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At the Rapids

When my father had stood on the creek bank for five minutes without speaking or looking back at us, without skipping a single stone across the water's surface, I stepped away from the picnic table and joined him. Low in the wake of a summer drought, mutely filling with leaves, the creek glimmered in the October sunlight without betraying a current. Dad didn't greet me, just kept his eyes on the ground by his shoes, but at least he didn't turn away. I glanced back at my mother who, ever watchful, had stationed herself at one end of the table. She'd draped an orange oilcloth over its surface. Behind her, a maple tree with a rounded crown shed its yellow leaves like a sun dying out. My wife, Laura, stood near the other end of the table busily arranging our silverware and tubs of food—cold fried chicken, potato salad, pickled eggs. She'd baked an apple walnut pie, her first, for the outing. She fretted with the plates, and I knew she, unlike my mother, would give my father and me a measure of privacy. It was a warm Indian summer noontime. I crouched low by my father's knees, tugged loose what felt like a flat stone from the dry ground, raised myself, and reared my arm to sail the stone upon the water. I halted, mid-motion, when my fingers sensed what I held—an arrowhead, perfect in form. "*Holy Christmas!*" I sang out, honoring my younger self, for as a boy I'd spent whole summer Sunday afternoons clinging like the shell of a locust to the banks of this creek—digging, praying, exhorting the earth to yield up one arrowhead, blade, or bead. Dad, startled, had stepped forward to catch me, but I'd managed not to fall. Intending to offer him the first good look, I extended the dark treasure toward him. He glanced at it and nodded. A breeze nudged its wide arm across our chests.

"What kind of stone is this?" I asked as I urged it on him.

Dad frowned at the arrowhead. "It's iron."

"Oh." I drew it back and rubbed its surface with my thumb. Charcoal-colored and stained with clay, beveled on one edge but keen as the steel of a new pocketknife on the other, the arrowhead seemed a jewel in my hand.

I held it up for Laura to see. My mother announced, ringingly, that lunch was ready.

Sliding the arrowhead into my pants pocket, I said, “Hungry, Dad?”

With his eyes on the creek he shook his head no.

Turning alone, I beheld, dappled with sunlight, the two women standing together behind the laden table. The shrug I gave my mother was met by her with a pout. I climbed to Laura and took her hand. Still our secret, carried by her these past two months like the seed of a flower too precious to mention, our first baby waited to bloom.

I scooped a fingerful of my mother’s creamy potato salad from its plastic bowl and ate it. “Good as ever, Mom,” I said.

“Won’t he come?” she asked in a stricken tone.

Her dramatics annoyed me. “In a little while, I’m sure,” I answered as I callously filled my plate.

Laura asked, “Should we wait?”

“Davey?” stage-whispered my mother.

I sat down, pulling gently at Laura’s wrist to seat her. “I think not.”

“Earl?” My mother’s burdened utterance reverberated, drawing looks from picnickers at other tables.

Dad gazed upward as though her voice, like a bird’s, had descended from the topmost branches of the slender river birch that shared the bank with him. His chin snapped down and he swiveled in place. “Lu, I’m going for a walk. Go ahead and eat.” He began to hike, in his long-legged gait, along the creek.

Mother’s eyes implored me. “Won’t you *go* with him? Won’t you make him come *back*?”

“No, Mom. Jesus, he obviously wants to be left alone. You know how he is.”

“Better than anyone, I should hope.” She slumped onto the bench across from us and told Laura, “He’ll moon about the house for weeks.” To me she added, as if to portion out the blame, “He’ll smother me with silence, you know he will.”

My mother’s eyes are sea blue and lovely and almost always clear, but beneath this noon’s full sun, a brimming lemon-gold bowl in the unfolding sky, they were clouded. In all my recollection, my parents’ skirmishes resulted from my mother’s frequently stated imputation that my father

talked too little to her and my father's abiding conviction that she talked too much. "Why must she make an issue out of everything?" I'd heard him ask, more than once, not me or my siblings but the prevailing air.

I helped myself to a chicken breast. "Dad always needs to work things out for himself. Let's give him some time. Then I'll find him and try to steer him back here. Eat a little bit and tell us the story. All you said when you called this morning was that Aunt Jane died yesterday but Dad still wanted to go on our picnic. Now he's acting like he'd rather be anywhere than here."

Laura had prepared a plate for my mother. Mom took it and thanked her with a dim smile. She ate a slice of pickled egg. "Don telephoned last night around ten. I answered and he asked for Earl. I somehow didn't recognize his glum, gruff voice. We'd been laughing at a joke Larry Halter told us. He and Rose were over for cards, and we were about to play the bully. Earl's face went numb at the kitchen phone. He leaned against the wall. We heard him say, 'Yes... yes... I see.' He hung up and faced us close enough to tears to scare me. Have you ever known your father to cry? I stood up, knocking over my chair, and said, 'Is it one of the kids?' He leaned against the wall and moaned, 'It's Jane. Cancer's been pitted throughout her lungs since April. She died half an hour ago.' I didn't go to him. The air he spun around himself seemed dense as"—she searched for an image—"a swarm of bees. I said, 'I'll go upstairs and pack our suitcases.' He said, 'No, you won't.' Larry and Rose cleared the table and whispered how sorry they were. Larry had been sweet on Jane when we were all in school. I walked them to the door in a daze. When I came back to the kitchen, Earl said, 'The bastard kept it to himself. He could've called us last week. Could've called yesterday.' "

I thought Mom had paused. She picked at her food for a minute and lit a cigarette, so I said, "What about the funeral?"

She exhaled a plume of smoke. "Don claimed Jane wanted to be buried in a simple ceremony out there. In Arizona! He's burying her tomorrow, or so he told Earl. He said he'd write to us about the location of the grave and about her will. Can you believe it? I said we should just fly out there, Davey would drive us to the airport. His answer to that was to walk out into the night, without a coat on, for two hours. He went to the cemetery, I'm sure—his parents and all—and into the woods. While he was gone

the whole thing hit me, Jane dead. She called us one day last month and sounded like herself, perhaps a little winded. She and Earl talked for ten happy minutes, and then I laughed along with her for five. Neither of us guessed anything was wrong. The only hitch came when I asked her when she planned to come home again and tour the unmarked sites of her strayed youth—you know, the back alleys and cornfields. We were always kidding each other about our wicked pasts when we'd been the least daring girls in town. Jane went quiet, so I gushed out an apology. But she said, 'Oh soon, soon I pray.' Then we said goodbye."

"The last time we saw her," I said, "was at Grandma's funeral?"

Mom nodded. "Four years ago. She flew home by herself. Remember how your father tried to talk her into staying?"

"Dad never liked that guy."

"Don glowers so. He doesn't let you feel comfortable around him. No wonder they had no children."

I laughed. "Sorry, Mom, but that makes no sense."

"Doesn't it? Well—" She wiped a tear from her right cheek and hugged herself. "It's been my suspicion for years that Don kept her out there against her will, hiding her from us. That's silly, I guess. She loved him." Mom stubbed her cigarette out on the bench and dropped the butt into a paper cup.

Laura tapped my knee. I rose and smiled at my mother. "You know how good Dad and I are at talking about anything harder to discuss than baseball or work."

Her face brightened. "You might just tell him how sorry you are about Jane. I know he hasn't given you the chance."

"Would it help if you told him we missed him?" Laura asked.

My mother laughed with genuine pleasure. "That's never worked for me before. But, Davey, if you tell him *Laura* misses him you might shame him back."

"Oh I wouldn't want him to be shamed," Laura protested.

I kissed her. "I'll say it only if I have to."

The woods—spangled trees, littered path—didn't camouflage my father for long. Through the red veil of a camellia I saw him sitting at the far end of

a hickory bole that spanned the creek. He'd walked fewer than a hundred yards to take cover from us. I stepped into view and hailed him.

He glanced up but couldn't find me. "Present," he called.

I wobbled across the tree bridge. Sitting down beside him, I said, "I'm sorry about Aunt Jane."

By the time I'd entered the third grade I'd learned that my father buried all pain beneath a ghastly scowl, so his hatchet grimace, aimed at the woods as he barely nodded, didn't alarm me. I added, to fill the void, "Uncle Don's a lout."

No answer. Balked by a voiceless sorrow that welled up through me for my father, whose silence, an invisible cloak he wore like a shroud on the occasions of his grief or anger, seemed born of a hard secrecy no one could penetrate, I fought back an uprush of tears. Images of my aunt and father together, both tall and lithe and with angular faces, kind green eyes, and straw-colored hair, brimmed in my memory to blot my sight of the creek. I remembered a photograph that revealed their grinning grade-school faces peeking out from a spray of coin-sized leaves in my grandmother's beech tree, their bare legs dangling from the limb on which they were perched. I remembered the time when, along this very creek, my young father and aunt had helped my brothers and me build a dam of rocks and sticks while my mother, choosing not to get her feet wet, bestowed her encouragement from a lawn chair. Uncle Don, a stranger to us by his own choice, wandered the woods alone. And I remembered the golden autumn afternoon when I was five that Aunt Jane, her blond beauty magnified by her bridal gown, her arm squeezed in the vise of my father's elbow, strode up the center aisle of our Lutheran church toward a life we did not suspect would become one concealed from us.

"Dave. Dave?"

"What? Oh, I'm sorry, Dad."

"Let's see that arrowhead."

I fished it out of my pocket and handed it to him. "Remember how we used to hunt for these along here?"

"Yes." He studied the relic critically. "Most Indians stopped hunting and warring with arrows when white men began to trade rifles with them. This must have been used in some ceremony or sold as a trinket."

"Oh? It looks pretty deadly."

Dad raised the arrowhead into the glittering sunlight. “It would tear a body’s hide,” he agreed. He lowered it, pressed it in his right hand, and studied the mark it left in the heel of his palm. Sighing, he gazed into the trees as though they masked the balm to his suffering.

All I could think to do was to watch the trees with him.

After a minute, Dad asked, “Do you know how this creek came by its name?”

“I’ve guessed it was named for the Conewago Indians.”

“By them, I’d bet. It twists a long way east and flows into the Susquehanna near some rapids. Indians named things—rivers, forests—in a way that fixed their locations. ‘Conewago’ means ‘at the place of the rapids.’”

I glanced at the creek. Here, it was stippled like the flank of a trout by sunlight and stones. The water was still.

Dad’s eyes were troubled. “Some old-timers, the fathers and grandfathers of men around here who talk Black people down even if they’ve never met any, claimed *Caugh-na-wah-ga* was Indian slang for ‘cannot walk it.’ Like all Indians were lazy. But the Indians around here never built a permanent village. These were just good hunting and fishing grounds for them to visit. They weren’t even natives of this area. They were refugees, hidiers from the Iroquois. Scared of them, I guess.”

He barked a self-belittling laugh and stood up. I jumped to the bank to let him cross the hickory first, but he stayed in place, towering over me. “Hidiers,” he repeated, biting the word, looking across the creek toward the picnic area. “Maybe that’s what I’ve been all my life. What I’ve been doing for most of my fifty years—hiding out.” He swung his face, kinked with disgust, toward me. “I could’ve visited her anytime. My own sister.”

I stood rooted to the bank. “You didn’t know she was ill.”

Dad shook his head. “I don’t know, Dave. How do things go so sour? One day I see they are sour and I don’t know why. I can’t ever figure out why.” He scanned the breadth of the woods. Then he discovered the piece of iron in his hand and looked at it like it was a brand new thing. It seemed to spring him. He skipped down to the bank, gave me the arrowhead, and said, “I’m going for that walk now. Be back soon.”

I let him go ten yards, then thought the hell with it and said, “Dad?”

He wheeled round as though I’d flung a net over him.

“Laura and I are expecting a baby.”

He took the news stone-faced. “Honestly?”

By now, I felt I could laugh in restored safety, the afternoon partially saved, but I didn’t. “Yeah.”

“Does your mother know?”

“No sir.”

“Well.” A pent breath escaped through his lips. Without exactly smiling, his face relented. “I’m glad, son. Hey, that’s great.” He brought his hands to his hips. “I’m still taking that walk, okay? Go back and tell Mom the good news. And listen, tell her I’m all right and I’ll be hungry when I get back.”

“I will.”

Then the smile came, reticent, but a smile all the same. It held as he pivoted into the woods, away from the light that skirted the creek. All around him, screening his body as he moved on, the burnished leaves spun down or clung for another minute or day to branches that would prove helpless to hold them.

I crossed the bridge wishing I knew how to breach my father’s aloneness. And then I wondered if he’d spied the arrowhead on the creek bank first, if he’d waited there hoping I would join him and study the terrain about us as I’d done when I was a boy. If I hadn’t discovered it, would he have plucked it from the ground for me? I looked back to where Dad had disappeared and promised myself I would keep the arrowhead, be it trinket or treasure, until the day arrived when I could conceal it along the creek for my own child to discover.