



THE TOPIC OVER BREAKFAST IN PAVOLA'S IS DEATH. Not the sort occurring weekly up at Senior Cedars, where grannies in mobility scooters and walkers thump along in their derby to the finish, and not the tragic sort that floored Hatchet Inlet last fall after Kelly Rantala and Jessica Wiirtinen were killed in a drunken swerve. The death patrons of the diner mull over this bracing May morning is theoretical, regarding the current status of Rauri Paar, who may be dead, or—not to split hairs—is maybe not alive.

Pete Lahti holds the little metal pitcher just so, watching half & half meet his black coffee in a tiny Hiroshima bloom. Indeed, if Rauri is dead—and this might be a rugged image for so early in the day—somebody'll have to go out there and peel him off his cabin floor or search his island for gnawed remains. Maybe drag the bay. Pete listens as the caffeine-fueled debate revs and idles across booths, down the straightaway of the counter. Sitting next to him, Pete's father, Alpo, only nods. Every morning since ice-out on the big lake there's been talk. Usually, ice-out this far north in Minnesota is in April—in a bad year like this, as late as May. As soon as ice on the big lake breaks up, Rauri's smaller lake follows suit. Once it's navigable, he straps on a harness like some husky and humps his Alumacraft up the corduroy portage. Beyond Rauri Lake (no one remembers its actual name) it's an easy enough slide down the south side of the Divide, which lands Rauri on the banks of the Majimanidoo, where snowmelt can roil it into a carnival ride. Dodging ice chunks the size of coolers is no easy feat in a twelve-foot fishing boat with only a 10-horse

Evinrude. Rauri could be bobbing like a cork around the Laurentian Basin.

Pete's made the journey to Rauri's place a few times, once years back and again on his own last fall when he went out to put down Rauri's old spaniel, Scotty. It's no stroll.

The one thing everyone in the diner agrees on is that Rauri should have shown up by now. You can say "Spring is here," or you can say "Rauri's back." His arrival marks the start of the season, and when weather is slow to warm and cabin fever's not yet broke, you might hear someone mutter, "Where in hell is Rauri Paar?" Some won't set seedlings in their windowsills until they've see the whites of Rauri's eyes.

When he does show, it's first things first: he drops a toxic load of laundry at the Wash & Gogh, then it's straight to the barber for a haircut and hot lather shave. Once his bushman's eyebrows are trimmed and he's wearing a fumigated shirt, he'll beeline to the produce aisle at Putzl's and stand gawking as if at a centerfold, stuffing himself with fresh anything—gnawing parsley while juggling limes and tangelos into his cart. Mumbling "abundance" while snuffling a peach or "cornufuckingcopia" as he gropes tomatoes.

Lastly, Rauri makes his way to Pavola's, where he takes center stool to enjoy his first fresh eggs since November. Regulars ignore the yolk on his chin and coax an account of his winter out of Rauri. No great storyteller but a wiz at figures and facts, he regales them with a litany of temperatures and wind speeds, snowfall totals, ice depths, pounds of propane used, boxes of Bisquick consumed, cords of birch burnt.

They prod for more. The core of their curiosity regards loneliness, but no one asks outright how he hacks it—every winter out there by himself. Instead, he offers a picture of his season like a paint-by-number of facts: biggest fish, wildlife visitations, vermin infestations, magazines read. Monochrome at best, the sections are slowly filled in with what DVDs got watched and how many times, what supplies were run out of—the previous year it had been cooking oil and Preparation H. Rauri might describe

notable meals cooked: his personal best had been a haunch of wolf-killed doe with chanterelles glazed in a reduction of maple syrup and vodka, a side of fiddlehead ferns sauced with condensed milk and nutmeg. Worst was a stew of jerky shards and limp carrots in a base made from the last bouillon cube, garnished with moldy Parmesan and consumed sober.

If anyone had taken note of the Northern Lights over the winter, Rauri could remind them of the exact dates and times, and how many minutes or hours they had waltzed. No nuances from Rauri, barely an adjective, but if it's facts you're after, he's your man.

Pavola's patrons assume that Rauri is thrilled to be among them, and they unconsciously note who his gaze returns to, whose hand gets shaken most vigorously, whose back is slapped most mightily. Who had Rauri missed?

As always, he saves revealing the exact date and time of ice-out for last.

Nearly everyone in Pavola's has a sum wagered, and while Joe Pavola collects the money and manages the kitty, Rauri reserves the honor of doling it out to those with the closest guesses. This year there's more than two grand in the kitty, ice has been out on the big lake for four days, and since Rauri is MIA, there are implications. The names and times are listed in a spiral notebook under the counter. If more than one person bets on the same day, they must pick morning, midday, or evening. Rauri arrives with the date and time written on a scrap in his wallet so there can be no fudging like the time he split the pot between the Jenson boys the same day they got their pink slips from OreTac. They weren't even close. The rightful winner that year was Kip Karjala, his guess confirmed by Erv at the DNR. Kip hasn't spoken to Rauri since.

Pete no longer has a stake in the kitty—his own date has passed by two weeks, placing him well out of the running, which is fine with him since it's the guys working seasonal that need the cash—their guesses cluster across the three consecutive most likely dates. It's them that might be thinking hardest about Rauri's predicament.

He could have just sprained an ankle or busted a rib and is out there tethered to his recliner, living on ramen and peanut butter. Whatever the case, no one in Pavola's seems particularly motivated to haul ass out to his island to confirm. Not even Rauri's closest friends—*close* being a relative term, *friend* being another.

Sissy leans across Pete to top off his father's cup despite its being nearly full, saying, chirpy as always, "For all we know, he could be dancing the Macarena out there. He could barge in this minute and say—Whatsit? 'Rumors of my demise are very exaggerated'—who said that, Spock?"

"Twain," Laurie sighs from two booths down without looking at her sister like sisters do. "It was Mark Twain, and it goes, 'Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.'"

"Well, he can't be dead," Sissy bangs the carafe back onto the Bunn burner and folds her arms. "He just can't."

For several reasons.

Besides being the presenter of the kitty and harbinger of spring, Rauri is the closest thing Hatchet Inlet has to a living legend. His death would mark the end of an era. He is The Last Holdout, the only private property owner left in the Reserve. Everyone else was bought out years back, but Rauri refused the offer and stepped up to defend his grandfathered-in right to bear a gas can. On Pavola's wall map of the Reserve, all mint-green land, sage-colored bogs, and baby-blue lakes, Rauri's narrow islands remain fawn-colored—*private property*, according to the key. He alone holds a permit to use combustion engines and live within the Reserve borders.

When the ruling came down in Rauri's favor, the press swarmed, locals were captured in man-on-the-street sound bites, and camera crews thrashed their way out to his islands. Two-page articles were printed in Twin Cities papers. Eventually the hub-bub settled, but Rauri would occasionally be trotted out when there were new pushes for motorized access into the Reserve, or when some Vibram soul would come up from the Sierra Club to debate the Sportsmen's Coalition, when a new picture would appear—Rauri with a firm grasp on the throttle of his outboard

motor or two-stroke ice auger—always under the same tired headline FROM MY COLD, DEAD HANDS. No one can accuse *The Siren* of being original. If anybody really dug, they'd discover Rauri has never been a member of the NRA and in fact doesn't even own a gun.

Rauri's deal with the Feds is that he's allowed to occupy his islands and rev his engines and machinery for as long as he ticks. But should he die or leave his island for more than sixty days, his lease reverts to the government to become the final piece of the jigsaw that is the Laurentian Reserve—a million acres of motorless wilderness, nearly pristine. Nearly.

For now, his outpost with its corrugated roofs and piles of salvage remains a fawn-colored stain on the map. "Until I croak," he jokes, "I'm the skid mark on those tree huggers' boxers."

Since Rauri does not trap or hunt, some wonder what he does out there. But Pete's seen his workshop, stockpiled with scavenged antlers and bones. He'll trail a dying old bear into veils of mosquitoes to score a set of claws. When there is a wolf kill, Rauri will hang just far enough in the periphery so the alpha can see he poses no threat. More patient than carrion, Rauri moves in with his plastic sled only after the pack waddles from the carnage. Elbowing aside ravens, he wrangles the antlers and jawbones and pelvises from the puzzles of the dead. He dries and polishes such prizes before fashioning them into chandeliers or wall sconce skulls with LED stares. He hollows hooves for cufflink boxes. He tans belly hide for lampshades stitched with sinew. It all sells for stupid amounts down in Minnetonka and Deephaven in shops with names like *Up Chic Creek* and *Lichen It*.

Pete's dad keeps clippings from back at the height of the debate. He remembers one from a Sunday supplement of the Duluth paper, Rauri looking like a runty Viking, holding his Husqvarna aloft, the article harshly portraying him as an anti-environment bumpkin. Folks pitching left of the argument are too PC to admit they are wild for him to expire, though they will be dancing the tread off their Keens when he does. It is true that when the wind is right, his generator can be heard a mile or

two into the Reserve, to the chagrin of canoeists. What doesn't get mentioned is all he's done for the same people wishing him gone: Rauri's pulled many an inexperienced camper out of jams of their own making. His icehouse walls are lined with salvaged aluminum from canoes wrecked by paddlers too stupid to avoid big timber in straight-line winds. If you need help in the Reserve, Rauri, being the only guy, is the go-to guy. The pickets of his garden fence are lost canoe paddles and broken cross-country skis. Mobiles hanging from his porch are fashioned from snapped rods strung with snagged lures. Rauri probably couldn't count the number of gashes he's stitched up, broken bones set, or dislocated shoulders he's relocated over the decades. He's pumped the stomachs of mushroom-hunting idiots and has sat up all night more than once nudging awake some concussed fool.

Pete, curious about Rauri's medical knowledge and impressive first aid kit, had asked about his training, but Rauri's mumbled answer was somehow out of sync with the movement of his Adam's apple. "Field medic."

"When?"

"'69, '70."

"In 'Nam?"

"*Dau Tieng*." About the war itself, all Rauri would offer was a shrug.

Hadn't his dad mentioned something about meeting Rauri when he'd first hitchhiked into town? Pete's about to nudge Alpo when Junior Gahbow pipes up.

"You know those islands aren't really his."

"What do you mean?" Alpo asks.

"They were ours," Junior says.

After a gulp of coffee, Pete says, "Junior, you could say that about the whole reserve."

"No, I'm only saying about his islands—they're sacred ground."

"How?"

"They just are. After Rauri parked himself there, my pa and Eddie Drift and Noble Wakemup went out to pay him a visit.

Story being he had paper proof he'd inherited the islands from an uncle who'd got them in some land grab by the pulp company."

*No surprise there*, Pete thinks but only asks, "What'd they do? Your dad and the elders?"

"Told him what's what, I 'spose," offers Junior.

Alpo leans in. "Then?"

"Rauri said he'd leave if they asked him to. Offered up the deed on the spot. Said he'd sign a quit-claim deed and hand over the islands."

"They didn't take him up on it?" Pete asks.

"Nah, told him they'd think on it."

"And?"

"And what?" Junior shrugs.

"But that was forty years ago."

"Far as I know they're still thinking on it." Junior nods to the ceiling, "*Boozhoo, Nimishoome.*"

If Rauri is laid up with some manageable injury, at least he's got the splints, antibiotics, and meds to see him through. Pete has seen examples of Rauri's sutures, every bit as neat as his own. With enough morphine, an able medic could set his own bones.

Between concern over Rauri and concern for the kitty, conversation has escalated. Everyone in Pavola's has an opinion or a should. Should County Rescue be called? Should somebody go check things out and report back? Alert his next of kin?

Earl Rantala raises a hand. "That time he left? I heard he got a trader's license in Chicago and made a killing on the stock exchange. He could have a fortune hidden out there for all we know."

"You know fuck-all. He worked as a pipe fitter in Ohio."

"Nu-uh, he was a Merchant Marine," Juri Perla interrupts, "working the Great Lakes."

"Wasn't he an intern down at the VA hospital?"

"I think you mean *orderly.*"

"Jesus." Pete sits back. What is becoming clear is how few facts of Rauri Paar there are. He puts his coffee cup down none

too gently and says, “Conjecture.” A few old-timers at the counter give him that look: *college boy*. Pete swivels so his words are evenly distributed: “You’re guessing, is all. Anybody remember when he came back that time?”

“Yup. Just after Reagan got elected.” When Alpo speaks, heads turn, but when he adds no details, Laurie tosses out the idea of drawing straws to determine who might make the trip out to Rauri’s island.

“It’s an all-day ballbuster out there and back. Who’s got that kind of time?”

A dozen eyes land on Dusty Heikala, built like a Navy Seal, and having nothing *but* time since his court-ordered leave for sending three bikers to the ER after a brawl in the Legion parking lot.

“Hell, I would but . . .” Dusty tugs up the leg of his jeans to show the tiny green light on his ankle cuff. “I only got a two-mile radius.”

“And if he’s dead?” Laurie asks.

Junior gestures to his own foot with the amputated toes. “Somebody take me out there, I’ll go. I’ll bring the tobacco and keep his fire lit.”

Dusty nods. “Or, maybe just light up his cabin like in *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*, which is only what the Feds are gonna to do anyway once they get their mitts on the place.”

Joe comes out from behind the grill. “Or pile one of those cairns of rocks over him to keep the animals off. We seen that on our trip to Ireland last summer. Irish got nothing on us in the way of rocks.”

“Assuming he’s dead, Joe.”

“Well, say he is—what do we do?”

After a silence, Sissy says, almost to herself, “Somebody’s tried calling him,” she cracks a roll of dimes into the till, “haven’t they?”

Everyone looks at everyone else. A frenzied mining of pockets nets a dozen cell phones, but no one has Rauri’s number. Pete



calls Lynn at the clinic and asks her to pull up Rauri's account, then scribbles on his napkin. Punching numbers, he feels all eyes on him like deer, blinking along with each ring. He looks up, shaking his head, "It's rolling over to voicemail." After the beep he hasn't the faintest idea what to say and so punts, sounding the opposite of casual: "Hiya, Raur, it's me, Pete. I just was wondering what you've been up to, sooo . . . hey, give us, *me*, a holler. It's Pete Lahti?"

As he hangs up, Joe whistles. "Not quite Oscar material there, Lahti."

Pete makes as if to hand over the phone. "Feel free, since you're such the Russell Crowe."

Nunce Olson, retired county coroner's assistant, sniffs. "Whoever goes out there should make notes of how and where his body is, get some idea of his last days by poking around. And if it looks like foul play, for God's sake don't touch anything that looks like evidence." Nunce makes no secret of the fact she is an aspiring crime writer.

Laurie swivels. "You'd *like* him to be dead."

Nunce ignores the comment. "You gotta be realistic. There are wolves. He doesn't carry a gun. Depending on where he died, he could be half-eaten, parts of him dragged off." Forks hoisted midway halt, images hang in the air alongside the hiss of breakfast sausage on the grill.

Sissy nearly stomps a foot. "Stop talking like he's dead."

Laurie plants an order of pie in front of Nunce and asks, "What if he died inside?"

"Inside?" Nunce pries the lid of crust with her fork and peers. "Inside there are voles, not to mention what beetles or maggots will do."

Gimp Wuuri touches both eyelids.

"And don't underestimate mice . . ." Juri adds. "I mean, if ants can move a rubber tree . . ."

Laurie sputters.

"Mice," Sissy says to the cash register. "I don't know why that

makes me think of those velvet paintings of dogs playing poker, only with Rauri and a bunch of big mice. What is it about him that reminds me of a mouse?”

“His eyes are close together,” Alpo says.

“Slopy forehead,” Laurie adds. “And his ears are sort of far back?”

“Hard to say with the hair.”

After the door to the walk-in freezer clunk shuts, Junior shrugs. “They say freezing to death is actually a pretty peaceful way to go. Wouldn’t a-taken much in January.”

The mention of January elicits moans—not yet far enough in the past to laugh about, not yet warm enough to wear their *I Survived the Polar Vortex* T-shirts. You will not find climate-change deniers in Hatchet Inlet, where extremes are felt and seen daily—moose withering, tree diseases and gray squirrels migrating north, lake temps running hot and cold. After the third subzero week in a row, a camera crew from the Weather Channel came up to film folks trying to do mundane chores dressed as if for bomb disposal. Days when Pete was out on calls, he’d zip into a snowmobile suit upon rising and peel it off only when tripping toward bed. Over at the junior high, ninth graders set oranges outside at lunchtime and an hour later dashed out from shop class to shatter them with hammers. The winter *had* been a doozy, dangerous even indoors, where it was so dry just walking roused carpet sparks to singe holes in socks. One house was burned to cinders after its woodstove overheated; another half-dozen had damage from chimney fires. All across town, propane was sluggish and water pipes burst. A record number of frostbite cases were admitted to the ER, and there was a suicide over in Greenstone. Attendance at the Sokol Hall AA meetings went rock-bottom—sometimes only Pete, Jon Redleaf, and Granger showed up, and Jon hardly counts, not being a real drunk himself, but there’s no Al-Anon in town.

“Okay, who’s been out to Rauri’s most recently?” Alpo asks.

“I ain’t been since Labor Day,” Juri says.

“Not me,” Pete says. “Not since last fall.”

“You put his old spaniel down?”

“Yeah, it was just after . . . *after*.”

After the merest slice of silence, Alpo continues. “So, mid-October, say?”

“Sure.”

Scotty had been in renal failure, and while Rauri had the drugs, he couldn't bring himself to load a syringe, let alone a rifle he did not own. The dog was crippled with arthritis, blind, and at sixteen well beyond the average lifespan for the breed. Pete packed a few doses of ketamine and a quart of Jameson, disguised in an empty Sprite bottle, and set out early. It was the last gasp of tick season, he remembers that. The final mile had been a bit hairy after the steep portage past the narrows, and with the autumn sun setting early he had to book to make time.

Once Pete arrived, Rauri kept apologizing. “I'd do it myself, but you know the way spaniels look at you . . .”

Beyond that, Pete actually remembers very little.

“How was he?”

“How? He was just Rauri.” Pete shrugs. “Okay, considering.” He reconstructs his visit in a most-likely scenario. His trip to Rauri's had been only days into the start of his relapse. What had surprised him most, after having been sober for months, was that just into a bender he was already having blackouts, and that it took as much booze as it ever did to numb up. The first part of the visit he remembers in yellowed flashes like a filmstrip—Rauri petting the little dog's head as if memorizing its contours. He kept topping off his glass when Rauri wasn't looking . . . hoping that when the Sprite bottle was drained, there'd be something else in Rauri's cupboards.

“And?”

“And we fed Scotty popcorn and some hamburger.” He thinks. It may have been Doritos and chicken.

“Then?”

“You want a blow-by-blow? I put Scotty down, then put Rauri to bed. Rauri buried him in the morning and I left.”

In reality Rauri had put Pete to bed, and he only knows this

because Rauri had told him the next morning, not making a big deal out of it, not judgy, just passing on the information with his head cocked, a little like Scotty. In fact, he can't picture Rauri with any expression on his face other than the slightly distracted half-smile chiseled there.

"I meant to get out there again," Pete says. "I knew a breeder over in Black Falls had a liver-colored runt."

"But?"

Pete regrets the disclosure. He had every intention of getting the pup out to Rauri, but one thing led to another and the weekend got misplaced and Monday was spent making up for lost time and by Tuesday it was too late. "I didn't get there in time and he'd already snuffed it."

"Oh, Pete." Sissy comes out from behind the counter. "You're not saying Rauri's been out there alone all this time without a *dog*?"

Alpo sighs. "I doubt Rauri's alone or dogless because of Pete."

"Still," Junior nods, "that makes you the last person to see Rauri alive."

"Oh, c'mon."

Out of patience, Pete stands. "Talk is cheap. I'm going over to the credit union, see what I can find out from Mackie." His cousin is a loan officer. "Mackie might tell us if Rauri's checks are getting deposited, at least." He nods at Alpo. "Dad. You coming with?"

"Sure. I'll drive."

Pete fishes in his pocket before dropping an oddly folded bill on top of his receipt.

Alpo winks in Sissy's direction. She blows a kiss back before pulling an order of waffles from under the heat lamps.

At Borderlands Credit Union, Mackie pretends to be outraged that they would even ask about somebody's private banking transactions. But as they are pulling out of the parking lot Alpo's phone rings.

“Uncle Alp?” Mackie whispers. “Actually? There hasn’t been any activity on his account yet this month.”

“So we know but don’t know. The circumstances.”

“Thanks, Mackie.”

“Hey, while I’ve got you, can you ask Pete if he could stop out and take a look at Molly? Her nipples are oozing something.”

“Sure.” Alpo looks at him. Pete sighs and nods.

Mackie whispers, “But only if, you know, he’s—”

“Sober?” Pete leans. “You’re on speaker phone, Mackie, I’m right here.”

“Oh, geez, Pete, I’m sorry.”

“No biggie. I’ll stop by after supper.”

“I’ve got pie?”

“Pie would be good.”

Alpo hung up. “Square one.”

Pete reclines his seat so that he’s staring out the sunroof. A few minutes of shut-eye on the drive to the clinic would be nice. He’d been roused at three a.m. to swivel a breach. Thank God, it’s the end of lambing season—this is no climate for sheep, but a fad comes down the pike and people get some Instagram vision in their heads of curly lambs, of selling sheep cheese or boiled-wool mittens at the farmers’ market. Or they decide they want antibiotic-free eggs and so order a chicken coop from Restoration Hardware and a brace of chicks, but winter comes and the novelty wears off and feathers fly. Down in the Cities the chicken rescues can’t keep up.

As his father drives, Pete blinks at the puffy clouds, the sun behind them slicing up in a razored benevolence. As a child Pete was convinced there was a heaven and that there were angels, having been told his cousin Andy had become one upon drowning when they were both eight. By the time Grandpa Corrigan died, Pete had grown less sure about angels. Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy had been debunked by then and the pearly gates were looking less pearly. The Easter Bunny’s cover had been summarily blown by his sister, coincidentally named Candy.

It used to annoy him at the clinic when parents, rather than

explain the concept of death, would pull the angel card. *Jojo is going to a farm in the sky, Sweetie. Or Pinky's in a better place,* suggesting their mower-mangled bunny is happily crapping on some great cloud of wood shavings. Pull the angel card because *Mommy has a busy day.*

At the girls' funerals, Pete listened to the minister declare such destinations as *hereafter* and *thereafter* as if they were as real as Bloomington or Coleraine. He observed mourners' desperate need to embrace images of Kelly and Jessica somewhere sunny, wearing robes, sporting wings—easier than picturing them as they were pried from the wreck, neither completely intact.

Whatever works.

Both had been in their twenties. Kelly was in grad school studying water quality and working on her thesis; Jessica was cramming for the bar, keen to practice tribal law. Though they were grown women, Pete still frames them as the adolescents they'd been during the Easter break ten or so years back. He and Beth had been in town with their daughters, little then—to visit Gappa Appo (neither could pronounce *Grandpa* or *Alpo*).

Pete had gone for one of his “walks” in the unseasonable warmth, the flask a solid comfort in his shirt pocket. Passing the Wiirtinen house he saw Kelly and Jessica on a blanket on the flat part of the garage roof, trying to sop up heat from the dark asphalt. They were thirteen, maybe fourteen. One was painting the other's toes—he can't recall who was painter and paintee. Pages of a magazine flapped, an Easter basket rolled. At that stage, Pete was managing his job and keeping things under control; it was well before Beth had begun to suspect.

As he passed below the girls unseen, the laughter spilling over from the roof cut him with a pang of something he could not identify. Once out of range it hit him. They seemed such intimate conspirators. He could have used such a friend himself at that point, one that might demand he get his shit together and stop being an idiot: he envied their friendship.

But by the time he'd reached his father's mailbox he was considering the upside—that *not* having a friend meant there was no

one to keep him from spending the holiday afternoon popping in and out of Alpo's fish house to visit the fifth he'd hidden there.

Letting his head roll, he takes in his father's silhouette, wondering if he thinks much about his mother anymore. Pete has long ago stopped trying to understand his mismatched parents. Because they seemed so often to confound one another, Pete believes what kept each bound was some quest to solve the other.

He hopes Sissy with all that life in her can make his father happy. An old Robin Hitchcock tune weaves into his head—he wonders if his father has ever heard it. *My wife, and my dead wife.* He grunts the lyrics away before they can lodge.

Pete chooses to remember his mother as he remembers those girls—long before her end, before becoming ill, at her most vivid. About the age he is now—younger, actually. *Am I the only one that sees her?*

“I'm older than my mother.”

After a beat, Alpo says, “You're thinking out loud, son.”

He opens his eyes. She'd always been quick with advice—annoying, really. But now he'd give anything. What, for instance, might his mother suggest they do about Rauri?

He knows exactly what she would suggest—that they hightail it out there and check on him. “I should paddle out there,” Pete says. “To Rauri's.”

Alpo considers, then shakes his head. “I could go. You have work.”

“You've got this weekend to think about, remember?”

“I do . . .,” Alpo brightens. “I 'spose I do.”

“That's right, Dad, just keep practicing the *I do.*”



**S**ISSY HAS HAPPIER THINGS TO THINK ABOUT THAN A nice old guy dying alone without even a dog. Honestly, hasn't everyone had their fill? And now with Rauri missing here's the grim reaper shaking his bony finger at Hatchet Inlet again. Maybe. Sissy looks around at the regulars. She'd prefer their usual complaints about lakeshore taxes, the tailings pond at OreTac, and union dues, because the tedious for-and-against, for-and-against at least has a rhythm to it. Now it's one-upping each other on how many grisly ways one person can die, from how long it might take to bleed out, to arguing whether spontaneous combustion is really even a thing.

Sissy's got half a mind to tune the radio to *Morning Edition* and give them all something to take their minds off Rauri.

In sixty-some hours her wedding day will commence. This time Saturday she'll be having her hair teased into an updo and her nails French-manicured. Thirty-six hours after saying "I do," she and Alpo will be in Cozumel on their all-inclusive honeymoon, where for ten days *she's* going to be waited on, and when not being waited on, she's going to bake on a Mexican beach. Sissy's coming home with a tan or she's not coming home at all.

The dress hangs in a zippered garment bag on the back of the Ladies' door. It's either come unzipped on its own or someone's snuck a peak. She unzips it the rest of the way and runs a hand along the champagne-colored silk. Inching closer to sniff, she recoils and yells to her brother, "Joe, turn that fan to high! My dress smells like the special."

He yells back, "What the hell's it doing *here*?"



Does he expect an answer? After picking it up from the alterations lady, she hadn't wanted to leave it in the car. The rash of break-ins has been blamed on the meth heads, but as far as Sissy's concerned, meth is a problem in Hatchet Inlet only because Janko Junior isn't half the sheriff his father was. No surprise when somebody slapped an *I'd rather be fishing* bumper sticker on his squad. No surprise when Junior didn't peel it off.

She looks to the wall where Pine Pig hangs, as if he might have something to say. Back when her great-grandfather Turk Pavola opened his butcher shop, a logger gave him a huge wafer of pine with two hundred wobbly rings of coniferous history. Turk carved it into a sign for the shop, seven feet across and eight inches thick, chiseled on both sides with a relief of a hog wearing a crown, his quarters sectioned and labeled with the different cuts: Hock, Shoulder, Trotters, etc. Arching over in san serif is *Pavola's*. Sissy likes to imagine old Turk working on the sign by lamplight, wood chaff in the mighty beard of his photographs. If Pine Pig could talk he might sound like her great-grandfather in some yowly-vowelly Finnish cadence. But because Pine Pig never says anything, he seems all the wiser. Sissy has been caught more than once talking to him (so what?) and has suggested Laurie try it herself sometime, "Because the thing is, you talk out loud for long enough, you eventually start hearing yourself." And if Laurie could hear herself, she might dial it down.

Carved at the bottom of the sign is the sentiment that more or less still applies ninety years on at Pavola's: *Where Bacon Reigns*.

Joe gets his pork from a farm in Wisconsin and cures it in his pole barn before hand-cutting it. Laurie and Sissy have worked the bacon craze—making bacon-caramel syrup for sundaes; bacon brownies; bacon jam; bacon-glazed donuts. After the novelty of those wore off, Laurie washed her hands of bacon, but Sissy hit the bullseye with her cashew-bacon brittle, and now summer people are hooked on SissyBrittle as if on heroin. The counter does a brisk business with no one blinking an eye at eight-fifty a pound. And since it's Sissy's deal, she gleans a hundred percent of the profits, shrugging off Laurie's suggestion that cashews are

an extravagance, that peanuts at a fraction of the price would increase her profit margin. With her first season's take, Sissy had a logo designed, got a Website, and had boxes made. Her pre-Christmas orders went ballistic. The Fed Ex driver good-naturedly blames his extra pounds on Sissy when she tops off her orders with a box of seconds for him. She needs to decide whether to make SissyBrittle a real business or keep it small.

Bacon may reign at Pavola's, but damned if her wedding dress is going to smell like it. From the short-order line, Sissy hears the *thunk* of Joe's cleaver and a mumble. She's about to holler again when the fan ramps up and green order slips flutter on the spinner as if in a gale.

She pries open the back door and hangs the garment bag outside on one of the old meat hooks where Joe hangs deer carcasses during season. November is the month she most dislikes, each day a narrowing corridor of light, deer hung upside down with their impossibly huge eyes filming over. One year Joe hung a whole family: doe, buck, and two yearlings, skin stripped away, all sinew and bare muscle bound by cauls the color of dusk. Some deer are given to Joe by the DNR when culling the herds, some come from hunters that don't even like venison but kill for sport. Sissy covers her ears when Joe names them: sometimes living in a small town requires willful ignorance. That's what Alpo says.

But this morning she's just happy it's May—it's spring and in every way opposite of November. In spite of its being only forty degrees, Sissy lingers, thinking of something their mother used to say when shooing them out of doors: *Go blow the stink off.*

Two bearded millennials driving one of those new Cube things slows near the alley lot. The passengers squint at the back entrance. Most tourists turn their noses up at the diner, put off by the pressed-asphalt exterior and the faulty neon *Pa ola's* sign. But Laurie insists that Rural Gothic is in now—plaid is all the rage down in the Cities, where hipsters are happy to drop three hundred dollars for steel-toed boots identical to those miners pay fifty-five for with their union discounts over at Shaw's. These urban boys with waxed mustaches are “lumbersexuals,”

according to Laurie. Most of them work in tech and graphic design but wear the reverse mullet of early loggers—party up top and sides buzzed. Alpo says he would pay money to watch one try to cut down a tree.

Both roll their windows down to get a better look at the parking lot. The one with geek glasses wears an Elmer Fudd hat. The Cube slowly moves on as if reluctant to park its puny self next to an F150 or Ramcharger.

Some tourists turn away at Laurie's *No Free Wi-Fi* sign, or upon discovering drip coffee where they'd hoped for cappuccino. She's hinted that Sissy's incessant questions drive others off, as if being friendly would. There's no half-full glass for Laurie—she's a quarter-cup or nothing, while Sissy's billows over the rim in that way (she can never remember the word for it) but what's the harm when she only wants to know who these people are and what's compelled them to travel across the country or even an ocean? There are the resorts, the lakes, and the Reserve. That's all. She understands the draw of escaping the rat race of big cities, but her own version of vacation would not include portaging thirty-pound packs or eating freeze-dried food, and she would rather not use a pit toilet in the woods while being watched by creatures with teeth bigger than her own. Now, one of those houseboats with a full kitchen and bath—that she can see. This place can look beautiful in the brochures, all glittery water and sunsets, but at the end of the day, here is just that—*here*.

Some even have rooftop decks with water slides.

Pavola's best patrons are the longtime summer people, cabin owners, and retired snowbirds who believe the diner is their discovery and let everyone know they are forgoing the Perkins down the street to support a mom-and-pop diner. They come in mid-morning after the regulars file out, around the time Laurie fires up MPR. They joke about cholesterol specials and leave huge tips that Sissy and Laurie are happy enough to rake in.

Sissy unzips the garment bag all the way to let the breeze rustle the silk. It is hands-down the nicest dress she has ever owned, and she wishes the clerk at Nordstrom's hadn't referred to it as a

bandage dress. It's not white, and not an actual wedding gown—who could face that? Even hearing the word conjures torn lace. She's chosen a very elegant calf-length dress-up dress, in champagne silk, with the palest robin's-egg blue piping that matches the lining on the little three-quarter-sleeve bolero jacket. When she'd called Laurie in to the dressing room, her sister had nodded half-approving, "Not bad. It makes your waist look smaller than it is."

"But?"

"I didn't say *but*."

"You're thinking it."

"I'm not. I just think it's an interesting choice for the over-forty bride."

"Because it's strapless?"

"No. Just cross fingers for the weather, or you might need more than that little bed jacket."

"It's a *bolero*."

"Well, this isn't Spain and you're not going to a bullfight. You'll need more."

"I'll freeze before I wear some jacket."

"Well, not a *parka*, something classy—a *wrap*? How about a mink from Annie's?"

"And smell like mothballs? No, thank you. Does my back flab hang over?"

"You don't have back flab." You never knew when Laurie would be kind.

Sissy, suddenly feeling too large for the dress, lifted her arm for Laurie to undo the side hook and zip her free. She let out the breath she'd been holding and watched the dress pool to the carpet. "I wish Kelly was here."

After a breath Laurie says, "We all do, Sissy."

The last time she'd shopped for clothes was for the funerals, and the excursion to Duluth had been awful—navigating the mall, poking useless hands and useless elbows into dark sleeves. God knows her mind hadn't been on back flab then, just finding something fast so she could get back to the pod of her car where

she'd taken to holing up like some den animal—her Mazda being the one place besides bed where she could let loose the eerie moans she didn't know were in her, let go the tears that leaked as if from some cracked hose. For months her passenger seat was so thick with balled tissues it looked like a craft project.

At first, Sissy had been in shock like everyone else. The thought can still stall her in midstep. Her beautiful niece, killed along with Jessica Wiirtinen. *Along with* is how the grief counselor has urged Sissy to think of it, not killed *by* Jessica, which is how Sissy cannot help sometimes think of it, though she has managed to never say it aloud once.

At the bachelorette they'd all been drinking. Just Chardonnay for Sissy and Laurie, but the bridesmaids were drinking Red Bull and vodkas. Plus a few obscenely named cocktails like a Blowjob, which Sissy learned was a shot of Bailey's knocked back with lips stretched around the rim of the shot glass. A Stiff Dick was basically a Long Island Tea with half & half. There'd been a lot of laughs when it nearly gagged Tammy.

"Gross." Sissy had grimaced.

"Which is the *point*." Kelly had snorted, "Hello?"

It bothers Sissy that these were the last words between her and Kelly. Why couldn't it have been something less sarcastic than *hello*?

*Good-bye?*

Who could have known they weren't just going to the Ladies'? Later, the security footage showed how they pinballed across the Duck Blind parking lot, giggling and armed with a glue gun and a Rubbermaid bin of crepe streamers and paper roses. They were off to decorate the honeymoon cabin up at the Narrows for the bride and groom. At the inquest, evidence against the bar included grainy images of them climbing into the van, still wearing their thrift-store wedding dresses spattered from their afternoon at the paintball field, wrangling their filthy trains along.

Approximately fifteen minutes after leaving the lot, the van's brakes engaged at the tight curve after the gravel pit, and the vehicle launched through a copse of young birch, snapping them

like bones before crashing into the girders of the DM&IR trestle bridge.

They had been best friends since kindergarten. Just before the dual closed-casket visitation had begun, the florist delivered a horrible wreath of pink and blue carnations, spelling out *Friends4Eternity*. Laurie tossed it into a coat closet before either of the mothers could see it.

Someone planted a cross out near the bridge. People wedged bouquets, Beanie Babies, candles, the usual things. Mourners could peer past the busted trees to see bits of pastel-colored crepe paper fluttering from bushes and trees. Not knowing what else to do with herself that first month, Sissy had driven out nearly every day after lunch rush. She watched the crepe twist amid the last flutter of birch leaves. The stuffed animals became a soggy mess and the colors of the crepe ran together. By the time the pin oaks were naked, the streamers had bleached to white and lay limp on the ground. Then snow fell to cover it all.

She had retrieved one of the paper roses from near the base of the bridge where deep scrapes were scarred with Dodge red paint. The rose is still taped to her dresser mirror. Sissy knows it should be taken down soon. Kelly would want her to. Wouldn't she?

There are only so many reminders one can take. Maybe the rose does belong back at the bridge. Sissy's yoga teacher is always suggesting ways to "shed the negative" and leave thoughts and emotions behind with little visualization tricks—to shuck whatever is weighing you down, toss grief like a rose into a ditch.

She's better off than others on the obituary's survived-by list. Sissy's brother Dan—Kelly's stepfather since she was barely two, so basically her father—has only begun to shake the underwater quality of his speech. Kelly's sister Bailey has developed a sort of leaning shrug to the empty space where her big sister should be. Janine is still drinking like a fish in the privacy of her upholstery shop. The Pavolas are standing—hollowed some, but still standing.

Tammy's wedding had been postponed, of course, and when

it did happen six weeks later, it was simply the saddest wedding in the world. Which is one reason Sissy's been so insistent on a cheerful event for herself and Alpo. Defending her extravagance, she says, "Hon, this town *needs* a party."

"Fine," he agreed, "but I am not going to Minneapolis to any cake tastings. And I want food that's food, nothing *artisanal*."

"Okay."

"No pan flutes, and no tux. *Nada* on the tux." They'd both been listening to Rosetta Stone Spanish in preparation for their honeymoon.

"Okay," she'd said, assuming there would be some wiggle room. "But maybe you'll get a new suit at least? I mean, your good one is nice but are you going to—"

"Wear the same suit I wore to the funerals? 'Course not. That suit's so old I wore it to Rose's."

When Sissy frowned, Alpo pulled her to standing from her kitchen chair. "I may be cheap, but I'm no chump." He spun her in a half-turn. "Men's Warehouse, here I come."

Two things Sissy loves about her fiancé—one, he knows his own mind. And two, he's thoughtful. Not something she could say for Gerry, ever. She wonders if Gerry is on Facebook, and if he'd seen her status change to "engaged," and if so, what he thought. As if she cared.

Out on the loading dock Sissy stretches up on her toes and breathes in a huge breath of damp air smelling of dirt. On the south side of the dumpster a cluster of red dogwood has muscled open its buds. An alley stream trickles from under the last of the blackened scabs of snowbanks on the north sides of garages.

Rauri Paar or no Rauri Paar, spring has arrived.

As Sissy steps back in, she notices Pete and Alpo have left their tips on the table. She has asked them not to, but her request seems only to have prompted a challenge for each to outdo the other. They fold their bills into origami—at first just simple things like paper airplanes. Then Alpo Googled *origami frog*, which was one-upped by Pete's windmill, trumped by Alpo's rabbit, and so on. The contest has nothing to do with her, really. What she

knows but they don't is that her little collection of folded dollars represents the beginning of something better between the two of them. A tiny way for Alpo to dole out forgiveness without having to say anything, and Pete's way of showing he's making the effort.

Today one of Sissy's prizes is a horse's head fashioned from a five, and the other is either the Empire State Building or a rocket constructed from two ones.

By nine a.m. the first breakfast crowd has thinned, by ten-thirty the second wave is beginning to clear out, and she has a half-hour before the early lunch crowd descends. When Marna comes in to spell her, Sissy slides into a booth with her notebook and iPad. She checks again on the florist's delivery time and her remaining to-dos. Her Friday pedicure is scheduled for five p.m. Another weather update assures her that while Thursday and Friday look dodgy, there will be no rain on Saturday. Early May can be unpredictable, from blizzard to broil, but the forecast for her wedding day promises midfifties and sun. Fingers crossed nothing blows down from Saskatchewan.

Her hair appointment at Tresses is double-checked. The wedding is at five-thirty, reception from six-thirty until whenever. Sober-Cabs and Uber drivers will trawl the Sokol Hall parking lot—no one is driving home drunk from her wedding, she's making damn sure of that.

Sissy understands that the usual traditions aren't what make a wedding memorable, so she has cherry-picked a few elements she hopes will. No bridesmaids or maid of honor for one thing means not having to favor one friend or relative over another. So hurt feelings are avoided, mostly. Laurie had only frowned and nodded, and while her friend Nancy might be stinging right now, she'll come around, if only for being spared the expense of a bridesmaid's dress. Sissy herself has a cardboard wardrobe in the attic stuffed to the gills with a hideous pastel lineup from the eighties and nineties—ruffles and puffed sleeves and shoulder pads that made big girls look like linebackers and petite Sissy look like a fifth grader playing dress-up.



No gifts. It's not like she and Alpo *need* anything. The opposite—they have two households of accumulated stuff to winnow through. Only the best of their furniture will go into their new lakeside townhome at The Landings. Not to say guests are getting off scot-free—donations to Malamute Rescue Minnesota will be encouraged (not *extorted*, as Joe implies) and collection boxes will be scattered over the tables. Thanks to SissyBrittle, she now has Square on her phone and iPad, so not carrying cash won't be any excuse. She's ordered a hundred refrigerator magnets shaped like paws and printed with the Website URL for those preferring to donate online.

The wedding will be fun. People need fun. The Erbach Brothers of Superior get booked a year in advance for a reason: they can sing and play anything from Taylor Swift to Tony Bennett. Joe says be thankful they are as homely as they are or they would be lost to *American Idol* by now. She'll be given away by Jeff. Joe let it be known his feelings were hurt by saying, "No biggie," and as much as she'd like to, she couldn't risk asking her brother Dan, who would probably bawl the length of the aisle.

Alpo jokes, "Even I'll be outshined by Jeff," which is only the truth, because there is not a man alive except maybe Clive Owen who approaches the brand of handsome Jeff has in spades. He is currently being groomed and probably not liking it, which is why Sissy asked Alpo to drop him off at Doggie Style. It takes nearly three hours to bathe, blow-dry, trim, and express the anal glands of a 140-pound malamute. Plus, it being May, there's his undercoat to rake out. Sissy's requested Jeff's nails be clipped and buffed. The pale aquamarine studs on his new collar match the piping on Sissy's dress, and, as it happens, his eyes.

List ticked, Sissy relaxes and pries off her shoes to sit cross-legged in the booth with her two folders, one marked TRIP, the other marked WEDDING. Cathy O'Hara jibs into the diner wearing one of her flowy Indian things. Once the door closes, she deflates some and heads for the booth, all smiles. She will be playing piano during the ceremony. Sissy likes Cathy well enough, but sometimes she's that person who, when you mispronounce some

word like *espresso* won't correct you on the spot but will manage to find a reason to say *espresso* a sentence or two later. Alpo says that is the definition of passive aggressive. Cathy is muscley and tan, recently back from her winter working at a goat ranch in New Mexico, where in return for beanful meals and a stall-sized bedroom with views but no central heat, she made chevre cheese from goats' milk and taught Iyengar yoga. Cathy calls herself a *sojourner* instead of *snowbird*.

She returns each spring to live out at Naledi Lodge with her niece, Meg. Cathy is a very social person, and Naledi has turned out to be more remote than she'd bargained for. Sissy sees this happen—people move here for the quiet, not counting on quite so much of it. Cathy is in town often, wanting to be part of things, determined to fit in, volunteering for this and that. Every third word out of her mouth is *community*, but you cannot blame her for being enthusiastic. She's taken a job two days a week at Pebbles & Bam Bam, the hot stone massage place Veshko the refugee operates. Sissy has wondered if Cathy might not have a thing for Veshko and reminds herself to pay more attention to him during her massage, because for a man she lays herself out nearly naked for twice a month (thank you, SissyBrittle), she couldn't even say how tall Veshko is or what color his eyes are. After the massages she is limp and blurry without her contacts and he is all manners. There is a thing he does down each side of her spine with his oiled elbow that makes her imagine being pressed right through to the underside of the massage table, reborn. Veshko is from Sarajevo, where he lived through The Siege. Everyone has their trouble and loss, but she imagines Veshko has had more than most—though it's hard to know since he's not what you'd call chatty and could hardly be accused of overdoing the eye contact.

Cathy settles in across the booth and glances at the papers and brochures Sissy has fanned before her. "All squared away?"

Sissy begins ordering her stacks back into the folders. "I hope so. Flight info, Sandals reservation, et cetera." She holds up an official-looking envelope. "Marriage license!"

"Nice. Can I see?"

“Sure. You want some coffee?”

“Mm, just hot water.” She fishes a jar of something that looks like soil from her bag. To Sissy’s questioning look, she shakes it.

“Chia.”

When Sissy returns with a cup and a pot, Cathy is frowning over the certificate.

“You’re changing your name?”

“Yeah . . . ?”

Cathy looks as if she’s been slapped. “Why?”

“Why?” Sissy sits.

“Did Alpo tell you to?”

“*Tell* me? No, we haven’t even . . . we haven’t actually—”

“You haven’t *talked* about it? Well, then, there’s still time.”

Cathy leans. “It’s an archaic tradition, Sissy. Your name is your identity. It’s who you *are*. Taking on a man’s name labels you as *his*—you’re subsumed.”

“Subsumed . . .” Sissy knows what it means, it just seems a little dramatic. “Cath, my name isn’t who I am. It isn’t my *identity*.”

“How isn’t it? How?”

“Well, I—”

“It’s insidious misogyny women still buckle under, and *why?* I could list twenty reasons it’s a bad idea—thirty.” Cathy raps at her breastbone like it’s a door. “We deserve equality, Sissy, but if we don’t respect ourselves enough to keep our own identities, how can we expect anyone else to?”

Sissy tries to reply but Cathy is on a tear.

“Seriously, if the educated women of the First World don’t set an example . . . I mean, girls in Nigeria are being kidnapped and sold.”

Sissy nods and pours more hot water into Cathy’s cup, hoping she will pause to drink because she looks a little flushed. Besides being a cheese-making *yogini* (according to her card), Cathy is also a Life Coach and holds weekend retreats out at Naledi for women from the Cities. It seems to Sissy that all Cathy does is what smart girlfriends do for each other: give advice. *Leave him! You’re good with hair, open a salon. Whatever you do, don’t adopt his*

*kids. Try Vagisil.* Commonsense stuff. Sissy supposes it's always easier to tackle someone else's problems.

"Listen," Cathy's tone shifts, calmer now, as if speaking with a client. "You've been Sissy Pavola for how many years?"

"Forty-five. But I don't think changing my name to Lahti will get anyone kidnapped."

"Maybe not, Sissy, but it won't do any *good*." Cathy dabs the corner of her mouth. "Just think about it? There's a war on women, Sissy, and you have a voice. And if you use your voice, you're a *warrior*."

Sissy pounces on the diversion of Joe wheeling out a rack of Cornish pasties to cool. "I don't know about you, Cath, but I'm starving." She has two pasties served up as Cathy is beginning to slow down.

"An entire gender shooting itself in . . . *that* smells amazing."

"On the house." Sissy pushes the plate under Cathy's nose as aromatic steam wafts from the little vents in the pastry. "Protein for the battle? The beef is grass-fed and the lard's free-range."

Cathy grabs a fork, giving her a look. "You're a terrible liar." The way Cathy goes after the pasty, you'd never guess she drives all the way to Fargo to picket stockyards.

It's the Pavola recipe, the crust downright airy—the secret being the cold half-dropper of cider vinegar added to the water mixing it with flour cut with beef lard. Besides seasoning, there are only three ingredients in Pavola's pasties: meat, potatoes, and onions, period. Sometimes butter. Some cooks will add rutabaga, but Sissy suspects that's to distract from fatty meat or tough crust. A pasty containing carrots is just wrong. On a trip to Wisconsin Dells, Sissy had been served a pasty with *peas* in it, leaving her to wonder if the Badger State hasn't lost the plot in more ways than one.

People do often take Cathy's advice—maybe because for as preachy as she can be, there's something about her that makes you think she knows something you don't.

Sissy's thoughts skip back to the morning.

"Cathy, you know Rauri Paar?"

Cathy takes her time to chew. "Sure. I see him around."

"He talk to you much?"

"Some, here and there." Cathy closes her eyes a moment, probably considering the mouth-feel of a perfectly diced potato.

Sissy waits it out, not wanting to distract. "Do you get any sense he's, you know, down?"

Cathy swallows. "Down? He's never really, ah, up is he?"

"True, but . . ."

"I haven't seen him since last fall, anyway. Why?" Cathy asks.

"He's what . . . missing, I guess." Sissy's gaze wanders to the window. "Darn Rauri."

Maybe it was nothing, but there had been something, some little thing about the last time she'd seen him . . .

"If Rauri is dead," Laurie is suddenly at the next booth, stacking dirty plates along the plank of her arm and hooking a syrup pitcher with her pinkie, "I'll kill him." She meets Sissy's eye and narrows her own. "We don't need any drama this weekend. You're getting married Saturday and that's that." Laurie hips the swinging door into the kitchen and disappears, the hinges squealing in her wake.

Cathy captures crumbs on the back of her fork before licking it like a Popsicle. "I miss having a sister."

"You do?" Watching the door thump to stillness, Sissy blinks back to Cathy. "Sorry, of course you do." Cathy's sister was Meg Machutova's mother, killed ages ago in a plane crash. Sissy is about to offer a word, but some bulb appears to be going off for Cathy.

"Hey. You know that public radio couple? This place could be featured on their show. They tour the country looking for greasy spoons?"

Sissy stiffens. "Greasy?"

Cathy waves the comment aside. "We all know how clean this place is—I'd eat off the urinal."

"I'd like to see that! You've *been* in our Men's?"

"Well, no."

Thank goodness, thinks Sissy. Cathy would have a bird if

she saw the wooden stalls in the Men's, where crude and complimentary comments about girls and women have been carved into the walls since Roosevelt—from soldiers' initials entwined with their sweethearts' to a list of girls doling out free love next to *Class of 1970*—the zero made into a peace sign. More recently are invitations to troll something called Grindr. The more offensive stuff gets sanded away, but some of the funnier lines and old limericks have been spared. Laurie even chose to leave the etched cartoon of herself saying, "There are plenty worse things to be called than Puss & Boots. The scabbard's a bit butch, but I wouldn't mind that hat."

"You're out of the water closet at least," Sissy observed. Neither has been in the Men's since going on strike and tasking Joe with the responsibility. Lord knows what's in there these days.

Laurie is out in Hatchet Inlet, but with a force that seems unnecessary to Sissy. The wide berth given Laurie has nothing to do with her liking women—no one has ever said boo about Miss Rappaport, that writer Polly, or the ex-nun who owns Bucksaw Sisters. Why would they bother with Laurie?

"Oh," Sissy remembers the radio couple. "I know what show you mean. He's skinny, she's not. Jack and Mrs. Spratt?"

"That's them." Cathy is now using her index finger to clean the plate. "They'd go crazy over these pasties. Your brittle, too. You could be bigger."

Cathy has hit on exactly what Sissy's been gnashing over. Does she want to be bigger? As it is, she can visualize every single counter where her brittle is sold—little tourist shops on the route to Hatchet Inlet, cafés down the North Shore, the Roadhouse out on 98—places like that. But if ratcheting up orders a notch or two meant working fewer hours in the diner . . .

"We could get in touch with that cook-show host who always sounds like she's salivating."

"Sure, but can we talk about the music now?"

After Cathy has left, Sissy considers her warning. Does a marriage subsume? That could apply to a lot of things people get sucked into: the Shopping Channel, restoring an El Camino

(Gerry), Facebook (Laurie), and even lifestyles—like Cathy’s holistic, Prius-driving, non-GMO, organic-cotton *simple* life that looks anything but. Would the opposite of being *subsumed* be to turn your back on it all, like Rauri Paar? Choose to live life in the woods, alone? Nobody else’s thoughts budging in, no needs, opinions, no pressure? No neighbors but wolverines and whisky jacks. That’s just a different sort of being sucked into something—*yourself*. Sissy wouldn’t last a week on those islands without going over some edge. Could that be where Rauri’s gone, over? Not far from where he lives is the literal edge—the Majimanidoo Falls—where little whirlpools twirl around a larger whirlpool, a giant drain that never ices over, called Satan’s Basin. What goes into the Basin rarely comes out, including tourists or idiots who read the warnings and see the chain-link fence as a challenge. The Basin is a convenient choice for suicides. Neater than a gunshot, quicker than pills. Those tossing themselves in usually leave notes—there was that poor bullied Greenstone boy who drowned himself just to have the last word.

Sissy blinks at her distorted reflection on the chrome of the sugar dispenser. If anyone would have time to think about and plan their own death, Rauri would. Sissy sighs. Maybe there’s something to be said for being too busy to think about such things. The thought of death just gets Sissy thinking about all she’d miss, like every single thing that will happen next. One week you might be handed someone’s brand-new nephew to hold, or watch the next Susan Boyle win *Britain’s Got Talent*, or taste the best peach ever on a trip to Florida. She hopes Rauri hasn’t done something stupid (unless he’s been diagnosed with something horrible, which is a different thing altogether). It seems backwards to Sissy that her mother’s neighbor over at Senior Cedars sits waiting to die from lung cancer with each breath sounding like something dragged, while Pete can put down a sick cat in less than a minute with a syringe.

Then there’s her mother, but Louise is just too much for Sissy to be thinking about right now.