



South
of
Superior



Ellen Airgood

RIVERHEAD BOOKS
A member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.
New York
2011




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*For my father,
Henry Sines Airgood,
who would have been so proud*

Prologue

The letter from Gladys Hansen was written in blue ink in an angular hand, on one sheet of plain white paper.

Dear Madeline Stone, it began,

I have thought to write to you for quite some while. I didn't because I supposed you wouldn't appreciate it, that you'd think it wasn't my place. I should have gone ahead and written anyhow.

I was sorry to hear of Emmy's passing. I know she was your mother, much more than Jackie Stone ever could've been. It is a hard loss, of someone so close. I expect you are at sea still without her—a year is not really long in the scheme of things. I won't say it was for the best or any of that. It can never feel right to lose someone so dear.

Emmy wrote me now and then, I don't know if you knew. She told me about the cancer, and how you helped her. She always said she wanted there to be some link for you up north, a door open if you wanted it. I should have done better with that.

I am writing now because I need help. My sister, Arbutus, has taken a bad turn. She's crippled up with the arthritis and since she fell this last time she can hardly get around at all. We are here in Chicago where you are, staying with my nephew Nathan. Moving in with him seemed like the only thing to do, but it is no good. Butte has hardly stirred from her chair since we got here, she says it is too much trouble. This isn't home and if we don't get home I swear she will be dead before many more months are gone.

What I need is someone to come back up north with us, someone to live in, to lift and bathe her and so forth, someone young and strong to help with whatever is needed. At least for a while. I hope you won't take this amiss but I know that you know how to do this. I thought you might come and help us. And I thought that maybe you should see where your people came from. Maybe it's time.

I would pay a small wage, not much I'm afraid, but there would be your room and board included. There is nothing much to buy up home, so if you had a mind to you could live cheap. Let me know your answer soon. If you say no I will have to think of something else. Nathan seems restless now at having us here and I am afraid he will put Arbutus in a home. I cannot stand to think of that. Please do come

*Yours truly,
Gladys Hansen*

Madeline had opened the letter as she came in the door from work, and now she stood in the entryway, still wearing her pink waitress dress that smelled faintly of fryer grease, gazing at it in astonishment. This from the woman who had been her grandfather's—what? Lady-friend? Paramour? Lover?—the estranged grandfather who'd abandoned Madeline to her fate more than thirty years ago. She'd only been three years old. Cards had come like clockwork on her birthday and at Christmas, always with a five-dollar bill taped inside, written in this same hand: *Best Wishes from Joe Stone and Gladys Hansen*, the return address a post office box in McAllaster, Michigan. Those cards—answered only by a perfunctory thank you and then only because Emmy insisted—had been the sum total of her relationship with her grandfather.

Emmy had explained it all when Madeline was very small. Gladys was a good friend of Joe Stone's and ladies often did do things like that, of the two in a couple—sent the cards, remembered the

birthdays. Emmy explained also that Madeline's grandfather was just too old and set in his ways to look after a little girl, which was why the two of them were so lucky, to be able to live together in Chicago. The lucky part was true, but the part about Madeline's grandfather was a polite fiction, and she wasn't very old at all when she understood that.

What her grandfather was in reality was a heartless, irresponsible bastard. Of course someone as kindhearted as Emmy would never have said anything so blunt, not to a child. Not even to an adult. They'd disagreed about it when Madeline got old enough—Emmy counseling Madeline to be forgiving, not to harbor such bitterness, Madeline telling Emmy in the sharp way of the young not to be naïve and soft. Eventually—well, after Emmy got so sick—they'd agreed to disagree and left the topic where it belonged, tucked away, not worth discussing. It was only at the end that Emmy brought it up again. *Promise me you'll try to forgive the man*, she'd said. *For your own sake*. Madeline had promised, not meaning it really, just wanting the worried look to leave Emmy's eyes, but in the end her insincerity didn't matter. She'd given her word to the person she loved most on earth, and against her will she began to feel obliged to live up to it. At least to make some stab at living up to it.

Those five-dollar bills Gladys Hansen sent stopped when Madeline turned twenty-one (to her relief—both the cards and money had made her uncomfortable; she still had them all, tucked into a box somewhere, the money unspent), but the cards kept coming, two a year, even after Joe Stone died. Nowadays they were just signed, with no message: *Gladys Hansen*.

And now this. It took a lot of nerve to ask. The idea was preposterous.

Madeline crumpled the letter into a ball and hurled it toward the wastebasket, but of course something so insubstantial—one frail piece of paper—couldn't carry off the gesture. It drifted to the floor a few feet short of its mark. Madeline left it there.

An hour later she was back in the entryway, frowning into the mirror, tugging at her slip. Richard—her boyfriend of three years and fiancé of six months—had said to dress up, they were going someplace fancy, and she had, but she resented the effort. It was a raw night, and she was not in the mood for strappy high heels and the skimpy, clingy red dress Richard had surprised her with on Valentine's Day. She sighed. The dress was ridiculous. She didn't have the figure for it, aside from her bosom, which was undoubtedly what he was thinking of when he chose it. She was a sturdy person, not very tall, top heavy, all-over muscular from her years of waiting table. *A serviceable person*, she thought, standing there in front of the wavy-glassed mirror.

Brown eyes stared back at her bleakly. A serviceable, capable person with a heart like a volcano, one that was spewing out a lava of rage and confusion and grief. Oh, no one would ever guess it. Her customers would never believe her capable of such fury and desolation, the unending baffled confusion she felt as to how to go on living without Emmy. She was like an animal who'd been blinded and maimed, clawing and flailing in a cage. She hid this well, she knew. She was ever the sensible and steady one, the cheerful, dependable one, the one who made everyone laugh but always kept their orders straight. But beneath the surface, down in the tunnels of the real Madeline, a train wreck had happened. Madeline felt from moment to moment that there was no telling what she might do.

Her gaze caught the crumpled letter from Gladys Hansen. She stared it down for a moment. Let it lie there, damn it. But she couldn't. It was untidy, for one thing. Also it looked helpless. Helpless and reproachful. Madeline bent and picked the letter up, smoothed it out, propped it against the small lamp on the library table next to the door. Then she reached for the old navy peacoat she'd had since the fall she almost went to college—one thing she would not do was be cold all evening—and the doorbell rang and she buzzed Richard in.

Madeline left Chicago three weeks later, on a windy night in the middle of April. It hadn't taken long to arrange things, once she'd decided. Almost before she knew it she'd quit her job, packed her belongings, said her goodbyes, taken one last look at everything. Of course she'd be back eventually, but for now she was headed for the middle of nowhere.

The general consensus—and it was a popular topic at Spinelli's, where she'd worked for so many years—was that this was a terrible idea, she'd lost her judgment, and she was going to wake up in Timbuktu feeling very, very sorry. Richard (whom she'd met at Spinelli's, back when he was working on his dissertation and liked to come in with his laptop and sit at the counter drinking coffee for hours) thought that too, with a fury. The size of his anger had surprised Madeline, though it probably shouldn't have.

"Look," she'd told him toward the end of yet another argument about her decision. "Our plans—they're your plans, really."

"They're good plans," he fumed. "And we've practically signed the papers on the house. Why are you making things so complicated? All this upheaval—it's for nothing. You're afraid to actually live your own life, now that you can."

She couldn't tell him that the nearer it came, the idea of the life they were supposed to lead together in that sweet little Victorian a few blocks from campus—him teaching at Northwestern, her in art school finally, on his dime, their friends (his friends?) coming over for casually gourmet dinners that involved lots of talk about books and films and music—made her uneasy. Uneasy and curiously flat. Confined instead of secure, angry instead of happy. But then, she was angry almost all the time now.

Madeline stared at his craggy face, that shank of dark hair that fell over his eye. At first, when he was a doctoral student and she was a waitress who'd once dreamed of being an artist, the differences between them hadn't been so apparent. But that would change. It was already changing. They came from such different worlds.

Richard's parents still lived in his childhood home, six thousand square feet of elegance that required not one but two massive furnaces in the basement to heat it. Emmy, on the other hand, had struggled just to hang on to their not-huge, not-fancy apartment. She'd scrimped and saved to keep it all together, and that was what Madeline was used to. She wasn't sure she could glide across the track into Richard's world. Not and still be herself, whoever that was.

She bit her lip, her heart sinking. Then she said. "I'm sorry, but I am going. I have to. I'm not sure when I'll be back."

And suddenly there was nothing more to say. She gave his ring back. She'd been surprised at how relieved she felt when she called the bank to say that they wouldn't be buying the house after all.

Maybe everyone was right, maybe she was crazy. But the thing was, she had nothing to lose. That shouldn't have been so. Chicago was her home—Chicago, Spinelli's, the dear old drafty apartment Emmy'd bought before she ever took Madeline in, the neighborhood that was so familiar Madeline knew every angle and shadow by heart. There was her job, her friends, Richard, all their plans, everything. But the emptiness inside was more real and more pressing than any of it.

So, she was going five hundred miles north to live with strangers, taking nothing with her but her beloved cat Marley, a miscellaneous assortment of bags and boxes containing sturdy, warm clothes

and a lot of books, mainly, and the Buick she'd inherited from Emmy. The Buick. Emmy's folly. Wh a heap. She'd bought it, used, when Madeline was a senior in high school. She'd had ideas of taking little trips with it after Madeline was in college—Up to Madison for an annual bookkeepers' convention, to Milwaukee to tour the breweries, to Decatur and Springfield and Hannibal on the trail of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Small, innocent dreams. None of it had ever happened, though they did drive up to Lake Winnebago every autumn to see the fall colors. The rest of the time it sat in storage, gently decaying.

It was only running well enough to make this trip thanks to the local mechanic who'd always tuned it up for them. Madeline had been serving Pete Kinney runny eggs on rye toast for as long as she'd been at Spinelli's, and he'd become a friend over the years. He was also nearly the only person who didn't think Madeline was crazy for leaving. He'd told her that he and his late wife had loved going north, that he envied Madeline the adventure. So that's the line she began to take with people: this was to be an adventure. And it was to maybe fix what was broken in her, if anything could, but that fact she kept to herself.

On the day of her departure, Madeline left Chicago after midnight, hoping to avoid traffic. She drove slowly—the car was old and she was an inexperienced driver—but finally got through Green Bay. After that the cities and traffic fell away, the towns got smaller and shabbier and farther apart, and near dawn she crossed from Wisconsin into Michigan and was on a narrow two-lane highway that threaded through pines and cedars.

Lake Michigan crashed on shore to her right, acting wilder than it did in Chicago. She rolled down her window and sucked in the blustery air, and a shot of glee coursed through her, her excitement as involuntary as hunger. For better or worse, she was here. Before long her route curved north, away from Lake Michigan and toward Lake Superior, through more expanses of trees and swamps and scattered towns so small you hardly had time to notice you'd come into one before you were out again. She stopped often, as much to satisfy her curiosity as for the coffee, and her progress was slow, but she told herself that was all right. She could almost hear Emmy telling her to enjoy the journey, not to think ahead too much to its end.

At eleven fifteen she cruised through Crosscut—big enough to have a school and two gas stations and an auto supply store; not big enough for a McDonald's or a Pamida, which seemed to be the north's miniature version of Walmart—and turned north for the last leg of her journey. By noon she was approaching McAllaster, where Gladys Hansen and her sister Arbutus were waiting. It was just a dot on the map at the edge of Lake Superior, a tiny village settled for some reason that by now must be defunct—fur trading? fishing? lumber?—at a scoop in the shoreline called Desolation Bay. It was the edge of the earth. And her birthplace, though she remembered nothing of it. Jackie Stone had left when Madeline was a baby. It had never been anything but a hazy idea to her.

Suddenly, it was real. She came around a bend and over a small rise, and the lake and town appeared below her. It was as if the road had been unfurling for all these miles for just this purpose: to bring her to this spot.

The town sat at the base of a steep hill at the edge of the water, a lonely collection of buildings she could take in all in one glance from this distance. Huddled under the sleet that had been falling for hours, it looked stark and desolate. And beautiful. There was still snow on the ground—had been, for the last twenty miles—and small icebergs bobbed near shore, waves lashing over them. Madeline had read that Lake Superior was as big as the State of South Carolina. It looked like an ocean. Without it, McAllaster might have been any of the small, drab hamlets she'd driven through today. With it—and from this vantage point high above—the effect was somehow thrilling.

Madeline slowed to a stop and sat motionless at the wheel, her hands still carefully placed at the ten and two o'clock positions, staring. Even in the driving rain the lake glittered and shone with movement, with the mystery of its whole huge self. It dawned on her that everyone's cautions had been correct, even if for the wrong reasons. This was a foreign, otherworldly place, complete with magic and perils and tests.

Madeline spent a long moment gazing at the town. She understood in a way she hadn't before that she drove down that hill, her life would change forever. Was it really too late to forget this idea? She shifted the car back into gear: of course it was. She had plenty of faults but being a coward wasn't one of them. She would not make herself ridiculous by turning back now, no matter what her misgivings. She cruised down the hill and pulled up in front of a grand old empty relic of a building—faded lettering above the second-floor windows proclaimed it "The Hotel Leppinen" but Madeline doubted anyone had stayed there in fifty years—and looked at Gladys Hansen's directions.

Pass the Hotel on Main, the note said. Go left on Edsel two blocks, left again on Lake, and right on Bessel. Go just past the big hemlock that's cracking the sidewalk. We are the third house from the corner, number 26. Madeline had read this a dozen times before she left. It hadn't seemed quite real. But now she was at the hotel and could see the sign for Edsel and there was no going back.

She started the Buick again. From high on the hill, the town had appeared mythical, a symbol of man's insignificance in the great scope of nature. Up close it was far more prosaic. She saw a hardware store, a grocery, a gas station, a bank, a bar, a few parked cars and pickups, and not one person. A dog trotted down the center of the street, as purposeful as a pedestrian out on errands. She turned left on Edsel and felt foolish for flicking on her blinker.

Number 26 Bessel was a small, elderly house covered in pebbly brown shingles. Lace curtains hung in the two windows that were centered on either side of the front door. Daffodils bloomed at the base of the steps and marched in a narrow row around the house's perimeter, and patches of grimy snow lay in shady places, but otherwise the yard was bare. It was a little forbidding—so spare and plain. Madeline sat very still, listening to the roar of the lake, the rain streaming on the car's roof, the sharp solitary scream of a gull. This was a wide, wild quiet, so spacious it seemed endless, and she wondered how it might change a person.

"Are you going to sit there all day noodling, or are you getting out?" Gladys Hansen said, loud enough to be heard through the window, tapping on the glass.

"I'm coming—" But Gladys was already brisking away. Marley made an inquisitive mew and Madeline rubbed his ears. "We'll be fine," she said, hoping. She scooped him from the passenger's seat and followed in Gladys's wake. Details loomed up: the cement walk was cracked, the front door—which had already clacked shut behind Gladys—was red (this surprised her), the trim needed painting, the streaming rain fell straight off the eaves into the flower beds. The daffodils poking up through a scrim of snow and ice were getting battered, which seemed like a shame—and then Gladys was opening the door again and Madeline was going in.

Madeline stepped into a parlor that smelled faintly of mothballs and looked frozen in time somewhere around 1950. “Thought you’d decided to set up camp out there,” Gladys said, heading toward the back of the house. Madeline followed, uncertain this was the right thing to do but unable to think of an alternative.

“I’m tired, I guess,” she said to Gladys’s back. “It was a long drive.”

“Nathan drove like a bat out of Hell in that fancy vehicle of his last weekend. I thought we’d all perish. I watched the speedometer, he had it up over eighty-five most of the way. He got us back here even faster than he took us down in the first place.” Gladys gave Madeline a brief glance over her shoulder and Madeline thought her eyes were twinkling a little, but she couldn’t be sure. “Arbutus has asked me fifteen times already when I thought you’d be here. You’d best come set her mind at ease.”

They crossed into a kitchen that was broilingly warm. Arbutus was sitting at the table, her walker close by. Her face lit up. “Madeline! You’re here. I’m so glad.”

“Me too.” Madeline went and gave Arbutus a hug and her trepidation eased some. Even if everything else was a bust, Arbutus was a good, legitimate reason to have come. She smiled to herself. God forbid she should ever do something for no particular reason at all, or a selfish reason, or a frivolous one. “How are you feeling?” she asked. “How was your trip last weekend?”

“I’m fine, dear. It’s good to be home. I can’t tell you how glad I am—”

“Do you want coffee?” Gladys broke in.

After a tiny pause Madeline said, “I’d love some.” She was a guest here, she reminded herself. She’d just come. It was ridiculous to be so irritable that the least little thing, a tiny rudeness, made her want to lash out in frustration. She was tired, that was all. It had been a stressful three weeks getting ready, a big change. And it was going to *be* a change, *she* was going to change, she was no longer going to constantly feel like a wire stretched tight, about to snap.

Gladys poured the coffee and Madeline studied the room, stroking Marley to reassure him. The metal coffeepot had come off the back of a huge white porcelain range which had a stovepipe running up from its top—a woodstove. The floor was linoleum in a pattern of brown and green squares, and the table was blue Formica with stainless-steel legs. A kerosene lamp sat in its center, along with a ceramic salt and pepper set shaped like a hen and rooster. The cupboards were covered with coffee-colored paint and the counters were narrow, with a big porcelain sink built into them. The room had lived-in warmth that Madeline liked. She took the mug Gladys offered and ventured a smile, about to say so. “Sit down, why don’t you,” Gladys said, and it sounded more like an order than an invitation. Madeline sat, stifling her irritation.

Gladys got coffee for Arbutus too, rinsing out the dregs from her last cup, adding a dash of salt and cream and stirring them in, bringing the cup to the table and wrapping her sister’s hand around it. Madeline had a flash of connection with Gladys in that moment. So many times in that last year she’d been careful to make sure Emmy’s hands were steady on her mug of tea.

She sipped at the coffee, intending to visit, but the bone-deep warmth of the kitchen, the smell of the wood heat (it was something like ironing, and Emmy had ironed when Madeline was small, and the smell swept her back to that long-past time), the sisters’ voices washing over her, was so soothing that she nodded off almost to sleep and took in their conversation only hazily.

“Cold today,” Arbutus said.

“Down around twenty last night, I expect,” Gladys answered.

“. . . that low, you think?”

“. . . call on Emil to get us some more wood in.”

“Yes.”

It was like a fairy tale: the cold air and icy rain, the pounding lake, the acres of forest that had closed in behind her, the aged sisters in their kitchen, the boiled coffee and cook woodstove, her deep sleepiness.

“You may as well go along to bed for a nap,” Gladys said from far away at some point. Madeline began to apologize.

“Don’t be silly, you’ve driven all night,” Gladys said, frowning.

“You’re tired, dear. Go on and rest.” Arbutus beamed, and Madeline could not help but smile back. She was so very weary. It was as if years of tiredness had caught up with her all at once. She let Gladys steer her up narrow stairs to a small bedroom with faded wallpaper where there was an iron-framed bed with scratchy wool blankets and soft flannel sheets. She dropped into it and slept with abandon.

She woke up in time to eat dinner, feeling guilty and apologetic throughout, but nearly dozed off again in her chair afterward. Gladys refused her help with the dishes and sent her back upstairs to bed. Madeline considered protesting, but she didn’t have it in her. The drive had done her in.

She woke up once to find the room black and the house deeply quiet. She felt her way to the stairs, made her way to the bathroom, peered at her wristwatch—three a.m.—and when she was finished made a detour to the parlor window. The rain was still streaming down, her car sat out front like a faithful dog, the dark street was empty, and she could still hear, faintly, the pounding surf of Lake Superior. Out of nowhere the gleeful feeling shot through her again. She was *here*.

In the morning she found Gladys and Arbutus—and Marley—in the kitchen again. The cookstove was shoveling out heat and the coffee was boiling. “We opened the stair door hoping you’d smell the coffee and get up,” Gladys said, and Madeline heard criticism in her voice.

“I’m sorry I slept so long. Tell me what you need me to do, I’ll get started.”

“Nonsense,” Gladys said, her frown deepening. “You’ve just woken up.”

“Sit.” Arbutus patted at a chair. “Have coffee.”

“And toast. There’s blueberry jam I made.”

“*Wild* blueberry,” Arbutus confirmed.

Each day began in more or less the same way except that Madeline never let Arbutus beat her out of bed again. She’d open her eyes from a deep sleep, fish around on the covers for Marley (never to find him, he’d adopted the space beside the kitchen range as his own), smell a whiff of coffee, and climb down the stairs. She’d join Gladys in the kitchen and visit—thin, stilted conversations that touched on nothing of much consequence—until they heard Arbutus stirring (it turned out Gladys was the true early riser of the two; Arbutus had just been excited that first morning). Then she’d help Arbutus get up and around and situated, and try to find enough to do to fill her days.

That was a problem she hadn’t foreseen. Gladys relinquished no control of anything except the most basic aspects of helping Arbutus. She wanted no interference in her routine, allowed little help with the cooking or cleaning or dishes, had no big projects to tackle that might have filled some of

Madeline's hours. That hadn't occurred to her as a potential issue, back in Chicago. She'd just latched on to the decision and ran with it.

Why? she had to wonder now. But there had been genuine kindness in Gladys's letter and Madeline had grasped at that. At last, someone who understood. Where had *that* woman gone, the one who wrote, *I expect you are at sea still without her—a year is not really long in the scheme of things. I won't say it was for the best or any of that. It can never feel right to lose someone so dear.* More than a year after Emmy's death Madeline was absolutely not all right, and no one seemed to see that. She was supposed to be over it, moving on, reshaping her life, which after all had been put on hold to take care of a dying woman. But that wasn't how Madeline felt. Her life had not been on hold, for one thing, and it certainly wasn't racing forward now.

She was lost and enraged and she wasn't even completely sure why. People died, that was a fact of life. Inescapable. Madeline was not ordinarily someone who kicked against the inescapable. And there had been years and years to get used to the idea while they battled the cancer, lived with it, rejoiced at the remissions, got knocked down again by the renewed onslaughts. So she should have been ready for the end when it finally came. But she hadn't been of course and now she couldn't seem to get back on track. Her despair was like a virus that had infected her entire system, destroyed her at the core.

She'd come north partly because Gladys Hansen maybe understood that. And partly to be with Arbutus, who was not like Emmy in age or background or interests, but seemed exactly like her in spirit. Good. Merry. Wise. There was no right word for it that Madeline could find except one she'd forgotten. A Jewish friend had used it to describe Emmy at her funeral. One of the pillars of the world that God put on earth to live among us and help us cope and see the point of things, was what it meant. Madeline had understood it was a singular compliment and wanted to remember the word always. She'd even asked her friend to write it down, but was in such a haze of grief that she misplaced the scrap of paper almost immediately. So she'd lost the word but not the idea, and she thought it fit Arbutus too, the moment she met her.

She'd gone across town to meet Gladys Hansen and her sister after the letter came because it seemed ridiculously churlish not to, had gone filled with dread and curiosity and not one shred of interest in doing what Gladys asked. But then she met Arbutus and everything changed. It was as if Arbutus was a beloved grandmother she'd known all her life and would do anything for. There was a deep sweetness about her, an ineffable specialness, a rareness of character you'd be a fool not to latch on to.

Madeline had arrived at Nathan's apartment to find the door unlocked (in Chicago!) and Arbutus in the bathroom, struggling to get herself into a fresh pair of Depends. It turned out that Gladys had gone to the corner market and was later than she meant to be getting back.

"I'm sure this isn't what you expected," Arbutus said once Madeline made her tentative way down the hall. She had a rueful smile on her face—so pretty still—and despite the embarrassing situation her eyes were bright behind her gold-rimmed glasses.

"I didn't expect anything," Madeline said, all the defensive prickliness she had at the ready dissolved.

"Well, that's the best way, isn't it? Really it's the only way."

Right then Madeline decided: she would go north with them, to the end of the earth, to stay for an undetermined length of time and almost no money. It wasn't a decision, even—it was just inevitable. And besides, what else was there to do? Life had trudged on since Emmy died but there was no meaning in it. She had to do something different, maybe *anything* different. On her own she had not been able to figure out how to go on. How could she ignore it when it seemed as if maybe she'd met

another of those rare people, a pillar of the world? And of course she couldn't completely ignore the suggestion that it was time to see where Joe and Jackie Stone had come from.

So she'd come, but she hadn't penciled *boring* into her idea of how it would be. There were simply no distractions. No shopping, no movies, no museums, no events, no nothing. There was barely even any TV because Gladys was too cheap—or more likely too poor, Madeline corrected herself with chagrin—to hook up to cable or buy a satellite dish, and only two stations came in, usually fuzzily, with the antenna.

Madeline had never thought of herself as someone who required entertainment. It wasn't like she'd been out on the town all those years when she was taking care of Emmy, so what was the difference, really? Maybe most of all it was a lack of possibility. She had only the diversions she could manufacture herself, and no hope of any others. She couldn't even watch *other* people being entertained.

She loved to read, but there were limits. Plus she'd already run through half of one of the boxes of books she'd brought with her, which gave her an uneasy feeling. She had the impulse to hoard what was left. There was no library, no bookstore, no borrowing from a friend. Gladys's shelves held only the Bible and half a dozen Reader's Digest Condensed Books from the 1960s, and Arbutus read only romances. These were brought to her by friends from the library in Crosscut, and Madeline didn't see herself getting *there* on any regular basis. She'd already figured out that the round-trip would cost at least ten dollars in gas, which was not nothing, now that she had no real income, just the tiny wage from Gladys and a small savings account from Emmy's insurance policy set aside for emergencies. Besides which, it was obvious the Buick only had so many miles left in it. So, no frivolous driving.

McAllaster did have a small antique store that was closed in the winter; when she peered in the window she could make out a shelf of paperbacks toward the back. It was obvious even from the street that they were worn-out old mysteries and romances and celebrity bios and true crime thrillers, but still she longed to get at them, just so she wouldn't feel so deprived.

She loved to walk, but there were limits to that, too. Besides which, the weather was dismal, day after day of sleet and scattered snow showers and drizzling rain and endless wind. Chicago wasn't exactly balmy, but it was a playground compared to this. She kept going out doggedly, marching up and down the same few streets of town or slogging along the beach, willing to be amazed by the lake no matter what, but if she didn't get pneumonia pretty soon it was going to be a miracle.

She rarely saw anyone else on the beach, and hardly anyone in town, unless they were in their cars or popping in and out of the handful of businesses. There were practically as many dogs as people out and about. They wandered freely, trotting with great purpose to wherever their dog business took them, and Madeline was beginning to wish they'd invite her along. She was getting to know them: a mischievous-looking spaniel, a lumbering chocolate Lab, a beagle, a retriever, a couple of unclassifiable mutts.

There were a few hints that she hadn't somehow wandered back in time to 1950—mainly the huge new homes lining the beach and the ridge above town, summer places undoubtedly—but not many. She had never been out of the United States, never even out of the Midwest, but McAllaster seemed to her like a small Cornish, or perhaps Welsh, village on the sea. There was more loneliness and less charm to this than she would have imagined from the novels she'd read.

Her only job was taking care of Arbutus, and that had turned out to be an understudy position. So what else was left? She had an edgy, dissatisfied sense of waiting. But what did she expect to happen? What *could* happen? It was a town of eight hundred or so, and half—more than half?—of these people were over the age of sixty. Arbutus had told her that the grade school only had forty children in it. Th

high schoolers were bussed to Crosscut. The parents of these few kids had to be busy working and raising their families. ~~So who, exactly, was she expecting to run into, and what exactly was likely to happen?~~

Occasionally she recalled her sense of being on the brink of adventure, up on the hill that first day. Richard had been right. She had been—naïve.

Madeline was forever reading a book or taking a walk. Gladys supposed she couldn't blame her. What else was there to do for a person accustomed to the city? Arbutus didn't need watching every second and Madeline did finish her chores first. She was a good worker and that didn't surprise Gladys. Madeline might've been Jackie's daughter, but she was Joe's granddaughter, too. Still, she would've liked Madeline to be there when she got back from the market. It would've been nice to have someone to grouch to. Arbutus was napping, and Gladys didn't like to bother her with worrisome things anyway.

Gladys hauled in the last of her groceries and sat down at the table with a plunk. Everything of course was just the same as ever. The floor in its pattern of squares, the table she and Frank had bought new a million years ago, the kerosene lamp that had been her grandmother's, the salt and pepper set she'd been so proud of way back when. It had all been more or less this way for ages, and what was wrong with that?

But something did seem wrong with it lately. Gladys blew out a dissatisfied puff of air. Brooding was no good. She began stowing the groceries away but the more she thought about what her friend Mabel had told her, the madder she got, and before long she was flinging things around. *Bang!* went a can of baked beans, *Crash!* a box of oatmeal.

"What's wrong?"

Madeline, back at last. "Do you know what those people have done?" Gladys demanded.

"What people?"

Gladys slammed a box of bran flakes down on the counter. "I don't know what things are coming to. These new people come here and think they can just change things, just do whatever it is they want, it's terrible!"

"What happened?"

"I stopped at Mabel's for coffee on my way home, and you would not believe what she told me, it's the last straw. The more I think about it, the more disgusted I get. They've done a nice job with that store, I can't say they haven't, but they've overstepped their bounds, now. Besides which, their prices are too high and half the things they have in there no one wants. *Pesto* and *hummus*," Gladys sneered. "What for?"

"What happened?" Madeline asked again. It was clear she didn't think anything *could* have happened in the few blocks between 26 Bessel and the grocery store. Little did she know.

"They've cut people off their credit."

"Ah."

"They've cut off Emil Sainio, for one, and Randi Hopkins, and Mary Feather."

"I'm sorry. Do they not have money to pay?"

"Money to pay!" That was hardly the point of anything. Did this girl know nothing? When had the last owners, Everett and Nancy, ever worried about money to pay? They'd run that store for thirty years without seeing fit to change the way things were done, and they'd survived, hadn't they? Just barely. But just barely was all you could expect in a place like this, or all you *should* expect. You couldn't get blood out of turnips. The Bensons might be just trying to make a living, but they wanted too much. They wanted it at the expense of the way things had always been done, and Gladys wasn't

going to go along with that. She began shoving groceries back into sacks.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m returning these things.” Gladys felt deeply irked at Madeline’s lack of ire and banged a can of tomato puree into a bag, then followed it with a tin of smoked oysters. That gave her a pang; she loved oysters. A box of noodles went in next, then a package of frozen peas. She hesitated at the baggie of the pricey cardamom seed she flavored her rolls and breads with—she was out and that was like being out of coffee, unthinkable—but then flung it in too.

“So who are these people, the ones they’ve cut off?” Madeline asked, taking things out of the bags and putting them back in more neatly. “Are they friends of yours?”

“They’re just people. What are they supposed to do? Mary Feather’s older than dirt and they just tell her, sorry, we can’t help you any longer? It’s not right.”

“Why’d they cut them off?”

Gladys didn’t answer. Instead she opened every cupboard door and then the icebox, making sure she’d gotten everything.

“Did they just stop giving credit in general? I know some places have a policy—”

“No! No, it’s not everybody, it’s just a few.”

“So it’s just some people, people they don’t like.”

“It’s nothing to do with liking.” Gladys clamped her lips shut.

“What is it, then?”

“Is that all you can think of, nitpicky questions?”

Madeline raised her eyebrows. “I only asked a simple question.”

Gladys slapped a bag of kidney beans onto the counter. Then she said, “It’s people who haven’t paid on time, if you must know. People who—tend not to.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.” Gladys’s shoulders slumped and she sat in the closest chair and plucked up the rooster pepper shaker. She frowned at it. “I got this from the grocery in 1953. Jack and Irene Whistle had the store then. They gave out Green Stamps, and you could get things with them. I got that set of nested mixing bowls in the cupboard too, the yellow Pyrex.”

“Those are nice.”

“One year when Frank was out of work, Jack and Irene didn’t charge me a penny. Frank was my husband, he passed on in seventy-one, you know, his heart.” Madeline made a sympathetic face and Gladys sighed. “How time flies. I never got anything extra, just flour and sugar and coffee, a little meat and cheese. They let me pay it off when I could. Mary Feather brought us fish all that summer.” She rubbed the rooster’s painted red comb. It needed washing. “That was how things were always done, when I was a girl. Nobody had enough to make it through the winter. Everybody ran up their bill. They had to. It’s not so different now. Not for some people. Not for the *real* people.”

“Who are the real people?” Madeline asked quietly.

“I didn’t come here with a retirement, you know,” Gladys said, feeling querulous even though there had been nothing but understanding in Madeline’s voice. “I’ve been here my whole life.”

“I know,” Madeline said.

Gladys frowned and ran her thumb over the rooster’s comb again. It was hard to say who the “real” people were. She didn’t have anything against most of the new people, not the retirees or the summer people or tourists or even the snowmobilers, not on a case-by-case basis, except that they tended to expect too much, to *assume* too much. But they paid their taxes and kept their lawns mowed and volunteered at the school and spent money in the local stores and had as much right to be here as

Gladys did, she realized that. And McAllaster had always been a tourist town, a resort town; her own parents had made a living off that fact.

But things were changing fast, now. Too fast. Half a dozen new summer places got built on the beach every year, and no one was content with a regular house, everyone had to have a mansion. At this rate she wouldn't be able to afford the taxes on the house she'd lived in for more than fifty years and any of the young kids who'd grown up here and wanted to stay, forget it. There was almost nothing they could afford to rent, certainly nothing they could afford to buy. And worse than that was that *people* were changing, the rules of life were changing. Money to pay, indeed. Fury began to roil her gut again.

"What are you going to do?" Madeline asked after a moment.

"Take these groceries back for starters. I mean to let them know how I feel."

It only took a minute to load the things in her car. She climbed in the driver's seat and waited, but Madeline hesitated. "Coming?" Gladys asked, flicking the visor down.

"Arbutus will be awake soon."

"She'd be with me in a heartbeat if she knew about this."

"I don't really think—"

"Oh, *fizzle*." Gladys clicked on the ignition and pulled off in a splash of gravel.

Madeline felt gutless in the wake of her leaving. She checked on Arbutus (still sleeping), and set off for another walk, down Bessel Street in the opposite direction of Gladys. What did it matter if she hadn't taken a stand on this, she told herself, striding along the uneven sidewalk. How false it would have been to seem decisive. She didn't know these people. Boy oh boy, did she not know these people. She'd been here two weeks, and every day she felt more like a square peg in a round hole. Probably this move had been a mistake. But she was here and Arbutus needed her, so here she would stay.

She marched past the rows of houses that had been put up by the mill at the height of the lumber boom, according to Arbutus. She liked the way the small old houses, built all the same, had been weathered and used into individuality. It said something about the triumph of the human spirit, only "triumph" was too grand a word for it—it was nothing sweeping or orchestral. The houses had been built poor and they were still poor, but each one had its own personality. Madeline respected that.

It was a chilly day, and sunny at last. As usual she was nearly the only one out walking. Sometimes she saw a tall woman with the beagle on a leash, an ancient-looking man with a cane and a sparkly grin, an old lady trundling slowly along with a walker. These people usually smiled at her, but no one ever said anything, and she didn't, either. She felt shy.

She always saw a car or two, or a few rumbling pickups, but there was never any actual *traffic*. There were always vehicles on the streets, people going in and out of the bank and the stores, but so few of them that it still disconcerted her, a little. If she'd stood in the middle of the street and screamed, there might only have been ten or twenty people available at any given time to come running.

She had never been anywhere so empty, or so silent. After that first exhausted night, the silence had actually kept her awake. It took awhile to figure out what made her feel so uneasy, what was missing. It was the accustomed constant background sound of traffic, horns, sirens, voices drifting up from the sidewalks at all hours of the day and night. Here there was just—nothing, pretty much. Wind. Waves. Gulls. If she stood outside at noon, she could hear the bells of two different churches tolling from

opposite ends of the town. On pea-soup days, a foghorn blasted, mournful and patient. At nine every night an air siren blew, and she always saw children running for home just afterward. That was it.

The effect of the stillness was primeval, like the woods and swamps and the lake. She had fallen in love with the lake. The feeling it gave her—boundlessness. Hope, maybe. Awe. It was the best thing about McAllaster so far, aside from Arbutus. She wanted to paint it. She was actually trying to paint it, and it had been how many years since she'd allowed a thought like that in her head? But today even the lake couldn't distract her. Before long she turned right and then right again.

It was too late by the time she got to Benson's SuperValu, either to support Gladys in her cause or to slow her down. She pulled the double glass door open just as Gladys marched out. She swept along giving Madeline a regal nod as she passed, and Madeline was left alone to face the woman at the register. A badge pinned to her shirt said "Terry Benson."

Terry Benson had been popular in high school, Madeline thought. She had been popular and pretty and had worn her honey-colored hair feathered or curled or layered or waved, whatever the current style had been, and she had believed—still did believe—very much in her looks. She was still pretty, in a widened way, with a broad but shapely rear end and a prominent bosom. She stood with a hand on one hip and glared at the groceries Gladys had dumped on the conveyor belt. "You're the one staying with Mrs. Hansen, aren't you?" she asked when Madeline walked up.

"That's right."

"Do you plan on paying for this? Because we don't take returns. Not on food. What is she thinking?"

"Nothing's been opened," Madeline pointed out, still not sure of her stand in this little war, but wanting to help Gladys if she could.

"She took it out of the store, I'm not putting it back on the shelves, what would my customers think?"

"Can't you just—"

"I won't take those groceries back. I can't! People can't get the idea they can take food home and then change their minds."

From outside, the horn of Gladys's jaunty little red car beeped and Madeline glanced at her, sitting so erect behind the wheel. Proud, stubborn, cranky, and—fragile, somehow. Madeline took a breath. She reached for her wallet, thinking the total couldn't come to more than sixty dollars or so, she probably had that much. But before she could pull out any money Gladys tooted the horn again. Her expression was calm. Behind her, over the low rooftops of the stores across the street, Lake Superior crashed to shore in huge, white-capped waves. There was something magic in that endless turn of water, something oceanic and wild and old, something that would outlast the petty arguments of customers and cashiers. Out of nowhere a conviction rose in Madeline, inconvenient and romantic and maybe mistaken, but a conviction nonetheless.

She turned away from the window. What she saw: a fluorescentlit store bright with packaging, clean, neat, and somehow featureless. She saw a very conventional woman with an understandable gripe that she nonetheless did not sympathize with. It was not so much that Terry Benson was wrong. It was just that these other things—Gladys's staunchness, the endless roll of the lake—felt so right, so rare, and so much more interesting.

"Well? Are you paying or not?"

"Not," Madeline said, giving the woman a flicker of apologetic smile. She glanced at the man who'd come to stand next in line. Already she'd be getting a bad reputation in this tiny town. Arguing with the proprietor, refusing to pay a bill. But the man—about her age, dark-haired and brown-eyed

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