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For Michael, Eve and Grace

They will pass through the sea of trouble.

Zechariah 10:11

French Pond Road

His hands swung in the air, checking the flight of snapping branches. Frogs chorused, while car's headlights swept around a bank above the woods along French Pond Road. In the ghostly fog of an April night, his hands seemed as alien as the frog spawn come to life in vernal pools.

The Old Woman had accused him of cowardice. "Get on with your life," she'd said, not the first time, in her paranoia. "What are you hiding from? You scared?" His hands drew him forward through the woods in the half-light. He had a brief meta-cognitive moment of disbelief. Where had they come from, those hands? And they were drawing him towards, what? He said the word out loud. "What?" And Casey jumped to life, surging ahead expectantly, sniffing under a patch of woodland flowers rising on sappy stalks from the pine tree rot.

The dog and he knew their way through these woods. They'd spent good time working their trails around the swamp on long walks through all seasons of the year. Still, he expected only death would ever quell his urge to flee. Solitude had become a faithful and constant presence, like a drip that had worked its way to the middle of his center of gravity. The dog and the women kept him grounded: one of them, the Old Woman, as crazy as a loon and unable to fend for herself alone, and the other, Mandy, looking out for him as if he were a tired old dog himself.

They came out of the woods, jumping an overturned stone wall and a ditch running with thick, black, branch-choked melt. They walked past newly bloomed tract houses on the subdivided old Pelt farm, large starter fortresses stained with petrochemicals on five-acre lots. The neglected fields were neatly mowed once a year in late summer by an old man on an old tractor. Pelt was dead, but he believed the old man on the old tractor was a distant relation.

Mandy Barnes lived on the corner of French Pond and Bradford roads. In an old schoolhouse she'd painted red, she'd gathered the artifacts of her travels, various self-help books, Navajo throw rugs, a large empty birdcage among other things. He didn't mind not understanding most of her life. She didn't pretend to understand him, either. He liked it that way. She was home. The front door light was on and the blue glow of the tube could be seen in the one window on the side of the house. So different was Mandy from the Old Woman as to constitute the two stable poles of his life, thought Kagan. The Old Woman's dream world and comfort were entirely of her own fabrication.

He went to the Old Woman to bring her food and to get away from loneliness and the dead certainty that time doled out in reasonable measure. She usually did that for him. After all, she had once been a physician before the New York Board of Health had stripped her of her license, accusing her of insanity. She'd refused to administer certain vaccines. It worked against the natural defenses for which death was a necessary prophylactic. She had tried to explain it to him earlier that afternoon, but he, stiffened by the chorusing frogs chanting a lunatic dirge, had refused to accept that the New York Board of Health could have had it so wrong.

But here he was outside of Mandy's house still hearing the frogs in the swamp, that nameless stretch of water across the road from the old Pelt farm. And the peepers were spawning as thick as the darkness.

"Death isn't the be all and end all," he had said, relying on lines he'd once heard from his father. "And anyway it's a sin."

"What? You sinner. Don't bring sin in here." The Old Woman's eyes had blazed in the darkness of her feverish cabin, the roof sinking on its old beams. He'd helped her patch up the siding about five years previous, when she'd bought it from the car repair man in Merrimack, SM Auto, who'd used it as a hunting lodge.

He'd met Mandy at church, less than a year ago. He'd started to go to church in the acknowledgement that there was something big missing in his life. There was a picture, but the center was blank, as if the artist had suffered a stroke and missed the point.

Mandy had recognized him on the line for doughnuts and coffee. She had confessed a need for help with an unusual building project, the restoration of a clawed foot bathtub whose enamel had chipped along one rim. He'd taken it upon himself to find the right chemical restorative and color matching to the original. The bathtub was such an unusual dimension that it had not fit into the alcove Mandy had pictured enclosing it, but a sort of loft was built in the main room, and there it remained, framed in by bookcases and a Diego Rivera reproduction; and exotic plants grew down into it like a rain forest.

She'd thought of herself as a mover and a shaker, hired by Bert's Ski Peak as a Marketing and Events Planner at the tender age of thirty-two. Kagan had indulged her

need to think of herself in this way, little thinking that he would evolve into another of her life affirming projects. She had complained about his hygiene and talked him into giving the bathtub a trial run after the loft had been completed. That night he'd explained to her about Patricia and Mickey the baby and the years he'd spent in Europe hiding from himself. He'd never told the Old Woman those things, because the Old Woman might make some crazy sense and demand he seek retribution from the author of all outcomes, himself, whereas Mandy would recommend forgetfulness, which he preferred.

"Hello?" Mandy opened the door, and Kagan, kneeling on the corner to clip the leash on Casey, looked up.

"There's still snow up there," said Kagan, standing and looking out towards Bert's Peak. They could dimly see the line of gray snow on the trails at the top.

"All that work up there and it just melts. There's something beautiful about that," said Kagan.

"It's just snow. You've been with the witch in the swamp. I can smell her from here."

"She's in pain. Her arthritis's acting up."

"You started with Morgan yet?"

Kagan nodded. "He's got a colonial he's doing for some professor."

"That'd be Morgan. He's good." She laughed. "You coming in?"

"Not tonight. Just giving Casey a stretch."

“What’s the matter? You scared or something?”

She rubbed her bare arms and looked away, to where the last of the light was fading along the ridge line of the Contoocook.

“I understand. I’m going in. It’s cold,” she said. She gave him a half wistful, half understanding look as she closed the door.

When Patricia left one day to Florida with the baby, Mickey, it had shattered his life in so many ways that he could never have foreseen. It took him years to get his bearings back. He’d spent two in St. Johnsbury, working on roofing crews in the summer and playing cards in the winter. Then he’d woken up one day with a desperate case of longing for her and he’d called her father and been informed that she was divorcing him. The news had not upset him. It was his lack of any emotion that had been the most unsettling. He’d considered jumping through the window for the sake of feeling pain, anything better than numb, but took a plane instead from Logan for Shannon and then spent four more years hiking to Leningrad and back to Dublin.

When he came back to Boston it was 1992, December, and snow blanketed the roofs of houses on the North Shore. He’d called his sister - the number he still had for her in Brookline. Kagan had a mental picture of May with Jimmy and their two girls. The girls were thin like their mother with long arms and wrists that hung like shellfish dangling from their knees when they sat on the sofa together. They were all Jehovah’s Witnesses now. May had been attracted to the certainty and penchant for hard work, so like their own father, Hiram Kagan, although the root of his certainty had been a mystery and Kagan had always

suspected, even hoped it was bogus. But the rigidity ate at the girls, all very tense with twisted uncertain smiles mirroring the hardness of Jimmy's face and poor eating habits from Hiram via May. He'd pictured their hearts beating in unison, the enflamed tissues palpitating, as he dialed at the bank of public phones at the airport and waited. The air had smelled of cigarette smoke and metal and a forty year-old winter as if it was 1952 and he was his own father returning from duty in Germany and calling his wife in Windsor.

"Hello?"

"Hi. May?"

"Is it? Billy? Is it you?"

"Yes, May. Yes, I'm sorry. I..."

"Don't be sorry. Where are you?"

"I'm at the airport."

"Patricia's dead, Billy. Did you know that? We didn't know who would tell you. Angela has your boy. She's somewhere in California. California or New York. I'm not sure. Jimmy knows."

He'd already known that Patricia dead no longer made an impact on him. His fingers were cold. He needed to find a warm place. Then he could think of the disaster that he was coming home to and ways to bend himself to it again.

"I'm wondering where's a good place to go now, May."

“There’s nobody in Windsor anymore. Wayne Jefferson is in Penacook. Outside of Concord. You remember him?”

“Yeah. He was in my French class.”

“He works for Sylvania up there.”

“Okay. I haven’t talked to him since high school.”

“But you were pretty good friends. That’s the only person I can think of, Billy. You could come here, but we don’t have a lot of room.”

“How are the girls?”

“They’re fine.”

“That’s good. That’s good.”

They talked on, mouthing platitudes, but May’s advice was enough for him, a direction in the darkness, good enough to get him moving. Any direction would do. He had thought of striking out for California where he knew no one, where Angela had holed up with Mickey, but Wayne Jefferson would be a good enough start, a solid lead. He took the Trailways bus up to New Hampshire and looked up his old friend in the telephone book at the bus station. Several days later he had a job on a roofing crew, and he was looking for a place of his own. Wayne Jefferson had a friend who owned a trailer park out on the edge of Dodge State Forest and that was where, after several years of renting, he had bought the lease on the trailer where he still lived.

He headed back down the road in the dark. His life had a shape, and part of the trick in getting it to there

was to drown all thought of greener pastures, and live with the loneliness at his center. The spring melt sometimes threatened to dislodge his fragile toe-hold on stability, though. That was when he had a hard time sleeping and he tossed and turned in the moonlight coming through the window and thought he was still in St. Johnsbury hearing the train whistle blow and Patricia, whom he had loved, whispering to Mickey to calm him down.