

Valediction

A NOVELLA

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PART ONE

Goodbye.



– ONE –

It was October when they found her, three weeks before Halloween.

First frost had cleared the mire between earth and heaven left by the humidity of late August. The crisp air breathed new life into the valley and the townsfolk flitted about with renewed enthusiasm, finally setting out to prepare for summer's parting. The cold had come late this year, an Indian summer burning clear through September. Folding chairs and baseball mits, usually stowed just past Labor Day, lie in front lawns, decorative reminders to make more lemonade or pick up another case of beer on the way home from work.

Most of the birds had stayed past their perennial time of retreat and their enthusiastic vocalizations echoed unhindered through a clear, empty sky. They would join the others soon enough in more practical and hospitable locations, but for now they glided on refreshing currents to which only they were privy.

School had been in session for over a month, but its coming this year had not brought with it the usual sense of longing or regret. Mid-afternoon, the doors would swing open, spilling children into the local playgrounds and onto the streets, the whining of pedals and pattering of Ked-covered feet filling their elders's ears.

Rows of parked cars lined Main Street for long lunch hours or early evenings. People rushed home to barbecues and ballgames. Businessmen changed out of their ties and into t-shirts to wash cars and clean gutters. Across town, rakes swept across lawns in unison as black garbage bags were carried stuffed to the street. Those leaves left unbagged soon became trampolines and projectiles, the once neat piles spreading across yards, across property lines, across streets, acres upon acres until the town sat blanketed in vibrant red.

The Route 26 bridge, in the center of town, looked down on canoes and fisherman. Children – still fat from roasted marshmallows and cotton candy at the fair – waded in the stream below – still fat from unusually heavy summer rain – while the water coursed past them, subtly down and through, emptying into the lake.

Across New England, neighboring towns with equally regal and decidedly simple names – Rumford, Bethel, Turner, North Waterford – delighted as well in the fervor of fall's arrival. In the valley, a deep blue dome rose high over the swelling red trees. Steeples poked out and pointed skyward, bright beacons of white in the splendor of receding chlorophyll.

And so it was that they found her, the morning after first frost, beneath a clear blue sky on a blanket of dead, dry leaves. Her earthen bed

reflected the calm surrender in her open eyes. Red and brown, the ground peacefully held her in its gentle grasp.

To say her absence was unnoticed would be untruthful. In fact, many in town that day noted a difference without her presence. They joked of foul play and weather, kidnappings and alien abductions. They laughed and sipped their coffee, but none thought twice of her whereabouts. Most were too wrapped up in their own unrepentant joy to give it much thought.

It was Cory Wentland who found her, chasing Roger the black lab through the forest behind Town Hall. Cory had taken the freedom of fall particularly literally, granting himself a leave of absence from school. More specifically, he had embraced any excuse to miss a chemistry final in Mr. Garrison's class. *Days go by*, he had thought to himself in innocent mockery of the local proverb, a saying passed down through the indigenous people of the valley.

To be fair, Roger found her. By the time Cory ascended the hill Roger was curiously probing the area, his greying muzzle ruffling her clothing. Distracted by the view, the steeples poking inquisitively out of the canopy below him, Cory at first didn't notice Roger's discovery. A helpless whimper behind him finally spun him to face what lie on the forest floor. Her eyes were open, and it was all he could do to look away from them, his jaw hanging agape. He stood and stared, utterly motionless, even when Roger licked his hand comfortingly. Half an hour later he would burst out of the forest, Roger close behind, and proceed directly to the squad car parked in front of Fran's

Diner, but for now, he was transfixed by his first taste of mortality.

They wouldn't find the note until later that night, placed neatly on the kitchen table and held down with her chicken and rooster salt and pepper shakers. It was written in her clean, legible hand, one so many of the townspeople were accustomed to reading. It's message was clear and concise. She had never been one for indulgence.

"I can't anymore. Once, maybe. With love, C."

The empty bottle of prescription sleeping pills sat next to it, neatly capped, the label facing outward. A topic of conversation the next day would be her ability to make it to the top of the hill with all those pills in her belly. People would be amazed at her resilience, saying things like, "She must have really wanted to do it," and, "She shouldn't have made it out of her house, let alone up that hill." Then again, they'd add, she was eating for two. They would speak nonchalantly, but stumble occasionally. They would tiptoe around words, less out of respect for the dead than superstitious karmic belief. She was not *pregnant*, she was *eating for two*. Not *suicide*, but *it*.

"Days go by," they would mumble, bringing the subject to a close, at least for the moment. Days go by. Time heals all wounds, keep moving, don't look back. Their mantra was amalgamation. It was a cure-all, and they peddled it to one another as if it were magic elixir, a tonic to close painful gashes in their hearts and, if need be, to close their hearts completely.

But the town as a whole did not reel from the tragedy, as one may expect. Rather it faltered ever so slightly before regaining its step. They had

seen misfortune before and would see it again.
Keep moving, don't look back. Time does indeed
heal all wounds.

Days go by.

– TWO –

Ellen Williams couldn't leave her car. Her right hand floated above the ignition, attached to strings independent of her resolve. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to will her hand to slowly descend, grasp the key and turn it, killing the engine. Her left hand sat cemented to the top of the steering wheel, her knuckles white with strain. She focused every muscle on turning the key. She had to. It was something she'd been doing since sixteen. It was the first step in a simple procedure which ended in exiting the car. Getting out of the goddamn car. She gasped, realizing for the first time she had been holding her breath. With this, her eyes snapped open and she looked quickly to the ignition. A weak, nervous laugh escaped her and she turned the key, pulled it out of the slot, and set both hands in her lap. They nestled and slept deservedly.

She looked down.

She had left the town almost ten years earlier, young and full of ideas, full hopes and dreams, full of piss and vinegar, some would say. It

was summer then, and she imagined it was some kind of irony that her first return would be in autumn. She hated the fall. Always had. It was oppressive, a veil which descended over the green pleasantries of summer with no remorse. It choked out the freedom that warm weather promised, suffocated it with nothing but the assurance of a cold, dead winter as consolation. Beyond that, it got damn uncomfortable damn quickly, shorts and t-shirts soon replaced by thick parkas and bulky rubber boots. She had left and never looked back. She had promised she would never look back. But here she was, in her rusted silver Nova on Route 26, which doubled as Main Street, looking down at her hands and wishing she had come back sooner.

She left Los Angeles as soon as the call came, which she presumed was shortly after the discovery of Cassie's body. Her father dealt with his loss by putting himself to work. There were things to be done, after all: phone calls to make, arrangements to set straight. Ellen had driven straight through in a near-record forty hours, stopping only for gasoline and cigarettes. She could have pulled over; she should have pulled over. Her father was pushing the arrangements back a few days to give her time, but she couldn't have slept if she wanted to. She was fueled by the unexpected grief that sad in her stomach like a thick, dull rock. She was fueled by guilt and longing and regret.

The phone call itself had been short and sweet, the way she always hoped these things would be. There was no real crying, and there was no real consolation. She had answered on the third ring.

"Hello?"

“Ellen.” She recognized her father’s voice immediately, despite the years. Despite the time and the anger, she knew.

“Daddy?” she had asked, forcing herself to remain calm despite already welling tears. Somewhere around Oklahoma she would decide she had known the news before she heard it. She would avoid thinking of “precognition,” but instead would call it instinct. She would tiptoe around her thoughts and she would refuse them recognition. It was easier that way. It was always easier that way.

“It’s your sister,” he had said. Less than an hour later, she would be on the 15 north, headed first to Barstow in the heart of the Mohave, then veering east. She would keep her window rolled down and a cigarette lit. She would smoke a pack by Arizona and another by New Mexico. She would push through state after state, crossing rivers and mountains and plains. She would cry and laugh; she would sit in silence. A few times, she would switch on the radio only to grow tired of it too soon to make it worthwhile. She would decide not to bother.

She would call her father from a payphone in Missouri only to get the answering machine, wishing she had hung up sooner to avoid the trivial charge. She would hang up and light another cigarette on the way to back to the car.

She felt herself sinking somehow as the terrain shifted around her, brown to red and back to brown, sandy soil to moist, dark earth. She could feel the barometric pressure through the glass and sense the mercury’s height to the degree. The Nova began to slowly flatten into the earth until they became one and she was no longer driving, she was circling. She was rotating. She pictured herself as a

hump in the concrete speeding beneath the painted center line, defying time and space and commanding the rising and setting of the sun. Her mind turned to cartoons she had seen as a child: Bugs Bunny swiftly burrowing further and further, deeper and deeper still. She was untouchable. Here, on the road, she was invincible.

When she finally piloted her Nova past the faded white sign with the cheerfully small-town etching she could see in her dreams – *Population: One more now* – she broke free and regained a clarity of mind she had forgotten was possible. She pulled her car to a stop outside Freeley's Hardware and cursed herself for not stopping to rest somewhere. She tried to remember her journey but could think only in blurred images, a meandering mosaic of the American frontier.

She found herself parked on Main Street, a few inches too far from the curb. She was amazed she had pulled even that off. Her engine hissed and clicked censure at her for the brutalizing it had taken as she sat, hands folded in her lap. She hadn't realized she was crying again.