

My father sleeps through the December afternoon. He has always resisted a nap, doesn't believe in them, yet now lies on top of his bed wearing a winter coat and his red fleece hat, snoring lightly. He's ninety-one. For an hour he doesn't move, his head tilted back against the pillow and his hands interlaced on his chest. Another hour and the light begins to fade outside. Finally I walk down the hall and tap on the doorjamb. I stand beside the bed, listening to his shallow breaths and watching his old face: his half-open mouth, the crust in the corners of his eyes, his patchy skin and tumultuous eyebrows.

# December

“Dad? Do you want to wake up?”

He opens his good eye but doesn't say anything, just stares without moving. Outside, the long Vermont dusk is settling. Every Christmas Dad stays in this downstairs bedroom in my brother's house—but now his eye shifts from chair to window to door and back, making me wonder if he knows where he is.

After a couple of minutes he hunches himself up against the headboard. I try not to hurry him, because I'm always groggy myself after a long nap.

Resting in bed, he wears the old pair of slippers Al has given him, wide and brown and flattened at the heels. His feet are too swollen to fit into his shoes, and there's no chance this year that he will tramp across the meadow with the rest of us through six inches of new powder, as he did last Christmas.

When I turn on the table lamp with its cheerful yellow glow, he sits up and lowers his feet to the floor.

"What time is it?"

"Four-thirty," I say, reading off the digital clock on the table beside him.

"Is it night?"

"Almost."

His face is still lopsided from sleep, but both eyes are open. He takes off his hat and flexes his bony hands on the edge of the bed. I stand beside him until my brother walks in with some papers. Al has drawn up a couple of documents that will allow him to take over more of Dad's finances. Someone has to do this, because he can no longer keep up with them on his own. He wants to balance his own checkbook, but I've watched him try and he can't do it. He keeps records but they're scattered, and he'll sit at his dining room table for thirty or forty minutes trying to figure out what's wrong. Dates, names, money, math—it's all slipping away from him.

Al takes his time. He asks Dad if he's warm enough, if he'd like a glass of water, and gives him some time to finish waking up. But when he holds out one of the documents and explains how this will make things easier for all of us, Dad balks.

"I've given up too much already. I don't want to sign anything."

"All this one does," Al says, "is add my name to your bank account so I can make sure the bills get paid. It's still your money. There won't be any change for you at all."

“There’ll be a big change. I won’t be the one in charge anymore.”

He doesn’t look at us, but he knows what’s going on. His mouth turns down as if we have already deceived him.

“Dad,” I tell him, “you’ll always be in charge. All you have to do is talk to Al and he’ll do whatever you like.”

We’ve never backed our father into a corner like this. We’ve asked him to stop driving and to accept help with his medications, but he’s never had to sign anything. Al stands in front of him with pen and paper, but Dad shakes his head. He stares down at the floor, at the carpet, at his feet in their slippers. “I don’t want to.”

In the boxy silence that follows his refusal, I become aware of my patience, as if it’s a commodity I’m spending. I don’t know how much I have.

Al tries to explain. If checks bounce, he tells Dad, or if bills don’t get paid, it’s a problem for everyone. “I noticed this fall that some of your bills were overdue. It would really make things easier for us if you’d let me pay them.”

Dad looks away. For a long time he doesn’t say anything, and when he finally glances at us I think he’s going to give in. Instead he says, “I want to go home.”

He stares again at his feet. The windows are now black with night.

“I want to go home and take care of my own money and be in my own house.”

“We’ll be going back,” I assure him. “I’m going to drive you back after Christmas.”

“I want to go now.”

How desolate this sounds. I am tied to him. I have brought him here and must take him back, and now have a bleak vision of the two of us sitting in his house on Christmas Eve on snowless Cape Cod, far from my brother and the rest of the family. We would eat some small dinner, sit in his living room and exchange a present. We would read. It makes me lonely just to think about

it. Dad's two favorite times of year are the family reunion in August and Christmas at Al's in Vermont—yet now he wants to go home.

“I want to keep my house,” he says.

“Your house is yours, Dad. We're not taking that away.”

But he will not sign anything, not tonight. Al puts the papers back in a folder, and we reassure Dad that both house and money are his, and he can make all decisions about them. Slowly, by talking about our holiday plans, we bring him around. Al's two boys, Porter and Ted, will be here, some friends and neighbors will stop by, and we'll telephone our other brother, Joe Jr., and my son, Janir, who's spending Christmas with his wife's family. Dad stops talking about going home, but it's another hour before the stark look leaves his face, of someone hunted and trapped.

Over dinner he's still not his old self. He sits warily at the table with his hair uncombed and his eyes restless, looking at his food, then around the room. He turns to my sister-in-law and asks, “But where are the children?”

Al and I look at each other. We were the children, long ago. By now even our own children are adults.

“Tomorrow,” Ellen assures Dad. “Some children will be coming over tomorrow.”

This is true, but I'm sure my father is thinking about children young enough to be swept up in the mystery of Christmas. Back on Cape Cod, before we left his house, he showed me a pair of Christmas cards he'd bought, “one for my great-granddaughter and the other for my great-great-granddaughter.” He has, in fact, only a granddaughter, my brother Joe's two-year-old Eliza. She's miracle enough, the first female born to our line since Aunt Annie, Dad's father's sister, in 1867.

My father is not the kind to take over a conversation, to assert himself or steer the talk his way. He has things to say about

history and politics and economics, and he'll tell an occasional story, but he has to be drawn into it. During the meal the conversation swirls over his head, until I coax out of him a little vignette he once told me about Oliver Wendell Holmes.

"Well," Dad says, leaning forward, "I believe he was eighty-six." As he speaks he rests his palms on the white tablecloth. "He was out for a walk with an old friend in Washington when a woman passed them on the sidewalk. She was young and attractive and beautifully dressed, and she gave the two old gentlemen a smile as she passed by. 'Ah,' sighed Holmes to his friend, 'to be seventy again.'"

Dad's memory is irregular, and sometimes his language breaks down, but a little story like this flows out intact. It makes me smile, in its defiance of old age. This is the self-reliant father I've always known, with his dry humor and bank of anecdotes—not an old man who wakes confused and says he wants to abandon Christmas.

Usually after dinner he sits in the living room, perhaps with the rest of his wine, and at least listens in on the talk. But tonight, as soon as the plates are cleared, he thanks Ellen for the meal, says good night to the rest of us, and shuffles along the downstairs hallway, leaning on his cane. It pierces me, how old he looks, how even now he's passing out of our lives. His bedroom is carpeted and cheerful, but also the coldest in the house, and he keeps the door open in hopes of warmth. I watch him go into his room. I can see his bed through the open door and keep expecting him to climb into it, but for ten minutes he doesn't appear. He must be changing into his pajamas, I think, and I don't want to barge in on him. Twenty minutes and still no sign of him, so I walk down the hall and knock on the jamb.

He's sitting on the edge of a chair with his long underwear bunched around his ankles and his bare legs shaking. He's managed to get his pants off but not his socks, and these have stopped him from peeling off his long johns. He looks up at me, then down at his knees.

“I’m having a little trouble here.”

His legs are pale and thin and nearly hairless. I kneel in front of him, feeling awkward, and pull off his socks, then his long underwear. I’ve never dressed or undressed him before.

We get his shirt off and his pajamas on, then a sweater, and he climbs into bed with his legs still shaking. I pull the blanket and quilt up to his chin, and when he’s completely settled he says, “Thank you.”

For the past few days he’s been thanking me constantly. When I serve him a meal, when I bring him his coat, when I open a door for him, he thanks me. The formality of it has started to get on my nerves. He never says *Thanks* or *Great* or *Okay*, it’s always a precise *Thank you*. It makes me feel like an attendant.

I’d like to sit down on the bed beside him, but I’ve never done anything like that, not since I was a child. I twitch his quilt around and ask, “Dad, how long do you think you’d have sat on that chair before giving me a call?”

“I daresay quite a while.”

I laugh, but he doesn’t. He has never liked to be helped, and only puts up with it when truly stumped.

In the muffled early light I come downstairs thinking of the Christmases of my childhood, when Al and I woke our parents with a string of Christmas bells sewn to a band of cloth. A wave of nostalgia runs through me. Where have those bells gone to? I’m sure Dad would remember them if I appeared at his door with them: their pure high tinkling sound. I look down the hall and see his empty bed.

I find him in his bathroom, where he has tried to get warm by taking a bath. The water now dribbling out of the faucet is barely tepid, and he’s stuck in the smooth tub, unable to stand up in spite of the grab bars Al has installed. Once again he’s shaking

from the cold. I don't know how long he's been here, and when I ask he doesn't tell me.

"It's slippery," he explains, and waves me off when I reach out to help. "No. I can do it myself."

"Okay," I tell him coolly. "See if you can."

As soon as I say this I'm ashamed—but if he notices my tone he doesn't show it. He's already struggling to rise to his feet, but again can't manage it. After he settles back down, and without asking, I place one foot on the far side of the tub, slip my hands under his arms and lift him to his feet. How skinny he is. Deep pockets have formed below his collarbones, and the skin of his thighs is pleated like the gills of a mushroom. For the first time in decades he's completely naked in front of me, though he doesn't seem embarrassed about it or even conscious of the fact. He takes hold of a bar and makes the tricky step out of the tub, explaining what went wrong. "I got in too early," he says. "Something happened to the water."

As I help rub some heat into him with a towel I feel his new weakness, his vulnerability. He must know he's approaching the end of his life, but I want to protect him from this terrible fact. And I want to look after him. At least I do right now. I might not feel the same if I had to clean up his diapers—and that's where we're headed, I can see. At some point he'll be as helpless as a baby. But so far it's been no different from raising my son: the more I take care of him, the more I love him.

A few days later we drive back to Cape Cod with Christmas behind us and a long winter ahead. This past year was a difficult one for my father, for in the spring he was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, and in July his longtime companion, Jane, died of cancer. Since her death he has lived alone in his house, determined to bring order to his books, notebooks, photos and file cabinets. I'm glad he still has the will for this, but he fights a

losing battle. The real question is how long he can continue to live on his own. After Jane died his three sons—Joe Jr., Al, and I—all invited him to come and live with us, but he declined each offer. He doesn't want to live in Virginia or Vermont or Ohio. He wants to live at home, in the state he grew up in, near the ocean, in his own house. After all my recent visits I've left believing he could still manage on his own, but now I'm not so sure.

As we drive he turns oddly loquacious, and I draw him into a talk about his wartime travels as a correspondent for *Life*. I know he filed stories from Italy and North Africa, but I'm surprised when he mentions Australia.

"You never went to Australia, did you?"

"Well, yes."

"During the war?"

"And later. Your mother and I once drove there. We started out at the Bering Sea."

My hands are on the wheel. We're passing stands of pine and fir, whole forests of them, the nearby fields blanketed with snow, the road almost empty. *It's coming*, I think, with a small burst of panic. I glance at my father, but he looks completely composed, staring tranquilly at the road ahead.

"You drove there," I say.

"It was a much longer trip in those days. We had to go down the coast, you see, and stay close to the water. But we ran into trouble around all the redwoods, and the road was washed out and we had to go inland to some little towns. I think it was near the Hearst Mansion. It was quite a long drive."

"What year was that, Dad?"

"Oh, that was in . . . That must have been . . ."

I have asked too specific a question. I'm sorry to have stumped him, because while the delusion about Australia is troubling, I love the rare mention of my mother, and how freely he's talking. Once interrupted he can't find his way back to the topic, nor can I lead him. I want to ask how it was possible to drive a

car across the Pacific Ocean, but don't want to sound like I'm correcting him.

Though he's twisted the details, I think I know the germ of his story. In the late spring of 1942, when my mother was pregnant with me, and my father an associate editor at *Life*, my parents drove a great circle around the country, setting out from New York across the Midwest and the High Plains, over the mountains to Washington and down into California. Dad was looking for stories in those early months of the war. I'm not sure how the Bering Sea gets into it, unless it was the Japanese takeover of two islands in the Aleutians in June of that year—something my father, always the historian, might well remember. What strands are unraveling in my father's mind? Most of what he says sounds both calm and reasonable. I know he loved the California redwoods, and he has talked before about his visit to the Hearst Mansion, which he describes at length in his book *The Magnificent Builders*.

My father has written several books and edited many more, and writing is one of the interests we share. As young men we both loved to read, both went to Harvard, both had literary ambitions. But my father is an intellectual with a wide-ranging knowledge of history, art, archeology and architecture, and while I've written three books myself—a pair of novels and a memoir—I've spent as much time farming and building houses as I have writing.

My dad in his late twenties was an ambitious and confident young man who had started at *Life* straight out of college, and who eventually rose to be managing editor. I, at twenty-seven, dropped out of a PhD program in English and moved with my wife Clarisa to a farm in southern Chile, where we raised chickens and lived a peasant life. My academic career was over and my father's path left behind. There's always an element of rejection in such a move, and it couldn't have been easy on him, yet he wrote me steadily and sent whatever books I asked

for, including a 1903 manual on traditional aviculture he found through a rare book search. He didn't ask how long I was going to stay in Chile.

On the Cape a surprising storm has dropped fifteen inches of snow on the ground, but Dad's driveway has been plowed. I help him into the cold house and crank up the furnace. It's exciting—but what a mess we left in our hurry to get out last week. Mostly it's the accretion of old newspapers and mail, of cards and magazines and catalogs, and of Dad's many notes. His three Christmas lists still lie on the dining room table, all in a shattered handwriting: Errands, Presents, and Christmas Cards.

Dad has made lists and notes for years, for decades, and sees no reason to throw any of them away. He writes on legal pads, in notebooks, and most often on three-by-five cards, which now spill across tables and shelves and his two desks. The cards, many hundreds of them, list telephone numbers, appointments and reminders. Some have quotations as well, though he's more apt to set those down in a notebook, along with his outlines and research notes. There are notebooks here from when he was writing his last book, *The Coast*, an exploration of the Atlantic coastline—and others that go back seventy years, from when he worked on the *Harvard Crimson*, or even further, to high school, with quotes from Gibbon, Toynbee and Virgil. They are the endless, restless work of the mind.

Last fall, as Dad's memory started to fail, he began to write daily reminders to himself. He recorded, on an undated three-by-five card that now lies on the dining room table, "Doctor's appointment tomorrow." He set down many times what I guess to be the current date, one to a card. He wrote "Harriet came," and "I've had my medications," and "Blood test tomorrow." One card says, "I've eaten breakfast."

My father, once so knowledgeable about the history of Western civilization, is now trying to keep track of what meals he has eaten. I pore over the cards. Half of them I can't read at all, his handwriting has become so shaky. I had planned, after driving him to the Cape, to head back to Ohio—but his notes dismay me, and I worry about those times over Christmas when he seemed so bewildered. I decide to settle in for a few days, and go to work on the papers strewn over his dining room table and his desks. Slowly, when he's not watching, I sort through the cards and toss most of them. I inspect the first few hundred, but can't always tell what I'm throwing away.

After the cards, I take on the piles of old magazines and catalogs. And his junk mail, diligently saved for months or years: the many requests from the March of Dimes, the Smile Train and the ACLU, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Lighthouse International, the St. Labre Indian School and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, won't you help? There are easily three hundred of these petitions, and one after another they go into the trash. Dad has told me to save them, but I don't. Though he can no longer balance his checkbook, I'm afraid he could still write checks.

I'm aware of my transgressions, of imposing my will on my father's house and habits. Even though I'm still only visiting, the chaos of the place unnerves me. It's too clear a reflection of the growing disorder of his mind.

A couple of days after our return he wants to see the suitcase he took to Vermont. I've stored it upstairs but bring it down for him to inspect. It's empty, as I assured him it would be.

"I'm missing some things," he says. "We must have left them at Alan's."

"You mean clothes?"

"And other things."

“What things?”

He doesn’t answer.

I tell him I’ll look around for them, or I can call Al and he’ll send them down. “What is it that’s missing?”

The frustration on his face is clear. “They’re . . . those things,” he says. But he can’t name them.

All his life my father has been good with words. He loves the English language, and for a couple of years was head of the Usage Panel of the *American Heritage Dictionary*. But now he’s losing his nouns, and he hates it. Of course he’s been losing proper nouns for years, the way we all do. He can forget the street I grew up on, or the name of someone he’s known since college—but now he’s begun to blank out on common nouns as well, words like *chimney* or *swan* or *couch*. After dinner he asks me to replace “the . . . the . . . there, on the table.” He can’t find the word, but points to the lamp until I figure it out: the *lightbulb*.

“We’ve got plenty,” I say and go off to find one. How chipper I can sound. But underneath I’m as worried about what’s happening as he is.

Last summer, when my father started having trouble keeping track of his medications, we hired a retired nurse, Harriet Guyon, to stop in once a day, pour his meds and keep an eye on him. She’s been a godsend, and even my father has adjusted to her. At first he hated the idea of anyone coming into his house, and announced he wanted nothing to do with her. He disliked her, he didn’t need her, he was getting along fine on his own. But soon she won him over. After a week he felt neutral about her, and within a month she’d become indispensable to him.

Still, the time is going to come when he’ll need more care. If he’s going to stay in his disordered house, someone will have to live with him, and Harriet can’t do that. Neither can my brothers.

Al is married and has a small-town law practice. Joe's job as a tax analyst and historian is more flexible, but he's also married and has a two-year-old daughter. I remember when my son was two, how absorbed I was in raising him.

In her last years my grandmother was looked after by a distant cousin, and I think Dad believes that at some point an elderly woman like his great-aunt Eleanor will materialize to take care of him. But there is no busty and cheerful Aunt Eleanor, there's only me—or only *I*, as my father would say—and I'm still holding back. I've had a good Christmas, but now I'm ready to go home. I don't want to give up my life any more than my brothers do. I have a hundred friends in Athens, Ohio, a house by a creek, a deer-proof garden with an eight-foot-high fence, and a part-time business renting out the houses I've built in the last seven years. I try to balance this against my dad's needs and my brother's lives, and there is no balance.

In spite of the jumble of the house, I love how my father's history is stored all through it. On bookshelves, in his desk drawers, in oversized file cabinets, in cardboard boxes and old suitcases, anywhere I look I find papers and photographs and notebooks. Dad doesn't reminisce much about his past—hardly ever—but the record isn't hidden, and over the years I've wandered through it, starting with his youth in Peabody, Mass, north of Boston.

His ambition and literary bent must have been clear to everyone by the time he graduated from Peabody High. He was valedictorian of his class and an editor of both school magazines, for which he wrote some earnest editorials. In one, he castigated his classmates for bad manners: "Most of us," he wrote, "do not know Emily Post from Caelano the Harpy." In another he urged his readers to do more than eat, drink and be merry, because "There is nothing like getting a head start on the other guy."

In the fall of 1930, a difficult year for the nation, Joe Thorndike entered Harvard on a partial scholarship. Money was on everyone's mind, and like the majority of his class he majored in economics. "My goal," he once told me, "was to make a million dollars before I was twenty-five. If you couldn't do it when you were still young, it wasn't worth it."

After four straight years of As at Peabody High, his early grades at Harvard were mediocre: C in German, C in Geology, B in History. This was because he was already spending forty hours a week at the *Crimson*, the university's daily newspaper. He wrote steadily as a freshman and sophomore, was appointed managing editor his junior year and president his senior. Each year the Depression grew deeper, and his goal of earning a million dollars took a back seat to journalism, a field where he could make some headway.

In June 1934, the day after his last Harvard final, he moved to New York, skipping his graduation ceremonies so he could start a job. He had wrangled a tryout at Henry Luce's *Time*, and after a month Luce hired him. He wrote movie reviews, then People and Education articles. He wrote some financial pieces for *Fortune*, where he met James Agee and Archibald MacLeish. Dad was something of a protégé of Luce's, and in 1935 joined a small team under Dan Longwell, who spearheaded Luce's plan to start a picture magazine. Both Longwell and my father plumbed the mind of an exiled editor, Kurt Korff, who had run a German picture magazine called the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, and who knew more about photo choice and layout than anyone in New York. The nature of the new magazine was endlessly debated, and so was its name: Luce originally planned to call it *Dime*, as it was going to sell for ten cents. By the time *Life*'s first issue came out in the fall of 1936, Joe Thorndike, at the age of twenty-three, was the magazine's youngest associate editor.

He had been at *Life* for only three years when my mother, Virginia, came to work for the magazine. Dad clearly had his eye

on her, because when a visiting documentary photographer asked whom he should use in his film, my father suggested her as “the most attractive girl on the staff.” She was filmed at a desk as she sifted through some photos, and a few days later my parents had their first date, a drink at the fountain at Rockefeller Center.

They married a year later, in 1940. Dad once wrote a description of their wedding, and included a detail I had heard from her and passed on to him.

We were married in the chapel of Riverside Church by a Unitarian minister who was wearing golf shoes under his robe and skipped all the stuff about two becoming one, advising us instead to keep our own individuality (Eat of the same food but not off the same plate, etc.). John says his mother was miffed because after the ceremony I suggested we stop for ice cream sticks at a Good Humor stand outside the chapel.

My father has never been a romantic. He’s not exactly a pragmatist—he’s too fond of ideas, of art and literature—but I can imagine him coming out of the chapel thinking *Well, now we’re married*, and then, seeing the Good Humor cart, *Wouldn’t it be nice to eat some ice cream?*

The way to the top at *Life* led through Henry Luce, and it helped if he liked you. It helped as well if his wife, the editor and playwright Clare Boothe Luce, liked both you and your wife. A gauge of one’s status at Time Inc. was how often you were invited to the Luce mansion in Greenwich, Connecticut. My parents ate there numerous times, but their most notable meal at the long table was on Sunday afternoon, December 7, 1941, when twenty-two people—including some who thought the U.S. should go to England’s help, and some who thought we should

stay out of the war—sat down to a late luncheon. They were eating dessert when a telephone call was answered by the staff. A butler brought a message on a folded slip of paper and gave it to Clare, who read it, then tapped her spoon on a glass.

“All isolationists and appeasers, please listen. The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor.”

Whenever my mother told this story she loved to point out how the biggest news of the century had been delivered not to the biggest newsmen of the century, but to his wife.

My parents were married for twenty-three years. The marriage came to a bleak close, but the record of their early years looks hopeful. Here in Dad’s house, in his voluminous files, are plenty of contact sheets, snapshots and enlargements showing a young couple at ease with each other. One photo shows them in 1940 during their first summer together, sharing a cottage with friends on the Connecticut shoreline, two years before I was born. My father looks handsome, and my mother slender and vibrant. I would have dated her in a heartbeat.



*Joe and Virginia Thorndike with Bob and Patty Coughlan, at the Westport Country Playhouse, 1940*

In other photos they board a ski train to North Conway, then stand jauntily on the slopes. They play croquet on our Connecticut lawn on the Fourth of July, my mother in shorts, gesturing, caught in midsentence. Oliver Jensen and James Parton ply their wooden mallets, while Fritz Kirkland arms a pipe bomb and his wife Sally lounges in an elegant dress. I'm drawn to my parents' shining years, their first ten or fifteen, when they and their friends were so young and spirited. Though I later turned my back on that world, now I can't look at it enough. I love their ease and confidence.

Last fall, while visiting my dad, I drove him down to Connecticut to see his old pal Oliver Jensen. Oliver and Joe go way back. They met at *Life* in the forties and later started two hard-cover, ad-free magazines, *American Heritage* and *Horizon*. I hadn't seen Oliver in decades, but I remembered him from his many visits to our house when I was young. He was a big guy with a wide smile and an impish look. He liked kids but never had any of his own. He liked jokes, he liked women, he was married five times. He liked railroads and once bought one, a Connecticut spur that still operates nostalgic steam engine trips. But all that had passed by. Now Oliver lived in a nursing home, and as we turned off the interstate my father warned me, "He's not doing very well."

"Can he walk?"

"I don't think he can."

"And his mind?"

"Not so good, either."

Even after my father's warning it took me by surprise to find Oliver, that shining presence of a man, belted into a wheelchair. His hair, an inch and a half long, stood straight up from his scalp, just like before, only white. He had the same large head and broad smile.

“Look who’s here,” he said as we all shook hands. “Where have you two come from today?”

I think he knew my father, though probably not me. For fifteen minutes he was congenial and alert, as we talked about railroads and the house he lived in before he was brought here. Then his energy drained away. He drifted toward sleep, jerked awake, drifted off again. In midsentence his head bent forward, nodded, and he went silent. Sometimes a little drool gathered on his lower lip, and dropped.

When this happened my dad and I made conversation, or we waited until Oliver came around. Twice he woke up and asked again, “So, where have you two come from today?”

At times he made perfect sense. I’d brought along a copy of his first book, found on my father’s shelves: *Carrier War*, written during his Pacific service in the navy and a bestseller in 1945. Oliver turned the book over in his hands with pleasure, though he didn’t open it. “I had a lot of fun writing that one,” he said. He also claimed to remember the wartime telegram he’d sent to my parents the day after I was born: *Congratulations on best production yet*, signed *Ensign Jensen*.

In the midst of our visit, for a quarter of an hour, a woman in another room screamed and fell silent, screamed and fell silent. She had the right to scream, a nurse told me later. It’s the law. Unless a patient is a physical danger to others she may not be confined or restrained. If she moans she moans, and if she screams she screams. Oliver’s room, like the entire home, was clean and bright, but those cries gave an air of bedlam to the place—even if Oliver didn’t seem to hear them. My father showed no reaction to them either, save to lean in closer to the conversation. We continued our visit as if such howling were a commonplace, but I couldn’t get past the sound. Someone was miserable, and no one could do anything about it.

After an hour and a half my father and I said good-bye to Oliver and made our way out of the building, past the same

long-distance stares of the old women and men we had seen coming in, some solitary on their beds, others parked in wheelchairs at the sides of the corridor. Dad moved slowly. He had refused to bring in his cane, and I worried that he wouldn't be able to reach his car. I didn't offer him my arm, because I knew he didn't want to be helped. He made it across the asphalt on his own, opened his door, and lowered himself gingerly to the seat. After he pulled his legs inside, I closed the door and he slumped against it. He looked the way I felt, exhausted.

For ten minutes we drove in silence. Finally I said, "Pretty gruesome in there."

"Terrible."

"And Oliver's worse, isn't he?"

"He shouldn't be there."

My father hated that Oliver was trapped in that home. Oliver didn't like it himself, but his stepchildren had sold his house and a lawyer now had power of attorney over him. Only two years ago he'd lived in a large old house like my dad's, filled with books and magazines and the possessions dear to him. Now he slept in a room with a bed, a chair, two dressers and a television. All his books, even those he had written himself, had been given away or sold at auction.

After another five miles my father regained his posture. He sat upright on his seat and said, "Don't ever put me in a place like that."

That plea from my father never leaves me, and whenever Al or Joe Jr. talks about a nursing home I remember our visit to Oliver's. With each day it's getting harder to imagine leaving Dad alone in his house. Harriet comes over, visits with him in the living room, then joins me on the porch. She's a talkative, energetic and cheerful woman, but her face falls when I ask her what she thinks. She's been watching my father now for five months.

“He’s so much more confused. He’s worse than he was before Christmas.”

Just talking about him makes Harriet cry. I’m in awe of people, usually women, who cry easily. I wish I could myself, but it rarely happens. Harriet assures me that she can step back in, that she can come over for several hours each day. But she doesn’t think that’s going to be enough. “I worry about him walking around on his own at night. I worry about him falling again. I worry about him cooking. Twice I came over and the oven was still on from the night before.”

The evidence is building. I know what I should do, and that night, as if to close the deal, Dad shows me again how confused he can get. An hour after putting him to bed, I’m drifting off when I hear a faint call from downstairs. I dress quickly and bolt down the stairs to find him in his bathrobe, standing in the kitchen with his cane.

“I need some help here.”

He leads me into the bathroom and tries to explain what’s upsetting him. “I have to get this straightened out. It’s not working at all. You see, I press *here*, but nothing happens.”

He presses his cane to a spot on the worn linoleum floor, beside a set of built-in drawers. It seems to be a precise spot he’s looking for, because he keeps adjusting the point of the cane and pressing down on it.

“What’s supposed to happen, Dad?”

“The drawer should open.”

He taps the bottom drawer with his cane, and I kneel down and pull it out. Inside: old place mats, a package of vacuum bags, a bowl with a mounted nutcracker, some broken candles. I start picking things up, but he says, “No, no, that’s not the right stuff. That’s not supposed to be in there. If I can open this, those things will be gone. They don’t belong there.”

I start with logic. “Dad, I don’t see how tapping with your cane could open a drawer.”

“I have to press it,” he says. “It has always worked in the past.”

“You’ve opened this drawer with your cane?”

“I can’t find the spot on the floor.”

“Maybe you should be using your four-point cane—it would cover more ground.”

I’m trying to be funny, but he ignores this. “I just need some help here,” he says.

I study his face, seeing the trouble in it, the lines, the splotchy skin and furrowed brow. What’s he worried about? What’s wrong with the stuff in the drawers?

We struggle with it for another five minutes, but don’t solve anything. What’s really going on doesn’t occur to me until I go back upstairs and lie down on my bed in the dark. The drawer is a sideline: what matters is that he has asked for my help. My father never asks for anything, and now he has. No matter that he wants to stay in his house, he would never ask me to move in with him. Instead, he’d doggedly make do on his own until disaster overwhelmed him. But this drawer that won’t open gives him cover. It stands, I think, for all the other help he’ll need if he’s to remain in his house—which is what he wants most in life.

The next day I call Al, then Joe, and describe Dad’s attempt to open the drawer with his cane. I tell them I’m torn, but I have to stay here. I thought I could put it off until later, until the spring at least, but now the time has come. I tell them that sometimes I lie in bed at night and think about those bedlam cries from the woman at Oliver’s nursing home. I tell them I’m going to drive back to Ohio, pick up my computer and some clothes and tools, find someone to look after my rentals and their inevitable emergencies, and return to Dad’s house. I don’t tell them I feel like I’m stepping off the face of a cliff.

Both my brothers are enormously relieved, and thank me profusely. “But can you really do this?” Al asks.

“Sure,” I tell him. I’m aware of sounding like Dad, who never complains about anything.

“How long? What if he lives for years?”

“I can’t think about that. I’ll come for now. After that—we’ll see what happens.”

I don’t want to promise I’ll stay here until the end. I can’t imagine the end. After I get off the phone with Al, I arrange with Harriet to come over while I’m gone, every day, and I line up someone else to stop by in the evenings. Mostly, Dad will be on his own. He tells me not to worry, that he can take care of himself. But that’s the whole point: I don’t think he can.

On the morning of my drive I wake him at five o’clock. In past years he’s always gotten up for my departures no matter the hour, but this time he remains in bed, looking frail and unsure. He lies back on the pillow wearing the red fleece hat he now sleeps in. I crouch beside him and put a hand on his chest, then take his head between my palms and all but kiss him. These unheard-of acts are coming easier. Fearing there’s a chance I might never see him again, I blurt out, “Dad, you have been the greatest father.”

“Well,” he says. For half a minute we say nothing more. Then he asks, “When is it again that you’re coming back?”

“In six days,” I tell him. “Six and a half days. I’ll be back next Monday.”

“Write that down for me, would you?”

“I’ve pinned it to the bulletin board,” I tell him, and bring in the sheet of paper so he can look at it. “Harriet can always call me, and I’ll check in every couple of days.” Dad can still talk on the phone, but making long-distance calls is confusing to him, even with the speed dial.

“And who is it who’s coming today?”

“Harriet comes around noon, and Bob will stop by after dinner.”

“And what day was that, when you’ll be back?”

“Next Monday. Less than a week from today.”

Slowly, his face relaxes. It’s an act of will, I know. He’s still confused but lets it go. “Please drive carefully,” he says.

Ten minutes after I get into my car it starts to rain. I hate driving in the rain and dark, but eventually the skies lighten, the rain eases to a drizzle, and I’m launched on the fifteen-hour drive I’ve made many times before. Halfway through it, out among the farmlands and ridges of Pennsylvania, my neck and back start to tighten up. The drizzle continues, and the wiper arms are squeaking. I stop to spray them with silicone, but the maddening squeal continues.

It isn’t true what I said, that Dad has been the greatest father. He’s been good, he’s been great in many ways—yet there’s a coolness to him, a restraint that can drive me crazy. He can’t be emotional or affectionate. This seemed normal when I was growing up: weren’t all fathers the same? But looking back as an adult, I see how much warmth I didn’t get from him, and how much I needed. Not much has changed in all these years. He’ll talk about the rise and fall of nations, about the Spanish Inquisition or the Age of Exploration, about Hamilton’s tariffs or our failure to protect the coastal wetlands. All interesting—but what I most want to hear is how he feels. How he feels about my mother, how he felt about her when they married, how she felt about him and what went wrong in their marriage.

He won’t talk about my mother, or about his second wife Margery, or about Jane, his companion of twenty-eight years who died last summer. He doesn’t mention their names. If I have him trapped in the car and start asking him questions, he’ll answer politely, as if I were an acquaintance.

My mother died more than thirty years ago, awash in depression, drugs and alcohol, only a decade after her divorce from my father. There was plenty of anguish all around, but I’ve never been able to talk to Dad about it. Under duress he’ll answer the

most basic questions, but he won't reminisce about the good times or analyze the bad. Almost everything in our family history is off limits. This can make me want to scream, but if I show my exasperation he pulls back into silence.

If my mother were alive, I think I'd be talking to her about everything. Certainly we'd talk about how hard it was for her to live with someone so reticent, someone who shrank from all emotion. This is a difficult quality in a father, and even more so in a husband.

I remember that early conundrum: if my house were on fire and I could save only one of my parents, which would I choose? This is a cruel question one child asks another, and when I was a boy there was no answer to it. But later, as an adult, I knew I would choose my mother. We have the same dark skin and hair, the same full lips, the same love of warmth and water. Her sensual nature runs in my blood in equal measure with my father's restraint—and as a young man restraint didn't interest me. I had plenty of that and wanted the other. I was like her, I knew. We both wanted to talk, to tell secrets, to dance, to caress someone. In the last thirty years I've thought many times that for me, the wrong parent died.

It's still raining, and my back is even stiffer. On the long pull through West Virginia I wonder if I'm going to be able to manage my rentals from a distance, and try to figure out how much I should be paid to look after my father. I'm going to be paid, that much is decided. "Either we pay you or we pay someone else," Al has told me. It will all come out of Dad's account, over which we now have full control, after he gave in and signed the papers.

Five hundred a week, I think. There won't be that much work, but I'll be on call every day of the month with almost no life of my own. I keep driving through the rain. I drive and drive, until I think five hundred is too little, it should be seven-fifty. The rain beats down, dusk comes, and I finish the trip as I started it, in the dark.