

Homeplace

Clare followed the scent of freshly ground coffee into the kitchen. John stood in a pool of sunlight—rare in Chicago in October. His muscular legs and bare feet made Clare think about going back to bed. Then, he handed over her phone.

“You had a call,” he said.

Her desire reversed. “Why’d you answer it?” She’d asked him not to pick up her phone.

“I’m sorry. I saw the area code was from Michigan. It might be an emergency. It was your uncle Rob.”

Clare had already ignored a few calls from the unfamiliar number, figuring it was about her ten-year high school reunion, which she had no intention of attending. She hadn’t spoken to uncle Rob for years. Had something happened to her father? Heart racing, she returned to the bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind her.

“This is Clare. What’s wrong?”

“The old homeplace is coming up for auction in November,” uncle Rob said.

“That’s it? I thought…”

“I didn’t mean to scare you. Your dad’s fine.”

Clare took a deep breath, then asked, “An auction?”

Clare remembered attending farm auctions with her parents, Sam and Beth, searching for antiques or used equipment Sam could patch together. Cinnamon donuts and the bite of hot, tart apple cider married a memory of icy toes and cold rain. The auctioneer’s special language melodic, sometimes harsh, almost foreign, tones Clare hadn’t heard in decades—came back to her. Also, her father’s instruction never to raise her hand, for fear she would buy something she didn’t want, something they couldn’t afford.

“The county decided against building that road after all,” uncle Rob said. “They’re unloading all the farmland they bought up.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“You were so upset when your dad sold the farm. I hear you’ve got a fancy job. The minimum bid is \$100K. Maybe you could set things to right.”

Beth, Clare’s mom, became sick the spring of Clare’s junior year in high school. Clare’s few memories of that time were scattershot: Beth craved plain yogurt, special-ordered at their local grocery, but gagged at the smell of garlic. The same day the doctor stopped chemo, the cat disappeared. Charcoal masked the smell of illness, but imperfectly. But, when was it the bed moved from the second floor to the living room? Did Clare get her driver’s license when her mother was already bedridden, or the summer before, when she’d turned sixteen, and things were still normal?

After speaking with uncle Rob, Clare considered calling her father, but instead wrote an old-fashioned letter. It was a typed, bullet-pointed, list of questions, printed and mailed on a Monday.

Sam’s response arrived Friday. He’d copied Clare’s letter, cut out the questions, and pasted them to a paper with his responses:

- Do you want the farm? *Yes, I want the farm.*

This surprised Clare. Her parents hadn’t intended to live on the farm. But Clare’s maternal grandmother passed shortly after their wedding, and Beth persuaded Sam to move to the farm, at least temporarily, to care for her father and Beth’s younger brother, uncle Rob. Then, Beth’s father died in a freak accident, rolling a tractor on an incline he’d navigated all his life,

leaving Beth and Sam, in their early twenties, to parent uncle Rob, in his late teens. So, as it turned out, Beth had lived on the farm for all but a few months of her life, and Sam had spent his adult life there, too, always seeming to feel trapped and resentful.

- If so, do you have any funds to contribute? *I don't have much to contribute.*

This surprised Clare, too. She didn't know how much he'd received for the farm, but believed it had been a significant amount. Where had the money gone?

- How would we take care of it? *I'd take care of it. I've got nothing but time and good health.*

This one didn't surprise Clare. Sam hadn't worked in years and lived alone in the house they rented before her mom died.

- Why didn't you call me yourself? *I didn't know Rob called you. I didn't know you'd be interested.*

That was the problem right there, Clare thought—her father had *no idea* who she was, what mattered to her. Sadly, that was no surprise either.

In early November of Clare's senior year, Beth grew obsessed with Clare's teeth. They were a crooked mess. It started one evening over dinner. The three of them were watching the news on the TV mounted above the table, eating a casserole delivered by a neighbor.

Beth said, out of nowhere, "I should have had your teeth fixed."

Clare knew there'd never been money for braces. She'd perfected a close-lipped smile.

Beth sat up straighter. "I want them fixed before senior pictures."

"Pictures are next week," Clare said. Picture day was a ritual, almost as big as graduation, with all seniors scheduled at fifteen minute intervals. "I can't change picture day."

Beth covered her food with a paper napkin.

Sam white-knuckled the edge of the table and pushed back. “For Christ’s sake, Beth,” he said. “I’m doing the best I can. *Not one more thing*. What do you want from me?”

Clare knew what Beth wanted: for Clare to be perfect, the same way some people want their houses in perfect order when everything else is falling apart. Beth had given up on fixing herself. Her robust health had curdled. But Clare’s teeth, that was something she could fix.

In her senior picture, Clare’s lips were firmly pressed together. But, the braces were on by January and, within two years, but too late for her mother to witness, Clare’s teeth looked like she’d grown up in the shadow of a country club. Sometimes when Clare was feeling insecure, she stared at her perfectly lined up teeth in the mirror. It connected her to her mom.

John had never seen the farm. So, the Saturday after Clare received Sam’s response to her letter, she and John left the city at first light. On the four-hour drive, Clare explained how her mother’s Irish ancestors homesteaded the farm and that her mother had loved the place. She told him that the last sad chapter of her mother’s life began when she moved out of that home. She said Sam’s positive response to her letter gave her just the most fragile shoot of hope for their relationship.

When they reached Clare’s hometown, John stopped his SUV in front of the single diner, about the size of a double-wide trailer. “Coffee?” he asked.

“You go. I don’t want to see anybody I know.”

“Is that likely after all this time?”

Clare raised her eyebrows: the same group assembled every Saturday morning, seats at the long center table passing from one generation to the next. Someone would know her name,

even say she looked “just like Beth,” though she was a foot taller than Beth had been, and lanky, like Sam. If she went inside, her father would know she was home within minutes.

“I don’t understand why we didn’t tell your father we were coming,” John said. “Don’t you want me to meet him?”

“It’s not that. I want to see how I feel on my own.”

John returned with two white Styrofoam cups. “Wow,” he said, “it’s like a TV sitcom in there. Grizzled old guys talking politics. What do you think *their* news source is?”

“Probably CNN or Fox News,” Clare snapped.

“Wow, a little defensive there.”

“You shouldn’t make assumptions about them based on appearance.”

“Fair enough. No assumptions.”

As Clare directed John down the three miles of muddy roads to the farmhouse, he frowned at his coffee sloshing into the cup holder, winced at every bump, and slowed to a crawl at each puddle. Clare was used to taking the dirt roads at forty miles per hour or more, like a person who lived there, oblivious to mud or suspension. John grew more anxious the slower he drove. He wanted to be back in Chicago for the Bulls’ tipoff that evening.

“This is it,” Clare said, finally. “On the right. Pull into the driveway.”

The fieldstone house looked as though it had been built in Ireland centuries before. The palette of stones was grey, green, even some rose. The door, once bright, now faded to a Nantucket red, had the same tiny mullioned window Clare used to need a stepstool to see out of. The framing around the small windows needed sanding and paint, but all in all it still looked unchanged and timeless. Clare quite liked the way the ivy and trees had grown in the years since she’d seen the homeplace.

Now, as she looked over at John, however, it was clear he saw a whole different reality.

“This is it?” he said, his forehead crinkled. His expression telegraphed his opinion—this was a horrible idea.

“I suppose I made it sound more romantic than it is,” Clare said.

John placed both hands on the steering wheel. “If you want a vacation place, why not get something nice, close to the city? Maybe a lake house?” John’s Patagonia pullover and glossy hiking boots belonged at a lake house, not on a farm. There was a difference.

A drizzle freckled the car window. The dark gray sky suggested the rain would persist.

“A little rain never hurt anyone,” Clare said, and got out of the car. She climbed the wooden steps to the front porch, and stretched to peer through the living room window, where raccoons had chewed through sofa upholstery, dropping tufts across the floor like snow. Mouse droppings littered the windowsill.

“You can’t be serious, Clare.” John said, from behind her. “We should be thinking about a house for the two of us, something more permanent. We should start our own lives.”

Clare’s stomach turned over. John was five years older than her and ever more insistent that their relationship progress. While they owned the condo together, marriage had been a thing she avoided. Clare formed questions in her head—like, *Can’t you see the possibilities...maybe an open mind?*—but stayed silent. She didn’t want to persuade John.

“I’ll just be a few minutes,” Clare said. “You should wait in the car, where it’s dry.”

Clare investigated. She peeked through all the windows she could reach. But for the damage to the upholstery, everything looked more or less as she remembered. She smiled at the flower-sprigged wallpaper she and her mother had chosen together for her room. The dining room still contained her grandmother’s breakfront, table and chairs—they’d moved only the

kitchen table to the rental. In the back yard, unbelievably, Clare's childhood swing hung from the willow tree her great-great-grandmother had planted over a hundred years ago. Clare had fallen off the swing when she was six—there was still a scar and divot under her chin. Now all these years later, that same swing moved in the breeze.

Would the swing hold her now? Clare sat gingerly, almost wishing the weathered, frayed ropes would break, some kind of sign, that the polished life John aspired to was what she wanted too. As Clare swung, barely lifting her feet from the ground, the ropes held. The branch, as thick as her waist, held her. The swing was strong, as strong as this place.

Back on I-69, John turned on the radio and the progress of a game filled the silence. Clare didn't know which teams or even what sport. She wasn't paying attention to the scenery either. Instead, she pondered her new passion to have the farm, too new to withstand John's opposition.

The leaves on the trees outside the passenger window danced: olive, ripe-pear gold, rust and eggplant. The cornfields looked shorn of their crop, like a child who'd given herself a makeshift haircut.

Why *did* she want it?

Possible answers wafted through Clare's mind like clouds as the miles flew by. She wanted to integrate her past with her present. The history of the place; in her family for so many generations, then lost. The loss of the farm still felt like an open wound, a loss of her heritage. Something no one could buy, unlike everything for sale in the city. It was maybe a way to put things right with her father. But even more so, with her mom.

None of this would make any sense to John. Clare wasn't sure it made sense to her. Perhaps she needed a grief counselor, not a broken-down farm in the middle of nowhere. She smiled at John. "Thanks for going with me," she said.

He nodded, engrossed in the game.

The sale of the homeplace was one of the trio of things that went wrong in a matter of weeks after senior pictures. First, Beth's health went from something they talked around, to almost another member of the family, with daily reports. Then, two weeks after Thanksgiving, Sam lost his job as an assembler at a Flint auto plant, something he'd feared given the economy, but now it had happened. He was at home all the time now, without income.

Clare hadn't even known there was an offer on the farm. When Sam told her, he was brusque. "It's a fair offer—from the county. They'll take the whole property, even though they only need a small corner of it, for a new road."

"Where will we move?" Clare had asked.

"Into town."

Clare had always longed to live in town, or so she thought. On the farm, the nearest neighbor was a half-mile away and the muddy roads insured neither her shoes nor their car was ever quite clean. But the timing felt wrong. It was unfair to her mom. Clare knew what Beth wanted—to die in her own home, like her mother and grandmother had before her.

"We need the money," Sam said. "It's done."

Two weeks after their trip to the farm, on the second anniversary of their first date, Clare tearfully told John she wanted to buy the farm.

"I'm not on board for that," John said. "It's too much."

There was a silence. This was where Clare was meant to bend, but she wouldn't. She didn't want something more permanent with John, maybe not with anyone. She didn't want a

home in the city—that was an illusion. Not really a home at all. In the city, she just needed a place to live, to lay her head between long days of work.

“Why do you want that farm?” John said. “It makes no sense.”

Clare dug deep for a good explanation. “I’ve been in heavy pursuit of someone—something—ever since my mom died. Being with you seemed to fit that need. Now I’m in pursuit of something else.”

More silence. No indication from John he’d bend, either.

“The only way for me to manage it is to get my money out of the condo.”

John nodded—sad. Tears in his eyes. He really was a good guy.

But a guy is not a farm.

It took exactly a week for Clare to get John to buy her out of her share of their home and start sharing the apartment of a friend from her graduate school years.

They’d moved out of the farmhouse and into the rental in January, just as Clare’s last semester of high school began. On the day of the move, Beth was dressed in street clothes—not pajamas. She’d been a sturdy woman, even stout, but she chose clothes a size too small as if to catch up to her vision of thin. Not unlike the magical thinking that made Beth think if Clare had perfectly straight white teeth, Beth might catch good health like you catch a train, and ride to a better destination. The once-too-tight clothes now hung on Beth. She was disappearing.

The rental was behind the post office, on the street that led to the baseball field. One story, two bedrooms, one bath. A tiny kitchen. Not much more than a hotel room, and just as generic. Clare knew her braces—which were on within weeks of the move—had been expensive. Though this made her feel partly responsible, she mostly blamed Sam for the horrible decision.

The weekend of the auction, Clare left the Mercantile Exchange in downtown Chicago just after Friday close and caught the four o'clock train in Union Station. She settled into a window seat at the back, placing her bag on the seat next to her. Unlikely the train would fill, though next week it would be packed with travelers for the Thanksgiving holiday. She again checked the website for online bids, as she'd been doing for weeks.

Nothing.

The train left the station, slowly, seeming to idle for miles. As it finally picked up speed, Clare leaned back and exhaled, then breathed in to every third rotation of the wheels, then every fifth and finally to the count of ten. The train passed through an ugly bit of Indiana, then north and east through Michigan farmland. The trees looked bare and brown, not like the high color of a few weeks earlier.

At Kalamazoo, Clare debated getting off and going back to John—maybe it wasn't too late to mend fences. She could settle back into the identity she'd cultivated. She could move back into the glamorous condo, and off the sofa bed in her friend's den. It would be so easy. *Too easy*, she decided. By Lansing, only an hour away from her stop, she'd recommitted to the fools' errand ahead.

When Clare got off the train in Lapeer, one vehicle was parked at the station. The battered white farm truck, the one on which she'd learned to drive, had its headlights shining across the track. Her dad leaned against the truck, his breath making clouds in the air.

Clare hadn't seen Sam for over two years. He looked rounder in the shoulders, somehow more tentative, but his hand was raised in the same wave—a wave that stood in for a sense of ownership and belonging. A wave that said, *You're mine, and I'm yours, no matter what. This is*

your stop. You belong here. She was surprised to feel a lump form in her throat—she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from tearing up.

Sam reached out for her bag when she was a couple of feet from him—no hug, it was not their custom—then dropped her bag in the truck bed. Clare boosted herself up into the high passenger’s seat. It would take over an hour, due north, to drive to their tiny town, down two-lane highways, always on the watch for deer darting across the road or a sleepy driver crossing the center line.

“I’m surprised—sad—to see you came alone,” Sam said, miles from the train station, on a dark road that made it feel like they were the only two people in the world. “I thought maybe you’d bring your young man. John?”

“Not this time,” Clare said, then felt badly for lying. She hadn’t spoken to John since he paid off her share of the condo. “Probably never,” she added.

Sam nodded, and they drove on in silence.

There was no hotel within thirty miles of the village, so Clare stayed in the same small room of the rental where she’d spent the last lonely months of her senior year. The closet and dresser drawers were full of clothes she’d left behind—college sweatshirts from schools she didn’t end up attending, prom shoes that gave her blisters she remembered even now, an old basketball uniform. Clare plopped down on the bed, and a cloud of dust rose from the old pink quilt. She willed herself not to catch the sadness of the girl she’d been when she lived here. This space needn’t be anything more than an airport terminal where she’d wait for a delayed flight.

Clare checked the website for bids one last time. Nothing on the house and surrounding land. The contents of the house were being sold as a single lot, with the minimum bid specified as one thousand dollars. Other things of more interest to farmers, small equipment and tools,

were listed separately. Well, Clare thought, she could buy the contents if nothing else. They'd left most of what they had in the house—there was no room in the rental. She could put them in storage, for when she had a home of her own.

Clare left for college at Michigan State University just weeks after high school graduation, electing to take summer classes. She loved MSU, a place where everyone she knew studied something practical like nursing or agriculture. At the beginning of her sophomore year, Clare chose finance as her major, aspiring to never worry about money as her parents had. Shortly before Thanksgiving 2009, when Beth was no longer able to speak to her on the phone, Clare had returned home for a visit. By then, Beth was in and out of reality. She thought she was back in the farmhouse, and asked Clare to take her out to the front porch to sit for a bit. Afraid to tell her mother that there was no front porch at the rental, Clare just convinced her it was too cold. Beth died the day before Christmas, 2009, in a house that wasn't a home, not even knowing where she was.

The morning of the auction was biting cold with an on-and-off drizzle. Clare, Sam and uncle Rob drove to the farm, registered, then waited in the warm truck, their auction paddle resting on the dash. Clare noticed a few shiny tricked-out pick-ups pulling in, which made her shiver with nerves. Some of these farmers weren't hurting for cash.

Fifteen minutes before the auction was to start, Clare shook out the MSU poncho she'd worn to football games in college and pulled it over her head. They walked to the barnyard behind the house. The old rope swing—still there on the willow tree—was a precursor to what Sam and Clare saw. Almost everything they'd owned ten years earlier seemed to be now offered

for sale, identified by dozens and dozens of numbers. The swing seemed to be the only thing not labeled for sale.

“Makes sense all the old stuff is here,” Sam said. “The County never did do anything with this property.”

“They’ll start with the farm itself,” uncle Rob said. “If you lose that bid, we’ll just go.”

Clare had \$125K. This sum came from the equity she had in the condo, her savings, and \$20K she’d borrowed from her mentor at the firm. She should have more, she knew, given her high salary, so high she’d be embarrassed to tell it to any man present, but city life was expensive. “I don’t think my one-twenty-five is going to cut it,” Clare said, shaking her head.

Sam said, “They bought it from me for \$200K, nearly ten years ago. I’ll throw in my ten grand, but that’s not going to make a difference.”

“Ten thousand dollars?” Clare said. “That’s all you’ve got left of two hundred thousand?”

“I used the money to take care of your mom. You know that,” Sam said, his mouth set in a stubborn line. “Remember how I had Audrey there, nearly twenty-four-seven? That wasn’t cheap.”

Clare did remember Audrey, a friend of Beth’s who was a retired nurse. Audrey spent months with Beth, while Sam, incapable of providing personal care for his wife, found anywhere else to go.

“And I used it to get you things you needed,” Sam continued. “Remember—I never did get called back up to the plant.”

Clare calculated in her head. Full time help, for almost two years. Tuition, which Sam helped with. No income for years. Not eligible for social security—too young. Or, any pension—not employed long enough.

Her father opened his hands in front of him. “Does it look like I’ve spent ten cents on myself, Clare?”

Clare didn’t say anything. She’d had no idea money was so tight back then, or now. She’d thought he was still in the sad little rental because he didn’t have the imagination to move, not because he couldn’t afford to.

“I’ve got five,” uncle Rob said, startling Clare. She’d forgotten he was there.

“Where’d you get five?” Clare asked. Uncle Rob worked at the local hardware store, she imagined for minimum wage, and supported three kids.

“Borrowed from the in-laws,” Rob shrugged. “Probably won’t help, but I’ve never gotten over giving Beth such a hard time when you were a kid.”

Clare barely remembered uncle Rob being around when she was a child. By the time she was born, he was twenty-two and living with his girlfriend in town. “What hard time?” she asked.

“I lost my real mother, then when you came along, it felt like I lost my spare. Didn’t see the point in coming around. I was grown. Didn’t need her anymore.”

A wave of sorrow hit Clare: her mother really had died alone. Sam had kept his distance, Clare rarely came home, uncle Rob had his own issues, and Beth’s parents were gone. Clare shook the raindrops off her poncho.

“Figure this is one way I can make it right,” uncle Rob said. “She’d want this for you. And your dad.”

The farmers surrounding them looked of a piece—wrinkled skin, hands with huge knuckles from years of hard work and frostbite, and clothing chosen for its practicality and replaced only when fully spent, if ever. As they edged closer to the auctioneer, Clare’s father and uncle Rob were acknowledged with a raised hand and a nod. None of the men parted their lips to smile—if they had, Clare knew their teeth would be brown with tobacco stains, and as crooked as hers had once been.

“Honey,” Sam said, handing her the paddle, “You make the bids.”

This was new. Her father letting her take the lead.

“Even if we get out-bid on the farm,” Clare said, “I’m bidding on the house contents. The minimum is a thousand dollars.”

Sam nodded.

“I’d love to see if there were some things of my mom and dad in there,” uncle Rob said.

The crowd quieted as the auctioneer walked up the steps to the platform. He listed to the left—maybe his left leg was shorter. He wore a “VFW” cap—perhaps a war injury? He greeted the crowd and explained the rules, then began speaking in the strange auctioneers’ patois Clare barely understood, but remembered from childhood, when her parents hoped to buy something beautiful or useful for a song.

The lopsided auctioneer asked for a starting bid on the farm in the amount of \$100,000.

Clare raised her paddle high and the auctioneer nodded acknowledgement—he’d seen her. His assistant, who sat to his right with a laptop, made note of her paddle number and bid.

“Do I have one-ten? One-ten? One-ten?” the auctioneer echoed into his microphone. “For this lovely farm?”

Bodies pressed closer to Clare, and she looked to either side for a raised paddle. Who was the competition? Silence—no movement. Everyone seemed to be looking at his shoes. Looking at anything else but her. No one else was bidding.

Was this some kind of joke? Or a dream?

“One-ten?” the auctioneer yelled—louder. It was his job to whip the farmers into a frenzy and drive up the price. He tried one last time. “One hundred thousand dollars...Going, going, gone. To the little lady in front.”

Clare couldn't believe it. Why had the farmers stayed silent?

“Did that just happen?” she asked her father.

“Appears so.” Sam threw his arm around Clare's shoulders. “Damndest thing ever.”

Uncle Rob's face split into a big grin.

The auctioneer took a break—hopefully not to figure out if he could undo the sale, which had to have netted far less than expected—and Sam and uncle Rob went for a cigarette and to refill the coffee thermos. Clare stood silent, still stunned. The rain was coming down harder now and the temperature was dropping. She pulled the poncho into a tight little cocoon around her. She wanted to remember this moment always, to take careful note, so she stood there, observing the water falling from the sky. It is rare, she thought, but not impossible, to see a whole tiny universe in a single drop of rain.

A man with an unkempt red and grey beard and a John Deere baseball-style cap tapped her shoulder. “You grew up here, right? Wasn't Beth your mother?”

If Clare knew him, she hadn't the faintest idea of his name. “Yes,” Clare said. “I'm Beth's daughter: Clare.”

“You look just like her.”

“Thank you.” In a city of millions, she didn’t resemble anyone, but here she looked just like someone. Someone remembered Beth, even ten years after she’d passed.

“You can thank your uncle Rob,” the man said. “He spread the word down at the hardware. Let folks know you’d be taking a shot at getting your farm back.”

The auctioneer climbed up on the platform again, and banged his gavel on the podium. “Lot one,” he yelled, making his microphone screech.

He was going forward. There was no technicality that would intercept her purchase. Clare let out the breath she’d been holding.

She looked around. All these farmers had stood down so she could have a chance. All these men *wanted* her to be the highest bidder. *Wanted* her family to have a chance to make something of the farm. No one met her eyes. It wasn’t the kind of place where people wanted credit for kindness.

“Makes us all sad to see the old family farms broken up,” the man continued. “Nice to see somebody come back and retrieve one. You got plans for the old place?”

“My father’s going to be moving back.”

By the end of the morning, Clare had used the remaining money to buy back the essentials from the inventory, and only when she didn’t offer a bid did another farmer raise his paddle.

That afternoon, Clare and Sam drove out to the old stone farmhouse. Clare unlocked the door. There were the signs of raccoons and mice. “Cold winters make the plaster crack,” said Sam, “too bad.” But, mostly, except for the few things Sam took to the rental house, everything was just as they’d left it.

All Clare saw were possibilities. Nobody could buy this kind of history.

“You know,” Sam said, “when your mom got sick, we’d just started talking about making some changes here. I had that good job....”

Clare tried to picture what her mother might have wanted to do with the house.

“I’ve still got the plans,” Sam said. “And like I said, nothing but good health and time.”

Clare took out her phone and snapped a picture of the original doorknob on the dining room door; a number of the others were missing, and she’d need to find a good match.

“Why did this mean so much to you?” Sam asked.

“Kind of crazy, isn’t it?” Clare smiled.

“Seriously, why’d you put all your money into it?”

“You don’t know the half of it—it wasn’t just the money I gave up. John found the idea of owning a farm so preposterous, he basically gave me an ultimatum. Him or the farm.”

“There was a time I felt like your mother gave me a similar choice—before you were born. Her on the farm, or not at all. I complained about that for years. I failed your mother.” Sam wiped at his eyes.

Clare didn’t know what to say. “That must have been tough,” was all she came up with.

“I wanted her more than I wanted to live anywhere else.”

“It was just about the opposite with me. I wanted the farm more than I wanted to be with John. So, I guess it wasn’t exactly an ultimatum. He didn’t force me to choose. I just chose.”

“Got back to town like I wanted, then hated that. Didn’t know what I had until I pushed it away. Funny how you can fall in and out of love with a place, isn’t it?”

“Sure is,” Clare agreed. “I wanted to buy something that—”

“—should never been for sale in the first place,” Sam completed her sentence.

It took effort, but Clare put a hand on her father’s back.

“She’d be so proud of you, Clare. *I’m* so proud of you.”

Silence hung in the air for a moment. He’d never once said that before and they both knew it.

“No buyer’s remorse?” he said. “You sure about this?”

“I’ve never been surer of anything in my life,” Clare said. She ran her tongue along the smooth surface of her teeth.

They walked from the mud room to the back yard.

Sam gave the old swing a push. “This thing is a hazard; it’s coming down,” he said.

“I love that swing.”

“You fell out of it, don’t you remember? So hard, landing right on your chin. I thought you’d broken your neck.”

“The swing stays,” Clare said. “But you can shore it up.”

Sam pulled on the rope. “Seems sturdy enough, I guess,” he said. Then, he sat on the swing.

“Dad,” Clare said. “Maybe you should—”

A monstrous crack was the only signal of the failure of the branch, which had to have been failing for years. Or maybe the stress Clare put on the branch weeks ago wasn’t enough to break it, just weaken it. By the time Clare comprehended what was happening, the branch had already bludgeoned her father. He was on the ground, with the branch lying over his leg, which was positioned at an unnatural angle. Blood ran from the corner of his mouth and a wound on the side of his head.

“Dad,” Clare screamed.

No answer.

Clare tried to pull the branch away. It was too heavy to budge. She jammed the numbers into her phone—911—fingers shaking, while smoothing her father’s hair back from his face. The fire department in their town was all volunteers. Men would leave whatever they were doing and come as fast as they could, but it wasn’t likely anyone could get there for several minutes.

Clare felt for a pulse at Sam’s throat—nothing. There was no way to perform CPR with the branch in the way. There was nothing to do other than to get down in the dirt and put her head on his chest, and say, “It’s okay. It’s okay.” Then, “Thank you. Thank you for this. This farm. This time. Thank you.” Clare stayed in that position until the truck arrived and five men who looked familiar, but no one with a name she could recall, pulled the branch off her father.

Why had she insisted on keeping the swing?

How could it be fair that their reconciliation would be so very brief? For that short while, they’d shared a purpose. Now that was over. Like two trains going opposite directions on parallel tracks, that just for a few beats were aligned. Clare was left with just an emptiness, like the emptiness of the landscape around her, bitten back by the freezing fall. Not yet winter, and spring a long way off.

The burly men tended to her father, as gently as they’d stood back at the auction. These men, like her father, only looked gruff. They were as tender yet helpless as men come.