

Dusk

Roger Stone had dreamed of a more valiant life, the kind best viewed in technicolor with rolling highland hills or chalk white cliffs in the background and accompanied by a bagpipe or two. Perhaps a war drum. And while he often trusted his death would be painless, he never envisioned a long drawn out exercise in boredom. Not like this was. But for the eddy into the bad memories, there was no drama.

To be one of the three residents of Iron Mountain Retirement Community with a semblance of wits was not always a good thing. Roger and two others were out there, at Iron Mountain, the only ones with the requisite combination of sense and verbal skills to communicate more than their basic needs.

One of the two others with any wits, Harriet Liverwell, was a gabby sort from Ausable Forks. Rita Collingsworth was the other, trucked up to Iron Mountain by flat-lander summer people from Connecticut or Rhode Island or one of those other places where people talk out of the sides of their mouths. Roger sat at a table next to theirs early in his tenancy and overheard Harriet's endless droning about the mistakes in her life and how things could have been different.

He, on the other hand, could not allow himself the luxury of considering how things might have been different. For one thing, he was a man. More importantly, Iron Mountain was not a place one selected for oneself. It was a place chosen by one's children. If a daughter felt Iron Mountain was the right place for her father, she gave them all his money and he would be cared for until the day he died. Should she choose for some reason to take her father back home to die, Iron Mountain would still keep all his money. Taking the father home again was a poor option and hardly anyone ever did it. Certainly, his daughter would not.

Iron Mountain is a ghost town stuffed into a dirty corner at the northern border of the state. The original iron-slag-cement-block row houses where the miners had lived were joined to one another with clapboarded connectors in the seventies by the founder of Iron Mountain, Harold Straight. The community center was constructed at one end, a bulbous bad dream some architect had during the heyday of giant geodesic domes, and from the sky, Roger imagined, the whole mess must very much resemble a tape worm, the segmented body parts each a columbarium unto itself.

When his grandson had died, and he'd finished helping put him in the ground, he'd been moved to Iron Mountain. Under different circumstances he would have fought the move. He still had his faculties. He'd lived alone since the death of his wife, still drove an automobile and knew who the president was. He wore matching socks, unless he knew no one would see them that day. He was the typical age of a man who hosts lavish brunches if brunches had interested him, which they certainly no longer did.

Before his grandson's death, he occasionally dreamed of the big adventures he could more easily have as a single man: train travel to the immense National Parks in the western

states, touring Laos and Cambodia, fly fishing in the Columbia River Basin, perhaps even taking a week-long cooking seminar in San Sebastian.

Those dreams evaporated at Iron Mountain. Days passed—he stopped counting—before anyone spoke to him. Then when it happened, it was Harriet Liverwell.

She took an empty seat at his lunch table. A pleasant looking woman in a wizened way and doubtless attractive when younger. She appeared to be dressed for church, a three-quarter length skirt with a matching jacket. Simple white blouse with a pointed collar. Fair without being wan, she wore a trace of lipstick and a close-fitting fake pearl necklace.

“I rather like Friday lunch best. Tomato soup and grilled cheese. A few chips. I’m Harriet Liverwell.”

Roger gazed at her, taking care to keep maintain focus without staring, and she rambled on for a few moments, but it only took a sentence or two for her to lose him. He was no longer in the room. He was in his head again, eddying down.

As he nears the bottom, he sees the accident as if he is there. The snowmobile lifts off the hillock, goes airborne, and the driver hunkers down into the seat like a turtle withdrawing into its carapace. Timothy, his grandson, riding behind the driver, is hurled into the air where he makes brief but fatal contact with a tree limb. The cracking of the limb, the boy’s fore-skull, or both, shatters the spell.

Every muscle in his body tense, his fists balled, jaw and anus clenched, his lower teeth gnawing the enamel off the back of the uppers—and someone has applied a vice to his temples—he arrived back at the lunch table as Harriet was finishing a sentence.

“...and after my husband passed away, my children just thought it best for me to be here. But listen to me go on. I haven’t even let you introduce yourself.” She paused, and Roger let out a deep breath, one he had not realized he’d been holding, and his skeleton ratcheted down inside his skin, his muscles sagging once again to an age appropriate tone. Even his balled fists withered into loose clumps.

“Roger Stone.” He offered a hand and she took it briefly, with a smile that was interrupted by another woman seating herself at the table.

“May I join you?”

“Oh hello, Rita. Yes, please do.” Harriet motioned at this new woman, a head taller, perhaps six feet, and big boned. “Rita, may I introduce Mr. Roger Stone. Mr. Stone, this is my good friend, Rita Collingsworth.”

The tall woman smiled, and Roger started to stand but then realized he had not done so for the first woman, so he would be slighting her if he did so for the second. But then again, what sort of boor would not stand to greet a woman? Just the sort of mind freeze that had plagued him since the boy’s death. Still in the end, he managed to half stand and offered a hand. She palmed it briefly and widened her smile as she sat.

“Please carry on,” Rita said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Harriet glanced at him, perhaps hoping he would offer up something of himself and when he did not, said, “Mr. Stone was just about to tell me how he happened upon Iron Mountain.”

“Please call me Roger,” he said, falling back into some social graces he’d thought perhaps forgotten.

“Lovely. Thank you, Roger, and please call me Harriet.”

Rita nodded with a smile, either due to the closeness that familiarity brings or because her lunch was placed in front of her. He assumed she wanted to be included in this first name bargain.

She confirmed his notion as she paused a half sandwich at her chin and said before taking a bite, “So, please Roger, continue, how is it that you’ve come to our little community here in the middle of nowhere?” She exhaled the word ‘nowhere’ as if blowing on a kazoo.

“My grandson was killed in a horrible accident. I had a nervous breakdown.” The bluntness of his reply startled even him.

Both women’s smiles crumpled, then Harriet’s mouth pinched into a ruck.

“I’m terribly sorry. I don’t mean to be so maudlin,” Roger said.

“Oh, my poor dear man, no,” Harriet said. “Please do continue.”

Rita placed her half-eaten sandwich back on the plate as if it were a favorite parakeet, gone dead in the moment.

“I can’t really talk about it much. It happened almost a year ago, but it’s still too raw. At any rate, I was having emotional difficulties, so my daughter had me admitted here.”

“Admitted?” Rita dabbed her lips with a napkin. “Admitted is overstated isn’t it? This isn’t an eighteenth-century asylum, for goodness sake. This is a care home. One can leave whenever one chooses.”

He knew this to be a lie but held his tongue.

Harriet did not seem to want the silence to grow more awkward. “Roger, you tell us as much or as little as you want, *whenever* you want. We’re happy to have another person to talk

to. As I am sure you have noticed, not many of the other residents are capable of carrying on much of a conversation.”

He studied the room. A total of ten tables accommodated perhaps thirty-five souls. None of the others were speaking except for an occasional monosyllabic exchange or a string of lilted gibberish. Fragments of grilled cheese sandwiches hung from parted lips, milk ran down chins, a fork clattered softly against a plate, setting off a nervous patter until a staff member removed it from the shaky liver-spotted hand of a scarecrow-looking man.

That was when it dawned on him that the three of them were the only mentally competent inmates of Iron Mountain. In some bizarre chronologically upside-down world the three of them were probably the youngest, yet were the ones sitting at the adult table. Roger's anger with his daughter threatened to explode inside him. How could she? No matter how angry and distraught she was, how dare she confine him to such a place.

Three months passed. Roger was able to make this calculation because the Iron Mountain staff were hanging Christmas decorations. He'd taken most meals with Harriet and Rita and it'd been smooth sailing if not enjoyable. For the most part they seemed to accept his disappearances into his mind without complaint, perhaps assuming the onset of dementia. The arrangement seemed satisfying although the idea that he was not fully in charge any longer, that he could not control or choose his thoughts, disturbed him.

As if evidence of that premise, the sight of the wreath at the front door sent him spiraling inward.

Christmas of the previous year was the eighth in a row he'd spent at his daughter's house. Two weeks in the mountain air with Judy, her husband Arthur, and their son, Timothy, then nine years old.

"Poppy, Dad and I are going to take the snow machines out. Why don't you come?"

From an upper corner of his brain he shouts down. "No, Tim! No! There will be an accident. A terrible accident." But neither Tim, nor Roger who cameos in this memory, can hear.

"Yeah, come along, Roger," Arthur says, tossing a beer can into the recycle bin. "It's a beautiful afternoon."

"I want to ride with Poppy, Dad."

"Fine with me," says Arthur, walking into the mudroom. Ten years married to his daughter and he is still pretty much a stranger. Roger had hunted with him every fall, but hunting, even in large groups, is a solitary experience.

Roger crouches next to the boy. "No, I think you should ride with your father, Tim. He's more experienced than I am. Probably sees better too."

"Awww." The boy places his hand on his grandfather's shoulder to steady himself as he draws a boot onto the opposite foot. "Okay, next time I want to ride with you."

"Right. Next time."

Roger was summoned back into the dining hall by a small hand clutching his forearm.

"Roger? Roger, can you hear me?"

He gradually focused on Harriet, who peered into his face as a terrier might a rockpile.

He smacked his lips a couple times. "Oh, I'm sorry."

“You scared me that time, Roger. You were gone quite a long time.”

Rita dropped her gaze to her plate the moment he engaged them.

Harriet moved her hand to Roger’s wrist and tapped lightly. “There, there. No problem really. We all need some alone time now and again, don’t we?” She laughed a short laugh.

“It angers me though,” he said, which garnered the attention of both women. “I don’t like having my mind choose my thoughts. I damn well want to choose them for myself.”

Harriet’s smile disappeared, and Rita checked her wrist watch, then covered it with her other hand as if perhaps she might stop time.

He started to believe that he’d become what his daughter had most recently characterized him as, the one who loses gloves and misplaces car keys, leaves the burner on after the pan has been removed to the sink, and shouldn’t be trusted with important documents and the safety of young children.

In late December, Harriet suggested an outing. “Why don’t you join me on a walk today?”

“A walk? Why on earth would we do that?”

“I can’t imagine a day going by without getting outdoors. Besides it’s a beautiful sunny day, rare for the north country in January.”

He objected lamely, but she persisted, and in the end he saw no compelling reason not to go for a walk. There are only so many crossword puzzles one can do. And she was right. The temperature had warmed, perhaps even above freezing, and the sun rested full and yellow in a cloudless sky.

“Oh, my Lord, Roger, don’t move,” she whispered.

“What?”

“A fisher cat. Over by the bird feeder. Isn’t she beautiful?”

He thought to ask how Harriet could know it was a female, but he was speechless. She was right about it being beautiful. The creature was the finest thing he’d laid eyes on in months. At the edge of the copse the fisher cat poised on three stout legs, the other lifted in readiness, head raised and tilted. She remained still and furry as a child’s stuffed animal. Sleek brown fur, a handsome face, large brown eyes, she seemed a cross between wolverine and cat.

The fisher’s mind does not spiral, does not eddy into places or moments in its past. The past—and whatever there might be of a future—are compressed into the present, a steel alloy of time. And the present is focused in an unfocused way like a flood light, on the ground beneath the bird feeder. Shadows of birds coming and going flit across the hard-packed snow and at the base of a white oak on the other side of the feeder, a red squirrel surveys it all, weighing the potential versus the threat. He will be safe as long as he does not blink.

For a moment Roger thought to look for a weapon, like he would’ve during every hunting season, and often out of season as well. Then he heard Harriet, though she was not speaking, scolding him for this line of nonsense, and he suddenly, for the first time in his life, realized the appreciation of nature does not necessarily involve destroying it.

“But why is she hanging around the bird feeder?” he asked. “Surely, fisher cats have no appetite for bird seed.”

“She’s hoping a squirrel or chipmunk might come by for a snack. Or a porcupine.”

“Really? I didn’t know anything preyed on porcupine. Too bristly.”

“Fishers are the only known North American mammal that succeeds in killing and consuming porcupines. They will eat the entire animal, leaving nothing but a quilled hide and a few of the larger bones.”

What followed were two months of outings with Harriet, sharing her knowledge of the flora and fauna and his experience as an outdoorsman. There was a gracefulness that he'd have been tempted to call happiness but for the nights when his eddying mind took him to those dark low corners where the one-legged clowns lived.

Then suddenly, Rita was relocated by her children. He and Harriet seemed a couple then, a common law marriage of sorts. Just prior to Ash Wednesday of that year, Harriet also disappeared. Her departure remained unexplained for a week, although he acknowledged the worst long before they told him.

On what he's been told is Easter Day, he spots the fisher by the bird feeder and she spies him as well. She stares briefly then turns and trots away, stopping just inside the tree line to look over her shoulder. He stoops to pull the laces tight on his boots, ties them, then when he sees she is still looking at him, he approaches. She lets him within ten feet, then moves farther into the woods.

He tracks her until, losing sense of time, in the way only the deep woods can, shadows tendrils, and dusk nets him before he is aware of the web forming. It dawns on him the fisher has lured him so far into the woods that he is for all intents and purposes, lost. Roger Stone—the outdoorsman—lost in the woods. But he does not panic. He's been lost before and knows the rules: move downhill, preferably alongside a brook.

The burbling of the water is what he imagines the world sounds like under the surface. Yes, even from down there, Timothy can hear his dense muddled mutterings. He can hear the fisher's breathing in the hush between Roger's breaths, the sighing and whooshing tree limbs blending with the struggle trapped in Roger's mind.

Darkness is looming when he comes across a stream and shortly thereafter an abandoned spring house. It could just as easily be a mausoleum for its size, but the door has long since rotted off its hinges, now moss covered and more a part of the earth than the structure.

In the last scrim of light, he snaps limbs from balsam firs to fashion a seat on the dirt floor, then buttons and zips what is not yet fully buttoned or zipped, flips collars, draws a hood, tugs at his cap, folds his arms over his chest and settles in for a chill. He thinks of a fire but knows it is too late to find dry fuel and kindling.

He is in the downward spiral of his mind again and driving the snowmobile behind Arthur's. Tim lofts like a rag doll, Roger winces as the boy's head thwacks off the oak limb. He cranks the handle bars hard to the left, but he is half a second too late and his machine lifts off the same hillock and in a moment of horror crashes into the boy as he bounces off the snowfield, the cracking of his bones and rending of his flesh jamming Roger's mind.

He is startled back to the moment by Timmy's voice beckoning in a harsh and high whisper. "Poppy." He scoffs at his own nonsense, dismissing the noise as a snapping tree limb, which brings new and different concerns.

"Who's there?" he calls half-heartedly, certain that he doesn't want to know.

Red eyes appear in the doorway. It is the fisher. It is a moment both startling and mesmerizing. In her face is a thing that makes him go quiet inside, makes his eddied consciousness slink back up his spine, because the thing he reads in the fisher's face is the totality of life; it is presence and it is promise. It is all-encompassing and essential, like the woods itself, like the cold dark endlessness of the wild.

"Poppy."

It is the boy. Or is it the sound of Roger's jaw unhinging?

It is the fisher. The fisher is the boy.

Only slowly will it come to him that there is no Timothy. He is no longer here. He is everywhere.