

Welcome Back to Waldo County

From the kneel of Mt. Rainier into the shadow of Mt. Desert Island, they drove for five days until road began to blur in front of them. Shannon managed not to wreck them when they got a flat tire in Coeur d'Alene and let Len take the wheel when the car overheated in Fargo. Len had taken a week off of work, flying one-way from Bangor to Sea-Tac the morning after Shannon's call, so there wasn't a timetable or plan. They mailed home two boxes of books and packed the rest into Shannon's 1975 Chevelle: two suitcases, a duffel bag, and a backpack. Len flattened the lines of his face when he saw how little there was to take back. Shannon saw it. He knew there was not much, besides the car, to show for the fifteen years he had spent away. Before getting onto I-5, they stopped at the am/pm for cigarettes, beef jerky and coffee. Shannon hated that even after fifteen years, Stockton Springs was still home, and always would be. He wasn't leaving Olympia because of Astrid or her curt reasons for leaving him. He was leaving because he hadn't been able to make a go of it, and he just couldn't stay there any longer.

There was nothing in Stockton Springs except the same room he'd left when he was eighteen, in Uncle Maitland's house, built and lived in by their family since 1889. He could drive US1 to Ellsworth, or Maine State Route 3 to Lewiston; he could stock boxes in a warehouse or run the cash register at the Hannaford in Belfast. Come summer, he could wait tables at the Weathervane and make decent money off the Massholes who flooded into the state to get a break from smoggy Boston, who chewed with their mouths open and staunchly refused to pronounce the letter "r". There would be no use for the degree in nothing practical that he'd earned from a college that no one here had ever

heard of. It would be no different than it had been in Olympia. From the shadow of one mountain into another, there would be a stifling sameness, nothing he could explain to Len, who had never gone further away than Laconia, New Hampshire. Len married his high-school sweetheart and fathered three tiny pigtailed daughters; nieces that Shannon had only seen grow up in Christmas pictures that Len's wife, Barbara, dutifully sent each year. Len embraced the sameness and found it comforting. Shannon had tried to escape it, and now that he was pointed back towards it in the car, he wasn't sure if there was any comfort in the direction or the destination. He only knew that there was neither in what he'd left behind.

On the fifth day, finally turning onto the Maine Turnpike, they looped I-95 and 295 before finally settling into Route 3, which would eventually feed into US1's coastal tour of nothing towns with their exit to Stockton Springs. Shannon had been focused on the driving and had forgotten to note the changes in geography happening state by state as they chased the sunrise coast. Suddenly, he was greeted by lichen-jeweled granite cliffs and a cold breeze that smelled of salt and the low, rolling mountains. From their direction, he couldn't see the jagged coastline yet, but he remembered the smell of Maine air: no matter where you were, the state always smells like the cold, salty sea. Belfast had changed, transformed from its blue-collar Broiler roots into an artsy tourist town, full of organic produce buying hipsters from Vermont or Connecticut. The wharf side bar that Shannon's drunken uncles had been notorious for brawling in was gone, replaced with a restaurant, whose sign bore the iconic red lobster of Shannon's youth, the one he'd come to hate. Crossing the Passagassawakeag Bridge, he breathed the scent of seaweed and crab shells on cold, Penobscot air. Though he had been away from it for nearly as long as

he lived there growing up, Stockton Springs folded him back up into her, as though he had never left. He was relieved, in a way he had not expected, by her small-town sameness. It was nearly sunset, like Len had timed their arrival to remind him. They stopped at Perry's and bought crabmeat sandwiches and Orangina in glass bottles, just like they had on summer beach days in Sandy Point. The mousy girl at the register, doubtless one of Perry's granddaughters or great-granddaughters, blushed when she put Shannon's change in his hand. She spoke in broad drags, drawing one-syllable words into two, like cold molasses over steaming steel cut oats.

“Youah the Tracy boy that went awayah, right? Shannon Tracy?”

Like falling back into a habit, he replied,

“Ayuh,” his jaw relaxing back into the slow patter of the speech of his younger days.

“My sistah Pearl had a wicked crush on youah in high school. She'll be tickled youah back in town again. Are youah staying apiece?”

“Not sure yet, but I'm staying with Uncle Maitland up to Main Street....” he paused, waiting for her name.

“Evie Staples. My sistah's Pearl, she was in youah class. Youah have a good night, now.”

“Ayuh. Will do.

They turned off onto the road to Cape Jellison as the sun dipped low in the sky, pulling onto the shoulder near the bridge to park. The crabmeat was sweeter than Shannon had remembered it, the wax-paper wrapped sandwich bursting pale pink and white like carnation blooms. Below the bridge, the seawater pulled in gentle, concentric circles as the tide lapped its way back to the shore. He remembered casting his grandfather's ashes off this bridge when he was 17, the year he left home. The wind had kicked up and he'd spilled half the ashes, smearing them in a great grey smudge down the front of the severe black suit he'd borrowed from his uncle Maitland. He and Len leaned on their elbows, watching the sun swing through its zenith like an unhurried pendulum, disappearing into the bay like a slow dive from the dock. Shannon took the keys and drove back to the family house, where Len and his wife lived with Uncle Maitland and the three tiny pigtailed daughters, who were playing around the crabapple tree in the front yard when Len and Shannon pulled up.

Dadddeeeeee!

It was a foreign song on Shannon's ears. The nieces seemed wary of Shannon, who they had not met, until the oldest, Melissa, determined that Uncle Shannon might let them brush and braid his shoulder-length hair.

The crabapple tree was exactly as it had been when Shannon and Len were growing up, and their father Harold before them. It had been struck by lightning a century before, yet the bolt had not killed the tree, only hollowing it out into the most wonderful hiding place for a child. The tree still grew heavy with crabapples, which were crisp and tart and caused stomachaches that no Tracy child had ever learned to avoid. The littlest niece,

Josie, smelled of sweat and grass and apple juice when she hugged Shannon's knees, holding out her grimy hand to offer him a gift, a small, dried-out shrunken-head made from an apple. The same kind of shrunken head that Shannon and Len had painstakingly carved faces into and set to mummify in the upstairs windows when they were growing up. Shannon thanked her and tucked the fossilized fruit into his pocket for safekeeping.

The barn in the back was as creaky as it had always been, groaning slightly as the nieces pounded up the stairs into the summer kitchen. The barn didn't seem as big as it had when Shannon was twelve, but lifting up the latch, the smells of dust, aged wood, old hay, rust, gasoline, and the cold dirt floor were unchanged. Neat rows of logs that Len chopped throughout the seasons lined the steps, to be burned in the wood stove of the common room downstairs. In the kitchen, Len's wife Barbara was frying potatoes and boiling red-skinned hot dogs for supper. She kissed Len and hugged Shannon, clucked over his thinness and asked if he'd had enough to eat. In the family room, Shannon and Len's 93 year-old great-uncle, Uncle Maitland, snored in the recliner, a knitted afghan tucked around his feet. The nieces tiptoed through, careful not to wake him until suppertime. In the front yard of the six-bedroom house, near the crabapple tree, the flag post leaned slightly. Its exterior pain was peeling. Inside, near the stairwell, great-grandmother Alice's organ sat polished but unused, except to display framed pictures of their family: World War I uniformed soldiers, great-aunts with rolled hairstyles and sepia toned skin, men with vests and watch chains and buttoned spats standing in the old family general store between bins of apples priced at 5 cents and tidy rows of dry goods in glass jars. The middle niece, Louise, pulled him upstairs to the same room that had been his growing up. Shannon set his duffel bag down on the cot along the wall nearest to the

window, beside a door to the attic at the corner where the roof of the house sloped down. The bed frame was made of wood and rope, the mattress was lumpy, stuffed with rags a century old. Around the dogleg of the upstairs landing, Louise and Josie shared the room with down matted beds; Melissa, the oldest, slept in the room next door, whose wrought-iron bed squeaked whenever you shifted position in the night. Whatever was in the car would wait until morning, after what he was sure would be a breakfast of cold baked beans, salt fish and black coffee. He took the mummified crabapple face from his pocket and set it in the window, whose hand-blown glass panes were thick, like looking through deep water out over the swale below in the side yard. He found the can of Blackjack tobacco and went back downstairs, making sure the screen door shut behind him. The handle was still broken, after all these years. Under his thighs, the front porch's granite steps were cold. She shredded tobacco into the fine V of rolling paper while his curious nieces, no longer wary, came out with hairbrushes. Sitting behind him, they took turns raking through his long hair, chattering like baby seals. They giggled and ran indoors when Barbara hollered that dinner was ready. The screen door slammed behind them but didn't latch. Leaning back, Shannon pushed it into place with a satisfying *click*.

Tomorrow he would drive to Belfast, or maybe Bucksport, to look for a job. Pearl Staples would be hanging around Perry's during her sister Evie's shift when he went to get a crabmeat sandwich and Orangina in a glass bottle. Tomorrow, he would sit next to the bell at the lighthouse and breathe in salt air and seaweed, near a beach whose sand was made of stones and broken mussel shells, nothing you'd want to walk on barefoot. Shannon's jaw would relax into the slow pronunciation and misplaced *r*'s of his forgotten accent, the nieces would braid his hair, and he would learn to remember which one was

which. He would walk to the old hand pump that stood at the border of Prospect, and drink the sweet, clean water that he'd almost forgotten. The coal scarf of nighttime descended, black flies found the back of his neck, and he finally lit the cigarette he'd been absently twirling. It wasn't this house, Stockton Springs, or even Maine that had been stifling, because he'd felt every bit as gawmy a continent away as he ever had here. Waldo County's welcome was stoic, like the patriarchs of the families who had lived here since the shipbuilding days but sweet, like the date-filled cookies his great-aunt Lu used to bake in the summertime.

It was not what he expected, but it was what he remembered.