jason, only brotherly rivalry, and that was just fine.

“Told me what?” Einar asked.

“He and Ginny are splitting. Pop, it’s not going to be pretty.”

“Wouldn’t think so,” Einar said. Robert sighed on the other end of the phone.

“Listen, I’m going to try and get up there next weekend. Jason will probably still be there. He’s taking vacation time. I can’t be there until this weekend, though.” Robert’s voice had a pleading note to it, as if Einar had been trying to guilt-trip him into coming up all along. Einar had no inclination to beg his sons or his daughter to visit him, but he felt as though Robert wanted to hear that from him, hear him plead for his presence.

“Come on up when you can,” Einar said.

“One more thing, Pop. Maggie and I are going to get married. I proposed to her three weeks ago. I didn’t get a chance to tell you with all the—with mom passing on and all.”

Einar let the last part of Robert’s statement pass with the austerity and coldness of the breeze off the lake. “Congratulations, boy.”

“Thanks. We were hoping we could have the wedding up there, by the lake.”

Einar thought for a moment, then said, “Lots of work to do in the yard there. I can’t do much of it, but if you and your brother come up to help—“

“We’ll take care of it. As long as it’s okay with you.”

“Fine by me.”

“Good. Thanks. I’ll see you next Friday.”

Einar hung up the phone and looked out the kitchen window. Jason was standing by the barn, looking up at it as though he were preparing to lift the whole damn thing off the ground. He stood that way for a good minute or two, then finally went inside. Einar got up from the kitchen table and pulled on a coat—one of those Carhartt deals Bethany had bought him down in Freeport two winters ago—and made his way, slowly, across the yard toward the barn. Jason was inside with his head buried in the tractor’s engine compartment.

“Only two things end a marriage,” Einar said. “Infidelity and money. Which one is it?”

Jason righted himself and looked at his father standing in the doorway. Then he grabbed a rag off the seat of the tractor and began wiping his hands over and over again until they were well past clean. “Infidelity,” he said, his eyes cast down at the front wheel of the tractor.

Einar grunted. “Sorry, kid,” he said to Jason. He shuffled slowly to the chair to the side of the doorway and sat down with an achy sigh. “I liked Ginny, but yer doin’ the right thing by leavin’.”

Jason closed his eyes. “I’m not leaving her. She’s leaving me.” He looked up at his father and saw he didn’t understand. “I cheated, dad. Not her.”

Einar stared at his son for a moment in the morning sun that shone through the doorway and halfway onto the tractor. Jason suddenly looked old to Einar for the first time ever. He’d always looked like a little boy, always had those happy eyes, always looked fit and spry. But now he looked tired and worn, which made Einar feel ancient and stupid.

Einar grunted again and stood up. He began to walk out of the barn, then stopped. He did not turn to face his son. “Well that sure was stupid of ya,” he said, then walked back toward the house. Jason couldn’t help but smile, though it was hardly a smile of real joy or happiness. He threw the rag back down onto the tractor seat and poked his head into the engine compartment again, trying to un-seize the oil filter, trying to ignore that hot feeling at the back of his neck.

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Bethany called on a Tuesday. “Isn’t it wonderful, Dad?” She half-shrieked through the phone. “They’re getting married! Robert just called me to tell me about it. And the wedding...oh, it will be perfect up there at the lake.”

Einar listened to his daughter ramble with a smile on his face and his fingers wrapped loosely around the phone.

“They’re planning for the spring, late May, I think. Askar said he’d like to come up with Robert a few times this winter to help with the work that needs to be done. It’s a long trip from Boston, but oh, daddy, it would be so great to spend some time up there.”

Einar’s smile faded at the sound of his daughter’s husband’s name. Askar. What the hell kind of a name was that? “Sure he can handle himself with the tools?” Einar said, the sarcasm not readily apparent in his gruff and usually monotone voice.

“He’s quite handy, daddy. You should see. He builds these model cars. They’re amazing and—well, I’ll have him bring one up next time we come visit.”

Einar listened to his daughter chat for a few minutes more, his participation in the conversation not at all necessary, and when they hung up and Einar turned away from the phone, he took two steps toward the kitchen and bellowed, “Sarah!”

The silence that echoed back was all Einar needed to realize how much of a fool he was. He wanted to tell Sarah all about his conversation with Bethany and his extreme distaste for Askar, but Sarah was not in the kitchen. She was not in the house. She was in the ground. It was the first time Einar had let himself slip that blatantly since she died. He looked around the living room and wondered briefly if Jason had heard him, but he’d been outside all morning down by the lake, repairing the dock after he and Henry Johnson from down the way pulled it out of the water for the winter.

Einar put his hands on his hips and let out a slow sigh, then put his coat on and walked out the front door. His boots thumped on the front porch as he looked down the

driveway. Years ago—maybe ten of them now—he'd walk down those porch steps every morning at five a.m. to go to the shed and start the tractor, then head down the driveway and across that county road to his potato fields. But ten years had passed and the fields had been sold for enough money for his retirement, allowing Sarah to do her stained glass crafts and Einar to tend to the house or do some woodworking out in the barn. Ten years had passed. Einar descended the steps slowly and made his way around the side of the house, past the barn and down the slope toward the lake. Jason was there with a cordless drill, repairing one corner of the dock.

Einar waited for the noise of the drill to stop. Jason did not see him standing there, looking out at the lake and the steam rising off it. He was busy checking his work, making sure the screws hadn't poked through the other end of the boards. Einar let the silence last, then finally said, "Your brother's gettin' married."

Startled, Jason pinched his finger between two boards, then pulled his hand out. "Shit," he said. "Yeah, I know. He told me earlier this week. Wants to have the wedding here."

Einar took a step toward the lake. "Lot of work to do 'fore then."

"Yes," Jason said.

"You'll be up?"

"Of course."

Einar did not reply. He took a few more steps forward until his boots almost dangled off the edge of the earth that overhung the lake water. He stood there for a minute or two, quietly staring out at that water. Jason thought how odd it seemed that after so many years, his father looked exactly the same but slower. It was as if time had forgotten him for years and years and only recently remembered to come back and fetch

him. Maybe within the last two weeks or so. Since Mom had died. That was when time came back for Einar William Coates.

“I’m going to get started on the barn later today,” Jason said. “It’ll need a coat of paint in the spring. We should get the eaves repaired before then.”

Einar simply nodded. Jason watched his father a moment longer, then returned to his work on the dock, retrieving the screws he’d dropped when his father startled him.

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Jason was working on the back side of the barn, high up on a ladder, when Robert showed up on Friday afternoon. Both Robert and Jason were hulking men, both with dark black hair and deep brown eyes, and both tall and straight. But Robert had a slight limp, the result of a car accident on a county road almost a decade ago. He’d been with his girlfriend at the time, coming home from a movie in Fort Kent when he hit a patch of ice and ended up in a ditch on the side of the road outside Nelson Michaud’s farm down the way. His girlfriend was irate and injured a little bit of her patience; Robert was scared and had broken his right leg in five places.

Jason saw him pull into the driveway but did not come down from the ladder. He went about fixing the eaves as he’d done for the last two days. Robert limped down the slope of the dooryard and made his way around the side of the barn. He looked up at Jason for a moment, knew he was being ignored, then shook the ladder to get his brother’s attention.

“Howdy, brother,” Jason said from the top of the ladder.

“Been up here a few days, have ya?”

“Yep.”

“Can hear it in your voice,” Robert said. “Got that County accent back.”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing,” Jason said, scraping red, flaky paint away from the eave.

“You want to come down and say hello to your brother?”

“Got work to do up here,” Jason said. “Said hello to you last week. We’ll say it again when I come down.”

Robert laughed with no humor behind it. He stood for a moment longer at the bottom of the ladder, looking up at his younger brother as he scraped away at the red eaves of the barn, then turned and made his way toward the house. When he rounded the corner of the barn, he saw Einar standing on the porch, two cups of coffee in hand.

“Hi, Willie,” Robert said to his father. It was strange how Einar didn’t register that name as his anymore; it took him a moment to understand what his son was saying.

“Maggie with you?” Einar asked.

“No, she stayed down in Portland this time around. She’ll be up next weekend when I come up.”

Robert was limping up the steps to the porch now. Einar watched him come, took a step forward and handed him the mug of coffee. Robert took it and looked over at the barn. “He’s been here all week?”

“Yep.” Einar said.

“He’s got to go back to work.”

Einar said nothing at first. He took a sip of his coffee, then said, “Tells me he’s got vacation time.”

Robert chuckled a bit. “Yes, he does. And he’s using it all up here, stewing in it all.”

Einar considered this for a moment. Yes, Jason was certainly in what his mother would have called the ‘mudfunks,’ and he’d said maybe a total of ten words since coming up to the farm almost a week ago.

“Man’s got to work on a barn sometimes,” Einar said, then made his way to the opposite side of the porch to sit in a chair he’d made almost thirty years ago. Its seat was a sawed disk of oak, the back slats of the branches from a birch. Its rigidity made it stiff and uncomfortable to anyone who sat in it, which was just fine by Einar; it freed it up for him, and he thought it more comfortable than any chair he’d put his weight in before.

Robert stood with his weight on his good leg—his left—and looked out at his car sitting in the dirt driveway. A breeze kicked up, loosening the leaves above again and sending one slowly in its descent onto the windshield of Robert’s car. It stayed there for a moment, then slid down into the gap between the windshield and the hood. “He cheated on Ginny,” Robert said, more to himself than to Einar.

“So he tells me.”

Robert turned to Einar. “That doesn’t bother you?”

“Sure does,” Einar said. “He’s bothered plenty, though. Boy don’t need mine, too.”

Robert stared at his father with a look that seemed mixed with equal parts awe and revulsion. Einar made no indication that this bothered him, but silently, in his own head, he marked this moment as a sign. Robert was surely bothered by Jason’s situation, but there was something else. Einar could see that plain as day.

“There’s some moose steaks in the icebox. Why don’t you go set them out to thaw so we can have them for dinner tonight?” Einar said.

Robert looked at Einar with that same look for a moment longer, then retreated into the house to fetch the steaks. When Einar heard Robert’s boots clop through the hard

wood of the living room, he stood up and looked out from the corner of the porch again at Jason, just barely visible at the right corner of the barn roof. “Damn fool,” Einar said under his breath, then returned to his chair.

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They sat at the table in the kitchen in almost complete silence. The dining room was reserved for special occasions. They had used it a few weeks ago for Sarah’s funeral, but that was the last time anyone had set foot in that room. Before that, it had probably been the fourth of July. Before that, Easter. Tonight they sat at the kitchen table, the only sounds in the room the clacking of forks and knives, the cleared throats and the slight sounds of chewing. Jason sat to Einar’s right, Robert to his left. Robert had all but cleared his plate before he broke the silence.

“Barn’s looking good,” he said to Jason.

“Lot of work to go.”

“You planning on staying up here much longer?”

“Don’t know,” Jason said as he cut his steak. “I guess I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

Robert pulled his napkin off his lap and placed it on the table. “Burning up those vacation days pretty quick, aren’t ya?”

Jason looked up from his meal and gave his brother a meaningful glance. Einar did not miss the fact that something had been said between his two sons in that glance. Einar was a man of few words, but he damn well didn’t like this conversation at all.

Jason went back to cutting his steak.

“You’ll help your brother tomorrow,” Einar said to Robert.

“I don’t need any help, Pop.”

“Can’t recall askin’ if ya needed help.”

Robert cleared his throat. “Maybe I should get started on the tractor tomorrow. It needs—“

“I already took care of it,” Jason said.

Einar put his fork down on his plate. “Then you’ll help your brother with the barn tomorrow,” he said, and as if the matter had been closed with those words, the table fell silent again.

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The next day, both of Einar’s sons were up before he was. Einar dressed himself in work clothes, brown and made for sweat and strain. He had awoken that morning with a strange premonition, or at least a sense that Sarah was watching. He didn’t like that thought, so he pushed it away, but something was different today nonetheless. His knees hurt less today for one thing, and he intended to take advantage of that welcome vacation. When he made his way down to the kitchen, coffee had already been made and both of his boys were outside in the yard. They had pulled the tractor outside of the barn, and Robert was walking with one of the ladders over his shoulder toward the back of the barn. Jason watched his brother as he went, his eyes seemingly following the undulating flow of the ladder caused by Robert’s limp. When Robert turned the corner around the barn, Jason went back inside to fetch the other ladder.

Einar watched all this with a contentment that almost brought a smile to his face. He poured himself a cup of coffee, drained it within a few minutes, and went outside as he pulled on his coat. When he reached the barn, both Jason and Robert were high up on the ladders, scraping away at the paint but not speaking to each other. Einar looked up at them only for a moment, then went inside the barn and began clearing off the work bench to the left of what he considered to be the regular parking space of his tractor. He pulled all the random scatter off the bench top, pulled all the tool boxes and scraps of wood from

underneath, moved all the oil cans and pushed the engine lift outside the barn next to the tractor. He spent the next two hours sweeping, wiping, rearranging, occasionally setting a screw here or a nail there, and essentially enjoying himself for the first time in weeks.

As he rolled the engine lift back into the barn, Jason followed him inside. He began poking around the work bench, looking for some tool or another, moving a can of nails and a jar full of used spark plugs. Einar watched him until he'd moved enough of what Einar had just spent the last two hours arranging for a moment before saying, "What are ya lookin' for?"

Jason turned around and looked at Einar as if he hadn't even realized his father had been there at all. "Just need a crowbar or a pike. There's a hornet's nest up there, rotted out and empty. Just out of my reach."

Without moving a single step, Einar reached to his left and picked up the crowbar that had been leaning against the inside wall of the barn. He handed it to Jason, who for some reason looked quite shaken. "You alright, boy?" Einar said to his son.

"I'm fine," Jason replied. He immediately dropped his eyes to the dirt on the floor. "Fine, pop."

"Cold enough them bees should be dead," Einar said, now wiping his hands on a rag that had been hanging from the engine lift.

"Should be," Jason said, then left the barn. Einar didn't watch him go, but he did notice Jason's shoulders: slumped, heavy, carrying some burden. Einar didn't like it; Jason had certainly knocked himself down into the cow pies, but now he was rolling in it. Robert was right: Jason was stewing in his mistakes, and Einar knew how much of a trick time could be. Jason might spend weeks, months, maybe even years kicking himself for this one, for it was a grand mistake he'd made. But there was something else in his son's gait that told him there was much more beyond what Einar was being told. It wasn't his

manner to ask questions about it, so he'd wait. If he knew his son well enough—and he did, by god—Jason would have something to say fairly soon. Maybe not to Einar, but he'd have something to say.

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Robert stayed the entire weekend and he and Jason got the eaves scraped on all four sides of the barn. The air had turned warm on Sunday, so they decided to throw a coat of primer all the way around. It was almost sundown on Sunday before they'd finished, and when they came inside for dinner, Robert was so exhausted he took an hour nap after dinner before heading back south. Jason sat out on the porch, bundled up now that the sun had gone down and the temperature had dropped, sipping a cup of tea with a nipper of whiskey in it. Einar stood just inside the door.

“Gonna get cold tonight. Think the primer'll set up right?” Einar said to Jason, not looking at him but instead looking out at the dirt driveway again.

“Just primer, pop. Most of it's dry already anyway.”

“If it gets warm again this week, we can go up there and get a first coat of paint on the eaves,” Einar said. “My knees have felt good. Could probably put in an hour at a time up on the ladder.”

“Sure, pop.”

“Frank Jordan could probably come help us. He's been pullin' spuds down the way at his dad's farm.”

Jason looked toward the door but couldn't see his father behind the screen. “Frank Jordan's around? I thought he was out in California.”

“Was. Came back. Always do, don't they.”

Jason thought for a moment. “Yeah, I’ll head down that way tomorrow morning and see what Frank’s up to. We could get a fresh coat on those eaves with three of us working, no problem. As long as we get a warm day.”

“Got a feelin’ we’ll get one,” Einar said. And he did. His knees still felt fresh, and that usually meant warm weather for a spell.

“Yeah, Pop. Me, too.”

Einar closed the door and went back into the living room. About a half an hour later, Robert came down the stairs, his duffel bag in one hand and a brief case in the other. “Heading out now, Pop. I’ll be up again next weekend, if that’s alright.”

“Fine by me,” Einar said. “Rough potholes on forty-four. Watch out for ‘em.”

“Got it. Bye.”

Einar nodded. Robert walked out the front door and onto the porch with an uneven thump-thump from his boots. He closed the door behind him and Einar could hear him talking to Jason, just for a moment, but he couldn’t hear what was said. Then the thump-thump of Robert’s boots started down the steps and into the gravel of the driveway. Einar sighed, then picked up a two-day old newspaper and read until he dozed off in the chair.

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The next morning, Einar was up before Jason. He cooked scrambled eggs and bacon—one of three meals Einar William Coates knew how to cook—and had it laid on the table by the time Jason came downstairs for his coffee. They sat and ate quickly. It was six a.m. when they finished.

“I’m going to head down the way to see if Frank can lend us a hand today. You need me to get anything while I’m out?”

“Right as rain I am,” Einar said.

“Alright. I should be back in an hour or so.”

“Dropcloths are up in the loft in the barn. I s’pose I can get those down for us.”

Einar stood up and took his plate to the sink.

“Your knees okay for that?” Jason said.

“Right as rain,” Einar said again. Jason picked up his own plate and set it next to the sink on top of Einar’s. He then drained his orange juice, took a sip of coffee, and said, “Alright, I’m off. I’ll see you in an hour.”

Einar cleaned the dishes, then went out into the barn to pull the dropcloths down from the loft. The day was warming, alright, and by the time he descended the ladder for the second time, Einar pulled off his coat and threw it on the workbench. He’d managed to get two ladders in place, too, by the time Jason came back. Frank Jordan was with him—“not pullin’ today,” he’d told Einar when he got out of Jason’s car—and the three of them began painting by eight o’clock.

It was fine work, Einar thought to himself. The cold had worn off as the day went on, and the wind off the lake was the only sound to be heard as it wove through the trees around the barn and the rest of the yard. That was, of course, until Frank started talking. When that boy got going, he really got going, and he stood perched atop one of the two ladders as Jason lay on his stomach off the roof, brushing back and forth beneath him. Frank would get three strokes in, stop to talk, then three more strokes, then more talking. It was funny to Einar at first, but then it started to grate away at him. He eventually descended his own ladder and went to the house to get away from it for a moment. As he crossed the yard, he could hear Frank up on the ladder: “It’s just a matter of time, really. I mean, we’re married now, and we both want to go back, so we’ll probably head back to California within a month. Maybe two months. Definitely by the spring, though.”

He went on, but his voice trailed off the closer to the house Einar got. When he stepped into the kitchen, the phone was ringing.

“Hello,” Einar said in his typical monotone voice.

“Hi, dad,” Bethany’s voice said.

“Mornin’ darlin’,” he said to his daughter.

“Askar and I are going to be up this weekend. Is there anything you need us to bring?”

*No, Einar thought, but I can think of a few things you can leave at home. Like a bit of luggage and your husband.* “Not a thing. Jason’s up here. Frank Jordan from down the way is helpin’ with the paintin’ on the barn.”

“Great,” Bethany said. “I have to run, dad. Askar’s got a dinner thing going on tonight and I have to get ready. Bye.”

She hung up before Einar could say goodbye himself. He hung up the phone and washed his hands in the sink, then went to the closet in the hallway to look for his knit cap—the brown one he’d worn since, hell, since forever. He dug and dug for ten minutes or more, shuffling through boxes and moving old jackets. He got a chair from the kitchen table, stood on it and checked the shelf high up in the closet, moved more boxes, and finally found it, a bit dusty but no worse for the wear. At least, no worse than it had been before. It was ratty, alright, but Einar liked that just fine.

When Einar went back out into the yard, Jason had made his way to the top of the ladder Einar had been using and Frank was still perched atop the other. Neither was painting. Jason was laughing as he watched Frank do what looked to be a dance but could have also been a convulsion of some sort. Maybe a seizure. “Jackass,” Einar grumbled under his breath.

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Frank stayed for dinner. Cooked it, in fact. He fired up the grill out back on the patio in the dooryard, even though it had gotten much colder now, and grilled up some moose steaks while Jason made corn on the stove inside. When they all sat down to eat, Frank started in talking immediately.

“Boy, I feel like I’ve been talking all day,” he said.

“Strange,” Einar grumbled under his breath again.

“How’s life down in Portland, Jason? Big city living, right?” He chuckled.

“It’s hardly a *big* city, but it’s nice down there. I enjoy it.”

“And how about Ginny? Boy, I haven’t seen her since—damn, since your wedding probably. She getting along okay?” Frank took a big forkful of meat and shoved it into his mouth. No reply came from Jason, nor Einar, and the silence sat there like a fourth guest at the table.

Frank swallowed. “I say something wrong?”

“No,” Jason said. “Ginny and I are...we’re taking some time off.”

“Oh,” Frank replied, pondering Jason’s statement for a moment. “I was down in Portland a few months ago and there was this crazy bar Natalie and I went to—you should have dinner with Nat and me, Jason. She’s something else. But hey, this bar, they had a fish tank dividing the two rooms and the fish could swim all around you. It was out of this world. You ever been there?”

“Can’t say as I have,” Jason said, a smile returning to his face. Frank went on talking and cutting his meat, not really looking to Einar or Jason to participate in the conversation he’d maintained control over for the last ten minutes or so. Jason looked to his father briefly, who rolled his eyes back at his son.

After dinner, Jason brought Frank home, then returned to the house to find Einar in a chair in the living room reading a newspaper. When Jason walked through the door,

Einar put his paper down. “In behind the workbench by the tractor’s a muzzle. We’ll fish that out for him tomorrow.”

Jason laughed for only the second time since coming to stay with Einar. His father seemed entirely unaware he was being funny, which made it even funnier to Jason. He climbed the stairs, took a shower and fell asleep immediately.

\* \* \*

It took another full day of painting to finish the eaves. Frank talked the entire time. With each word, Jason watched another tiny shred of patience rip away from his father and float away into the breeze. When all the painting was done, they had dinner again. Frank talked the entire time. When dinner was over, Einar gave Frank a hundred dollars and wished him well. Frank, of course, turned the money down, and for a moment, Jason thought Einar was going to take the money back just to shut him up, but he apparently had one shred of patience left and finally convinced Frank to take the cash.

\* \* \*

Robert came back up to the farm on Friday afternoon. Not long after he pulled into the driveway, Bethany and Askar showed up. Jason had been cleaning out a corner of the basement for more firewood when they all arrived and had no idea they’d come until he heard Robert’s uneven footfalls coming down the stairs. When he realized he’d actually come up to the farm for the second week in a row, Jason shut his eyes momentarily and wished he’d have to leave soon on some urgent business or something like that. As it turned out, he’d brought Maggie with him and had no reason to head back south. Maybe Jason did, however.

“Hey, brother.” Robert said when he reached the bottom of the steps.

“Hey.”

“Need any help down here?”

“I got it under control.”

Jason busied himself stacking wood on a broken pallet in the far corner of the basement, behind the furnace and bathed in a shadow caused by the only light bulb in the basement—a bare-wire deal that hung by the base of the steps. Robert approached the corner and picked up some wood that had obviously been tossed down into the basement from the bulkhead opposite the stairs to the kitchen and brought it over toward Jason’s pile. He attempted to stack it, but Jason blocked him.

“I said I got it under control.”

Jason stared for a moment at his brother, who said nothing in response. Then he returned to stacking the wood.

“Are we going to talk about this?” Robert asked.

Jason swung around so quickly that Robert never even saw the movement. Before he could comprehend what was happening, he was pinned up against the stone wall by Jason’s two strong forearms. Robert did not struggle.

“No,” Jason said. “We are most certainly *not* going to talk about this. Not today, not tomorrow, not this goddamn weekend. You can save yourself the trouble and go home now if it pleases ya.”

He released Robert and stormed up the steps. Robert looked at the corner bathed in shadow, picked up the two pieces of wood Jason had knocked from his hands, stacked them and climbed the stairs to the kitchen. He switched off the light bulb that hung from the bare wire as he went.

\* \* \*

Einar William Coates wasn’t always an old man. Didn’t always have arthritis. Wasn’t always so reticent, so stricken with the idea that words did far more harm than silence. He used to be a young man with dreams, with ideas, with *guts* to make all of

them happen. The war had sucked that out of him, had made him cold and ashamed of what he'd seen and what he'd done, not unlike so many other men who'd done exactly what he had done. But he had also made a promise, and then broken it, which made him different from all the others. They didn't have to live with that broken promise on their shoulders all their lives.

He had just begun dating Sarah. They had known each other for no more than three weeks, but they were in love. Very in love. It was at a dance—doesn't it always happen at a dance? So close to the other, eye to eye, pushing and pulling with the slightest movements—down in Falmouth, in that stupid town Einar hated so much and couldn't wait to leave because leaving meant he'd go to war, would go to somewhere other than Maine. But Sarah was in Falmouth that night, in the hall, dancing with Einar, and that was just fine by him.

“Willie,” she'd said, her head resting on his shoulder.

“Yes,” he had said, quietly, the way he knew Sarah wanted to hear the word.

“You're not going to kill any of those boys, are you?”

“They'll be tryin' to kill me,” Einar had replied. Sarah lifted her head off his shoulder and looked him in the eyes. This wasn't some passing, girlish sentiment. Einar knew that just by looking at her. She wasn't concerned really about the men Einar might or might not kill. She was worried about the soul of Einar William Coates. It wouldn't be until much later—decades, in fact—that Einar realized Sarah had not a thing to worry about. When he came back to Maine after his tour of duty, he no longer had a soul. He didn't lose it, per se. He knew exactly where it went.

He spent every moment of his life since then hoping the devil would take good care of it until he made his way down to hell to reclaim it.

But that night in Falmouth, Einar looked at Sarah and said, “If no man tries to kill me, I won’t kill no man.”

“You promise, Willie?”

“I promise.”

Sarah rested her head back on Einar’s shoulder and they danced all night long. Almost a year after that dance, Einar William Coates put a bullet in the head of a man who had not tried to kill him, had not so much as uttered a threat in his direction. He’d broken his promise to Sarah, and he’d taken another life to boot.

When he was just a little boy, Einar had picked up a newspaper and began reading the headlines before his father had sat down at the table. Einar read only a few lines about a man who had killed three other men over the matter of money. “What happens to murderers?” Einar had asked his father.

“They die,” his father had replied. “They die once for each death they caused.”

“But how do you die more than once?” Einar asked.

His father looked very serious and sat down next to his son at the kitchen table. “There are more lives than the ones we live now, son.”

Einar put a bullet in a man’s head and reckoned he had about a dozen or more lives to die for, but that one would be the one to kill him for good, no matter in this world or the next. This death, the bullet crushed through a man’s skull, was laced with a broken promise. If that wasn’t a helluva way to seal a man’s own coffin, Einar would learn no better method.

When Sarah died, Einar had been by her bedside. He was the only one in the room. Everyone else waited out in the hallway or downstairs in the living room, but Einar sat with his wife’s hands in his and watched her eyes close, watched her breathing slow. He watched her go as someone might watch a train leave the platform or the airplane

leave the jetway. It was slow, gradual, almost normal, a 'see you later' sort of moment. When her eyes closed and her breathing stopped, Einar sat for fifteen minutes with his wife's dead body and watched her slip away, even after breathing her last breath, still slipping, still floating into whatever world follows this one the way the leaves outside flowed to the ground, swinging, swaying, blowing back and forth, then finally succumbing. Einar pulled the sheet over her face before leaving the room.

Jason and Robert were the only ones in the hallway waiting. Everyone else was downstairs, sitting quietly and waiting...waiting...waiting to make plans, waiting for it all to be official, waiting to grieve and comfort. But Jason and Robert were in the hallway, clinging to a hope they both knew was false, hoping Einar would come out into the hall and tell them she'd made a sudden and amazing recovery, was, in fact, completely okay, ready to do battle with another few decades. Einar saw it painted on their faces plain as the sun off the lake. When Robert read his father's own face, he went downstairs to join the others in the living room. But Jason stayed.

Einar and Jason said nothing. Not a single word. They simply looked at each other, dry-eyed and serious, and hugged. It was the first time Jason had felt his father's embrace since he was fifteen years old, and they stayed that way for a good minute. Jason lost his mother that day, and for Einar, it was the only consolation of that moment that he could be somewhat of a comfort to his son. But in his own mind, he knew there was something else there, too. He'd just watched his wife slip away into a place he'd never get to visit, a heaven he'd never see, because he'd broken a promise and had to be killed so many more times after he died and went away from this life. He would truly never see his wife again. As he stood in the hallway with his arms around his son, Einar couldn't help but feel his mind and heart crush knowing that Jason, too, would never see Einar again once he departed this world. His father would be in a different place altogether, not

standing side by side with God and Sarah and whoever else may have passed on in the Coates family throughout the years.

Einar would be wrestling the devil for something he had given away—with the help of the United States of America and the powers that be—so many years ago. How long could that struggle last?

Einar figured the devil had an eternity, and so did he.

\* \* \*

Jason went into town--a main street, really. There was no town per se, only a few stores--to pick up a new rake and shovel. Einar's tools had done much throughout the years, and they were certainly worse for the wear. With work to be done and time on his hands, Jason decided to invest in a few new tools--without telling Einar, of course. Frank Jordan had come with him and had been uncharacteristically quiet during the drive, and though Jason noticed, it didn't seem too odd to him. Stoicism grows on trees in northern Maine and rains down on all men their entire lives.

Gibson's Feed was the name of the general store, and as he walked into the place, Jason figured he hadn't set foot in there for a good ten years. It was the kind of place that had the register at the back of the store in front of the booze, cigarettes and candy, because if someone was going to steal from the place, those were the tasty items they would take. Jason made his way through the center aisle toward the counter that held the cash register, and when he'd gotten no more than five feet from it, a semi-familiar voice rang out.

"Jason Coates!"

It took him a moment, but Jason placed the girl quickly enough.

"How are you, Eleanor?"

"By God, it's been years!"

Eleanor Rigby Phillips had been the self-fulfilling prophecy of Jason's high school class. She'd been told all her life she was destined to be alone and miserable because of her name--a gift from her deadbeat dad, an obvious Beatles fanatic and ignoramus in regards to subtext--and for years she denied that fate. In fact, she did so to a fault, often portraying herself as a bit too chipper. But over the years, after hearing it over and over again, she began to believe it: she was destined to be alone and miserable. She lived that way now, not because she had to--she was reasonably attractive and quite engaging--but instead because she was expected to. She'd been convinced, just like everyone else had been.

"Sure has," Jason said. "Been down south in Portland."

"Oh, wow," Eleanor said, the fingers of her left hand now twirling through her brown hair. "I always figured you'd find your way south. What do you do down there?"

"I write for the Press Herald," Jason said, now leaning on the glass case dividing him from Eleanor.

"The paper. Wow, that's great. Really great, Jason. God, it's been years." Eleanor's eyes wandered down to the glass case, trying to catch in it a reflection of the many years that had passed since high school, or perhaps simply the days and weeks and months and years since she'd accepted her fate as a hopeless one. Only after a few moments did she snap out of it and smile again. "Well what can I do for you today, young Mr. Coates?"

Jason returned her smile, though hers beamed more brightly than his could in recent memory. He was amazed at how easily her smile rose to her lips despite what he knew to be true about her: she was prone to depression, the severe stuff. She was often unreasonable and angry. Some said she was bipolar. But she was always quick to smile. Amazing.

"I need a few things," Jason said. "Need a rake and a shovel, and probably a new maul."

"Not a problem," Eleanor said as she turned completely around and grabbed a key off a hook behind her. The key was attached to what was once the rear-view mirror of some old car, and it dangled from Eleanor's right hand as she made her way around the glass case. "Out back," she said, motioning for Jason to follow her.

They went through a rickety door that led to a shed in a small, enclosed yard behind the store. Eleanor seemed to float with the breeze across the yard, and Jason noticed her hair catching the air and reaching like arms toward the sky, then falling again. She turned to him when they reached the shed. "You look great," she said to him again. "You really do...but tired."

"I am," Jason said.

Eleanor looked at him a moment longer and her face changed. When she smiled, she smiled completely. And when she didn't smile, she did that just as completely. Jason looked at her as her face changed and thought, if only for a split second, that her brown eyes actually grew darker, as if she'd sensed the weight of his response entirely. He was the first to look away. When he did, Eleanor went into the shed.

"I've been working here a while now," Eleanor said as she rustled through the shed looking for the tools Jason needed. She pulled out a maul first and leaned it against the outside of the shed. "Ten pound okay?"

Jason picked up the maul and said, "This will be fine."

"Was married for a while," Eleanor continued as she dug through the tools. "Betcha didn't know that."

"I didn't," Jason said.

"Was married for two years. The first year was good. The second year wasn't. I left him about six months ago. That's when I moved back here and started working at the store. It's a good life for now. Quiet. I like being alone." Eleanor emerged from the shed carrying a brand new shovel. She handed it to Jason. "You didn't know that, did ya? Didn't know I like being alone. I like it, you know."

"I didn't think--"

"I know you didn't, darlin'."

Eleanor smiled again, then went back into the shed.

"Hey," Jason said as he leaned the shovel against the shed and went inside, "not all of us thought you were that way. I didn't."

Eleanor tugged a metal rake out of one of the racks against the wall. When she did, the handle almost hit Jason in the chest. It was only then that he realized how small the shed really was, and that realization was accompanied by a slight feeling of claustrophobia.

Eleanor was smiling at him again.

"Oh, I know, Jason. I know it. We were kids, anyway." She handed him the rake.

"I mean—"

"Hey," Eleanor interrupted. "I know. Was just kidding with you, Coates. You're one of the good guys, right?"

Eleanor wriggled past him and left the shed. She was already halfway through the yard, the maul in her right hand, when Jason stepped out of the shed. "Good guys," he said to himself. "Not sure about that one, Rigby."

She turned when she heard the name. "Maybe not," she said, her face changed again, somehow darker again. Then she went inside. Jason followed. Frank was leaning

on the glass case when Jason and Eleanor made their way inside. He straightened up when he saw Eleanor. "Hey, Elly," Frank said.

"Mornin', Frank. How're the spuds these days?"

"Okay, I guess."

Eleanor put the maul down in front of the counter, then went around to the other side and positioned herself behind the register. "You helpin' Coates here with some work at Willie's place?"

"Yeah," Frank said. "Got some time before I, you know, head back to California."

Eleanor gave Frank a look that was halfway between a smile and a wink.

"Right, Frank."

Frank immediately looked away.

"How's Natalie these days?"

"Oh, she's good. You know. She's--she's good."

"Still in town, is she?"

"Oh, yeah, of course. Still in town. Up at the, uh, up at the farm.

With Pop."

Eleanor watched Frank fidget with some light fixtures in the first aisle. He hadn't looked at her since she'd mentioned Natalie's name. Jason watched all this happen and hated Eleanor for it, though he didn't know why. So what if Natalie was up at Frank's Pop's farm. What did that matter to Eleanor? And why was Frank so nervous about it? Jason made a mental note to ask Frank what was up, then quickly erased it. If Frank had a secret to keep, Jason was not the person to try and uncover it, considering the recent collapse of his own marriage for the sake of...what? Boredom? Anger? Jealousy? What was it?

"Hey Coates!" Eleanor all-but-shouted. "Still with us here?" She snapped her fingers in front of his face.

"Yeah. Sorry. How much?"

"Thirty seven even. Locals-only discount," she said with a slight chuckle.

Jason handed her two twenties and she made change. Jason watched again as Frank fidgeted through the aisles, then returned his attention to Eleanor, who was handing him three brand-new dollar bills.

"You going to be in town for a bit?" She asked.

"Few days, yeah."

"Stop on by again." Eleanor said this with no clear expression on her face. It came off as more of a command than a request.

"I will, Eleanor."

Jason made his way back through the center aisle and Frank followed. Jason put the tools in the trunk of the car and they began driving back toward Einar's place. It was a twenty minute drive that he and Frank spent in mostly silence. Frank still seemed abnormally quiet as he looked out the passenger window, his face so close to the glass that fog formed on it, but Jason let him be. Finally, when they turned onto County Road seventeen, Frank said, "Eleanor's looking happier these days."

Jason didn't reply at first. He thought about the complete smile Eleanor had worn only a few minutes ago, and how it changed so quickly into a straight-faced and bland frown. "I suppose I wouldn't have a basis for comparison," Jason said. "Hadn't seen her in years."

"Right," Frank said. "She and Natalie were spending a lot of time together when she—well, not long ago. Natalie's been spending a lot of time alone. You know. Women need that sort of thing."

Another few minutes of silence followed that, and Jason found it more and more difficult to keep from saying something to Frank. He'd been friends with this guy for years—more years than he cared to count at this point—and he knew when Frank was lying to him. Or worse, when Frank was lying to himself. “Natalie’s not around, is she, Frank?”

Frank turned away from the fogged window and looked at Jason with an exaggerated smile. “What? Come on, no, that’s silly. She’s up at my Pop’s place. She’s just—“

“She leave you, Frank?”

Frank didn’t lose his smile. He stared at Jason, who in turn stared out the windshield at the winding road ahead of them. “Yeah,” Frank said finally, turning back to the passenger window. “Yeah, she did.”

Jason slowed to a near-stop and took a right turn onto County Road forty-seven, which was not paved. The wheels of the car thumped down off the edge of the pavement and onto the dirt road and whizzed with the sort of whine a dirt road seems to speak with. Jason avoided deep holes full of half-frozen puddles. Pebbles kicked up and bounced off the side panels of the car. Dry dust swirled behind the car, brown ghosts in the rearview mirror exhumed and angered out of their sleep by the spinning rubber tires. “Lots of work to do at Willie’s place,” Jason said. “Going to need your help.”

Frank looked over at Jason again. “Thanks,” he said. “Guess we’ve both got a lot of work to do, don’t we?”

Jason made brief eye contact with Frank, then returned his attention to the road. “Yes, I suppose so.”

\* \* \*

Askar was standing on the porch smoking a cigarette and talking on his cell phone when Jason and Frank pulled up to the house. As he pulled the tools out of the trunk, Jason listened to Askar argue with whomever was on the other end of the line, but he couldn't really understand what the argument was over. Money, of course, but beyond that, it made no sense to Jason. He could see why Willie didn't like Askar, though his own distaste for his sister's husband was not a thing he really dwelled on himself. He was part of the family now, and Jason had no problem with that. He just wished the guy would get off the damn phone for a change.

As Jason and Frank skirted around the porch and headed toward the barn, Bethany came out of the house and stood by Askar. He ignored her and continued his argument. Jason made eye contact with Bethany, and she moved to the railing just above where Jason was standing.

"He gets that way," she said to her brother. "Just needs some time up here, I think, and he'll be fine." She gave Jason the most sincere smile she could muster—a smile Jason had seen countless times throughout their childhood, the smile she wore after disappointment or heartbreak or both—and did not smile back.

"Where's Robert?" Jason asked.

"He and Pop went down to the lake. I think Willie's fishing."

Jason grunted and went to catch up with Frank, who was just stepping into the barn. Bethany watched him go, her hands pressed firmly on the bare wood railing and her ears on the voice of her husband, still arguing about money on his phone behind her. When Jason disappeared into the barn, Bethany turned, gave Askar a kiss on the cheek, and went back inside the house.

\* \* \*

It was almost midnight when Jason's cell phone rang. He'd just turned it back on this morning after leaving it in his car for most of the week in an effort to escape whatever life he'd left behind when he came up from Portland. There were several voice mail messages, but Jason listened to none of them. He simply turned the ringer volume to low and placed it on the nightstand. Just before midnight, the slow, soft pulse of the ringer started, and though Jason didn't wake up immediately, he flipped his phone open just in time.

"Hello," he said, his voice groggy.

The reply came slowly: "Hi."

Jason sat up in bed but did not turn the light on. He could feel a nervous heat immediately reach his face, neck and arms. "Ginny," he said quietly.

"I called all week and you never answered."

"I turned my cell phone off. Sorry."

Ginny sighed long and deep, wavering slightly by the end of it. "It's okay. Are you up at your Dad's place still?"

"Yes."

"Maggie called me and told me. She says Robert's up there, too."

"Yes," Jason said, the sleep now finally disappearing from his voice. "Robert's up here, too."

There was a long pause between them on the phone in the dark, as if neither really knew how to proceed. Jason knew an apology right then would seem tacky and insincere, so he held back, even though his impulse was to scream it so that she might hear it down in Portland even if they hadn't been on the phone, with sadness and regret in his voice that would rustle the trees. But he held it in his throat, held it for a more appropriate time, held it because it was true and real and deserved to be said in person.

Instead, he said, “How have...you been?”

“My husband disappeared for almost two weeks. How do you think I’ve been?”

“I wanted to get away. I thought you’d—I thought you’d want to be away from me.”

Ginny sighed again. “Part of me does, Jason, but part of me wants you here, right now. I want to scream at you and hit you and hold you and cry into your arms and fucking kill you.”

“I know,” Jason said.

“When are you coming back?”

“I don’t know. Should I come back?” He asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Okay.”

Ginny sniffled, and Jason knew for sure she was in tears. “What are you doing up there anyway?”

“Lots of work to be done up here. The barn. Cutting wood. The tractor. Down basement. Willie wants to get the place looking good for Robert and—well, for the wedding.”

Ginny was outright crying now, hard and stuttered between sobs. Jason said nothing. He waited for her to regain control as he pressed his fingers around the bridge of his nose and into his eyes. It took several minutes, but she finally calmed. Ginny was a tough girl; Jason could count on his left hand—okay, maybe on both hands—how many times he’d seen her outright cry, but when she did it, she did it full-on. When she broke, she broke completely. Jason knew this and hated that he’d caused it this time.

“Does Robert know?” Ginny said, finally.

“I don’t know. I think he might have some suspicions, but he hasn’t said anything. I thought he’d have punched my face through the barn by now if he knew for sure.”

Ginny laughed halfheartedly.

“Look,” Jason said, “I know it doesn’t mean much now, but I’m going to make this right. I’m going to—to fix this.”

“Oh, Jason. This isn’t something to be fixed.”

“But I can fix it, Ginny. I’ll tell Robert and work it out with him, and—“

“And what, Jason? Ruin his wedding? And what about me? How can you fix me? How can you fix us?”

Jason thought about this for a moment. In the darkness of his bedroom, there seemed a million possibilities, but he was no fool. Once the morning sun rose and this all became a reality again, the possibilities whittled down to a few and none of them were really great options. He’d done the damage already, and the only thing he could do now was more damage. The question was, of course, was this damage that needed to be done?

“Ginny, I’ll figure this out, I swear to you. I swear to you, okay?”

Ginny cried in response.

“I love you, Ginny.”

Ginny cried louder and sobbed hard, then went silent. “Goodnight, Jason. I’m sorry I woke you.”

Then she hung up.

Jason didn’t sleep again that night until just before sun-up.

\* \* \*

Einar and Robert were sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee when Jason came downstairs.

“You look like shit,” Robert said to him.

“Good morning to you, too.”

“Too cold in the room last night?” Einar said.

“Room was fine.”

Jason poured himself a cup of coffee and immediately left the room. Einar never so much as looked at him go, but Robert followed Jason with his eyes the entire time. When he was finally out of the room, Robert looked at Einar. “Dad, this has gone on too long.”

Einar nodded.

“What are we going to do about it?” Robert said.

Einar took a sip of coffee. “I ‘spect we’ll wait a little longer.”

Robert looked across the table at his father for a moment longer, then left the kitchen and went through the living room to the front door. Jason was just stepping out onto the porch. Robert followed, then slammed the door behind him. Jason paid no attention. As he walked around the front of the porch and then down the slope of the yard toward the barn, he could hear Robert’s uneven footsteps behind him, walking as fast as he could though he couldn’t keep up with Jason—a fact Jason silently reveled in at his most angry or devious moments.

“Jason, I want to talk to you.”

“So talk.”

Jason did not stop walking.

“I want to talk, Jason. No more of this bullshit. Stop so we can talk.”

“Got work to do.”

Jason took two more steps before he felt Robert’s heavy hand slap down on his shoulder. He immediately shrugged it away, but he stopped walking and turned. “I’m not going to talk to you like this. Here. Pissed off.”

“I’m not pissed off,” Robert said. “I barely know what’s wrong with you. But I’m here, you know. I’m here because of you.”

“Well let me save you the trouble of babysitting your younger brother. You can leave whenever the hell you want.”

“I won’t leave until you talk to me. Come on, Jason. I want to help. I know you’re in a shitty place now and you screwed up, but we can—“

“Oh,” Jason said, his voice getting louder, “thanks for the pep talk, coach. Real helpful, asshole. I know what I did. I know what happened and you don’t, so save your bullshit, Robert.” Jason started to turn, but he stopped. “And *we* can’t fix shit. *We* can scrape the paint off a barn, but *we* can’t fix my marriage or my head, or Ginny’s head, or —“

“Or what?” Robert said.

“Never mind.”

“Tell me.”

“I’ve got work to do.”

“Tell me, Jason.”

Before Robert could get a grasp on what was happening, Jason had him by the collar. Jason wanted to hold back. He wanted to let it go, wanted to just make it all disappear before he could say what he knew he needed to say. But he could not hold back.

“It was Maggie,” He said. “You happy now?”

Robert’s massive hand curled into a fist and somehow wrapped around Jason’s arms to connect with his jaw. When Jason fell backward, Robert hit him again, and then again. Jason was on the ground now, taking each blow he knew he deserved. Finally,

after two more punches, Robert screamed at his brother, “Get up, you fucking asshole!

Get up. Get the fuck up!”

Jason did.

Robert punched him in the gut. Then he grabbed Jason’s head and punched him in the face. “You son of a bitch,” he said, out of breath now.

Robert walked away from his brother who was on his back bleeding in the dirt. Jason didn’t move for almost a half hour. He could hear Robert in the barn, on the phone with Maggie, alternately screaming and sobbing. As Jason lay on the ground, listening to his brother’s relationship with his fiancé end, he knew he’d done his worst, not because of the rising welts on his face, not because of the blood or the anger...but because Robert was sobbing. Because Jason had broken his brother. First Ginny, then himself, now his brother. What else could he possibly destroy?

Jason got himself up off the ground shortly after Robert stormed out of the barn and got into his car. As Robert sped out of the driveway, kicking dirt in two different directions as he turned, Jason put his hands to his face to feel the damage. It was substantial. Einar was sitting in the rocking chair on the porch. Jason joined him.

“Socked ya good,” Einar said.

“Sure did, Willie. Damned if I didn’t deserve more.”

Einar had brought ice wrapped in a washcloth out onto the porch. He pointed to it as it sat on the railing. “Put that on yer mug,” he said, then rocked back and forth in the chair.

Jason did as he was told.

“I messed it all up, Pop.”

Einar kept rocking his chair. “Mmhmm.”

“What the hell do I do now?” Jason said more to the empty driveway than to Einar.

There was a short moment in which the only noise was the wind through the almost-bare trees, but then Einar said, “Gutters need cleanin’.”

Jason chuckled, then said, “I suppose they do.” He dropped the ice from his face and started to walk down off the porch.

“Sit down for a spell,” Einar said.

Jason turned and looked at his father as he rocked back and forth, arms folded over his brown work coat. He then sat down on the top step of the porch and leaned against the railing, pressing the ice to his face once again.

“I don’t really want to talk about this now, Pop.”

“Your mother used to love your hockey games.”

“What?”

“Down there in Bangor. Used to love the drive down there to watch you play net. Such a boy with not a lick of talent, you were!”

They both laughed.

“She used to sit in the stands next to me, boy. And she’d say, ‘he’ll be great for his teammates when he’s old enough to buy the beer!’ She had that way, you know. You’d finish your game and she’d be the first to tell ya how great ya did, not because she believed it, but because she knew ya needed to believe it.”

Jason put the ice on the porch and left it there. It was the most he’d heard his father talk all at once in years.

“I was the opposite,” Einar said. “Ya know that well enough. I’d tell ya how it was, no matter how it irked ya, an’ boy did it irk ya some. That’s the balance, Jason. That’s how we kept you three level, you and yer brother and sister. We’d tell ya how

great ya were, how much you could accomplish, then we'd tell ya what life really is, an' how it would feel to fail and then dust yourself off and keep goin'. I guess ya know that, too."

"Yeah, Pop."

"If yer Ma was here, she'd tell ya you played a helluva game. Whatever that, she'd keep telling ya you had talent and played well, played strong, played with your arms and your legs and your head and your heart. But I'd tell ya different. I'd tell ya you were out of position or you played your angles wrong, or ya weren't keeping your stick on the ice."

"I get ya, Pop."

"Damned if ya do, boy. Because I'll tell ya, your mother ain't here. I am. And I want to tell ya you did the right thing by tellin' him, by takin' your lumps. You're still a goddamned fool, ya are, but ya told him, and now ya get up and dust yourself off. I got a feelin' you got a few more lumps comin' your way. Robert does, too."

Einar paused and looked out at the trees in the driveway. "Ahh, hell. Maybe if your Ma was here, she'd tell ya how badly you done. Maybe we'd switch ourselves, me and her. But it's just me, so I tell ya straight right now. Ya got a lot comin' your way. Keep your stick on the ice and you'll do just fine."

Einar stood up from his rocking chair and put his hands on his hips. It was a slow motion, the kind made perfect by old men throughout the world, though Einar had plenty of vigor and muscles on most men his age.

"Gutters need cleanin'," Einar said, then opened the door to the house and went inside. Jason watched him go, then thumped his head back against the porch railing. He sat that way for ten minutes or more before going inside to clean the cut Robert had opened up above his eye, then went to work cleaning out the gutters.

\* \* \*

Robert came back four hours later. He was drunk and angry. Jason met him in the driveway, but Robert shoved past him and went directly to the barn. Jason didn't bother to follow; instead, he finished cleaning the gutters and went inside to clean up when dinner time rolled around.

\* \* \*

Darkness had fallen by the time Einar decided to go out to the barn. Jason was asleep on the couch in the living room and Robert hadn't come out of the barn since returning home drunk earlier that afternoon. Einar pulled on his brown work coat and gloves and headed out in the direction of the barn; he got about four steps around the corner of the porch when he stopped, turned, and went back inside to fetch his shotgun. He swung the door to the closet open hard and the doorknob banged against the wall behind it. The thump woke Jason, who watched as Einar pulled the shotgun out and loaded it.

“What's going on, Pop?”

Einar said nothing. He took the gun and went back outside with a step more fitting a twenty-year-old man than a man with more than sixty-seven years behind him. Jason immediately got up from the couch, found his boots and laced them as quickly as he could. He had gotten both of them on and was heading toward the door when he heard the first shot.

“Jesus,” he said, running outside and into the driveway. When his boots hit the gravel of the driveway, the second shot rang out.

“Don't come back, ya hear me?” Einar screamed in the direction of the lake.

“Pop, what the hell’s going on?” Jason was standing next to Einar now, who was reloading the shotgun and preparing for another shot. Jason peered out toward the lake but saw nothing in the darkness. Robert was stumbling out of the barn now, staggering like a drunk, unsurprisingly.

Einar squeezed off another shot. The ringing that followed was immense, the sort of quiet pierced only by the ringing of eardrums that Jason associated with the sound of lightning bouncing off the lake when he was a kid.

“Jesus, Pop, what the hell is going on?”

“Ya goddamn *thief!*” Einar screamed toward the lake again. Then he simply turned and walked back toward the house. Robert was leaning against the barn door, a bottle of whiskey in his right hand. He looked over at Jason and started laughing.

“Thought I’d drink ‘em to death if there was trouble, ya know,” Robert said, slurring each word in a precise drunken sentence. He turned and disappeared into the barn.

Askar was standing on the porch as Einar approached, a golf club in his right hand and Bethany in the doorway behind him. Einar stopped and looked at the hulking man holding a golf club. “What the hell were ya goin’ to do to some gun-wieldin’ crazy if he was tryin’ to attack my daughter? Huh? Bore him to death?”

Askar stood still, unsmiling and seemingly unfazed.

“Goddamned *golf club*,” Einar muttered as he walked around Askar. As he went through the doorway, he looked at Bethany and said, “Damn fool brought a nine-iron to a gunfight.”

Jason stood for a moment in the middle of the yard in the dark, peering again at the lake, then at the barn, then at the house. He finally went back inside. Einar was returning the shotgun to the closet.

“What the hell was that, Pop?”

“Goddamn thief. Been coming by here for months now, right around the time your Ma started getting’ worse. Stealin’ from the barn, sleepin’ out there.”

“Who is it?”

“Damned if I know,” Einar said. “We’ll know for sure when I put a buckshot in his ass.”

Einar closed the closet door and put his hands on his hips. Jason was standing in the middle of the living room, hair tousled and adrenaline still pumping. Askar and Bethany were climbing the stairs back up to the bedroom. “Sorry I woke you all,” Einar said. Askar and Bethany finally disappeared. Einar looked to Jason. “There’s a deck of cards in the kitchen.”

Einar left the room and sat down at the kitchen table, not bothering to wait and see if Jason would follow.

He did.

They played cards for an hour without saying a word to each other. By the time the hour had passed, Jason had become sleepy again—something he wouldn’t have thought possible an hour before—and decided to call it a night. Einar stayed at the kitchen table for a half hour more playing solitaire in the soft light of the kitchen. His eyes grew tired, too, but he still had something else to tend to before sleep caught up with him. Einar was a working man, and when there was work to be done, sleep could wait. And wait it would tonight.

He collected the cards and wrapped an elastic band around them. Tossed them in a drawer—the ‘junk drawer,’ as his kids had called it for so many years growing up—and went to the living room closet to fetch his work coat again. He went outside into the yard,

and this time there was no need for a shotgun or any other interruption between him and his son, drunk in the barn.

“Robert,” Einar said into the dark.

“Hey, Pop.”

Robert’s voice came from the back corner of the barn, behind the tractor and Einar’s old Ford pick-up. The only light came in the form of a slight glow left over from the kitchen light that swept through the window of the house well behind Einar. It only cast itself about ten feet into the barn. Beyond that, Einar could see nothing.

“Your Pop’s old. Where the hell are ya?”

“I’m, uh...shit, I don’t know. On the ground.”

Einar put his hands on his hips for a moment, then moved around the front of the tractor to the work bench. He shuffled around there for a moment, looking for the flashlight, successfully dropping and shattering a glass container of nails, then found the light behind a can of primer. He clicked it on and wondered briefly when the last time this thing had been clicked on. That flashlight very well may have been older than his youngest child.

It worked, though, and Einar worked his way back around the tractor to the center of the barn, then worked his way back behind the Ford. Sure enough, Robert was on the ground, empty bottle of whiskey in one hand, his back up against the far wall of the barn.

“You and Jack havin’ a night of it?” Einar said, pointing the light at his drunk son.

“You know us, Pop. Always getting into trouble, me and Jack. Can you point that thing somewhere else?”

Einar pointed the light at the ground to his side. Then he looked around for that lantern and found it hanging from a hook on the wall. He pulled some matches out of his

pocket and lit it, then clicked off the flashlight. He worked his way back over toward his son and leaned on the back bumper of the Ford.

“I ain’t good at talkin’,” Einar said.

Robert laughed. “Hadn’t noticed.”

“Don’t be smart,” Einar said. “Yer mom was the talker. But I’ll hear ya.”

“Not much in the mood for talking, Pop. Really. You don’t have to fill in for mom, you know. She’s gone and that’s fine.”

Einar said nothing. He looked down at his drunk pile of son, and watched as Robert’s eyes opened, then closed, then opened again. His head lolled. His words weren’t complete. He’d been drinking a long time today.

“Funny,” Einar said. “Three of us Coates men in this house after so many years, and suddenly we’re all bachelors.”

Robert laughed harder than he should have. Einar cracked a smile only. Robert’s voice faded from a laugh to what sounded like a defeated sigh, then he dropped his chin to his chest and let go of the empty bottle. It thumped onto the dirt floor.

“Well, come on then,” Einar said, standing up. “I won’t have ya sleepin’ out here in the barn. Not with that damned thief wanderin’ about.” He reached his hand down to his son, but Robert did not take it.

“I’m not going inside,” Robert said. “Not with *him* in there. Not with Jason.”

Einar didn’t move. “He’s asleep. Can’t bother ya if he’s asleep.”

Robert looked at his father’s hand a moment longer, then got to his feet himself. Einar put his hand back in his pocket and watched as Robert stumbled side to side as he made his way out of the barn, his limp now accentuated with the dizziness of alcohol.

“You must think I’m—we’re shits, Pop. Jason and me both. We’re—we’re shits. Ha!”

“My sons ain’t shits,” Einar said, following Robert out into the yard.

“That shit inside, he’s a shit.”

“He’s your brother.”

“Not anymore he isn’t. He’s nothing to me now.”

Robert now stood next to the porch, and Einar grabbed him by the arm and threw him against the railing. The sturdy wood of the porch creaked from the force of it. Einar threw his open hand across his son’s face hard. Robert winced in surprise. Einar hit him again.

“That’s your blood in there, and don’t you forget it. I don’t care who he diddled to piss ya off. He’s your blood. He’s a Coates, and so are you.”

“Jesus, you slapped me,” Robert said.

“Yer lucky I didn’t do worse. Ya both deserve worse.”

Einar stepped away from his son, who stood stunned against the porch railing. As Einar raised his right boot onto the first step of the porch, he looked toward Robert and said, “If ya want worse, I’ll have Askar come down here with his nine iron.” This time, Einar laughed and Robert stayed silent.

Robert listened as his father’s footfalls reached the door, then the living room, then beyond until they disappeared. He stood unsteady by the porch, wavering through a drunken and dizzying haze, staring at the barn for a moment, then raising his hand to his face. *That asshole fucks my fiancé and I’m the one getting a slap?* He thought to himself, forgetting the beating he’d given Jason earlier that day. Robert finally stumbled inside and fell asleep on the couch, his boots still on and a steady stream of drool escaping the corner of his mouth.

\* \* \*

When Einar made his way to the bedroom he’d shared with Sarah for more years than he could bear to count, his daughter was sitting on his bed with the light on but her

eyes closed. Bethany was sitting Indian-style in the center of the four-poster, her hands folded in her lap and her long, blonde hair falling on either side of her face and onto her shoulders. Einar stood in the doorway, suddenly a guest in his own bedroom, an intrusion on a peaceful moment. But then Bethany opened her eyes, and the feeling that Einar was a piece of misplaced furniture left his mind.

“Sorry, Daddy. It just—it smells like Mom in here.”

Einar entered the room and sat down on the rocking chair in the corner. This one was far more comfortable than its cousin out on the front porch, and more presentable, too. Sarah had done a lot of her knitting in this chair, sitting by the window and looking out at the back yard near the lake. Einar used it as a stopping point only to take off his boots. Then he stood up again, put his hands on his hips, and looked at his daughter.

“You miss her a lot, don’t you, Daddy?”

“Course I do,” Einar said.

“Me too.”

Bethany stood up on the bed, bounced once, then stepped down onto the hard wood floor. She gave her father a kiss on the cheek and headed toward the door.

“You and Askar have plans tomorrow?” Einar asked.

Bethany stopped in the doorway and turned. “No, not really,” she said. “He’s most likely going to spend most of the day on his phone and his laptop. He works too much.”

Einar’s face softened just a bit. “Laptops and phones get lost sometimes,” he said.

Bethany smiled. “Daddy, don’t. It’s important to him.”

Einar crossed his arms across his chest. “Maybe you can tear him away from the phone tomorrow. Jason got through about half of the wood out back that needs to be split.

Reckon we could have the whole cord cut and stacked tomorrow, if he'd be willing to help."

"I'll see if he'd do that," Bethany said, then disappeared down the hall. Einar looked at the empty doorway for a moment, then down at the empty bed. A small indentation lingered in the comforter from where Bethany's weight had deformed it, and Einar concentrated for a moment on that space. He half expected Sarah to appear from behind him to smooth out the comforter, pat him on the shoulder and tell him it was time to take off the work clothes and climb into bed, but she did not come. Would not come. Einar closed the door and got changed, then climbed into bed alone. He could hear footsteps in the hallway, softly clopping one way or another, and thought how strange it was to have his kids in the house again without Sarah. This was the second time since she'd died that all the Coates had been in one place, under one roof. Now, one was drunk, one was bloodied and battered, and one was sleeping with a jackass. At one point in his life, all things had been simple; now here he was, with his children, and nothing at all seemed simple.

Einar closed his eyes and listened to the footsteps in the hallway disappear. *Sarah*, he thought, *I'm going to try to be Dad without you. Keep an eye, will ya?*