

WINTER THAW

NANCY BRANCH

THE TRAIN HAS HALTED somewhere between Dalhousie and Jacquet River, the last stop before Pine Ridge, where I will get off. I'm not sure where we are, for I am on the wrong side of the train and see no familiar landmarks. Outside the warmth of my sleeper, the sun creeps above the tops of frozen tree branches. Pale light falls across the clearing, tranquil and hushed with a powdering of new snow. Whatever lives here lies sleeping or hidden beneath the winter chill.

The train finally pulls into the Pine Ridge station, its brakes dumping air with a loud hiss into the frigid morning. Struggling with a suitcase full of Christmas gifts and hard-to-find baking items, I step down from the coach. For a moment, I imagine that I see the tall, lanky figure of my father—dead some ten years ago from Parkinson's—reach to retrieve my luggage in one easy motion. The vision fades, but the ache of memory remains. No one is here to greet me. Mumma is at home with her caregiver, and none of her neighbours has thought to pick me up. The tightness in my throat abates as I hail a cab and head to the rental car agency.

From the outside, our house has changed little in over sixty years. It sits tall and square on a hill, buffeted by the relentless northwest wind. As the rental car crests the hill, I see that someone has rebuilt the deck flush with the side door, no doubt to prevent my mother from stumbling as she steps outside. A new handrail runs along the steps.

"I'm home," I call out as I key the lock of the former shed, which was converted into a hallway and ground-level bedroom and bath for my mother.

In the overheated kitchen, Mumma does not rise from her lunch to greet me. Instead, her caregiver, Mrs. Hinton, advances to shake my hand. We exchange pleasantries while I cast sidelong glances at Mumma, more shrunken and stooped than she'd been six months ago during my summer visit. I give her hug and kiss the top of her head. The stale odour of unwashed hair wafts upwards, and she smiles, a small tug at one corner of her mouth.

"I'm not hungry for my dessert," she says as she pushes her fruit salad away.

Later that afternoon I call my husband. “Oh, you know,” I say in response to his query. “Changed. Older. And it doesn’t seem to matter that I’m here.”

It is dawn. I rise from restless slumber to morning silence. The wind that had moaned all night has finally subsided. Today is Sunday, and in the implacable routine that has become my mother’s life, that means going to church. I descend the creaking staircase into the kitchen. Although church is not for another two hours, Mumma sits, coated and booted, beside the door.

“You’d better hurry,” she urges. “We’re going to be late.”

Half an hour before the service, I help Mumma up the vestibule steps into the care of a sidesman. In the kitchen, I fill plates with the sweet breads and cookies that will be served after Holy Communion. Pecan squares, plum bread and ginger creams arranged on serving trays, I move through the back doors to join my mother in the nave.

Settling into the cramped space beside her, I sense that something is off. For the first time in sixty-five years, Mumma has sat in the wrong pew. Several times during the service, she leans into me and whispers, “When do we go out for coffee?” And each time she asks, her body grows a little tighter, her eyes a little more frantic. I lead her into the back hall to calm her.

In the kitchen, the tension eases from the sides of her mouth as she falls into the familiar routine. She hums and removes Saran Wrap from plates of cookies and, with exaggerated caution, shuffles towards the serving table in the next room. The cookies slide and teeter on the plates’ edges.

“Let me,” I begin, but my words trail off when I catch the determined set of her mouth. Turning from her, I rearrange her ginger creams, which years ago had taken first prize three summers in a row at the Gloucester County Exhibition. These are misshapen and splotched with flour from the dipping glass she has used to flatten them.

“Nice to see the Bobbsey twins working together again,” says the choir director, who has poked her head through the kitchen doorway. “Just like old times, eh?”

“Yeah,” I say as I watch Mumma through a sliding service window pick up a cookie from the floor.

A week into my visit, the weather shifts. The wind, which has raged with icy fury since my arrival, has finally relented. Outside, the window ther-

mometer registers plus eight degrees Celsius. Water drips from the eaves, and sunlight spills onto the tiled floor.

By the time I finish brushing my teeth, I have made a decision. I will walk to the river after lunch. Already the landscape's contours have changed. The barn that stood for over a hundred years is newly flattened, its massive beams salvaged by local barn busters, the remains bulldozed beneath the earth that had once put forth corn and potatoes in profusion. The basin field has been sold: an elementary school now rises from its hill on whose steep slope my uncle once baled hay in the August heat. And from the upstairs window, I can no longer see Robin's Pond, where we skated in the blood-red glow of the afternoon sun. The pond is now choked with cattails, their headless spikes tangled and heaped like an oversized funeral pyre.

I find Mumma seated beside the kitchen table. I boil an egg and place a plate of blueberry muffins on the counter. A smile seeps across her face.

"Grammie Eastland used to make cupcakes for your father when he was courting me," she says.

I know the story well. But I am a willing audience, so I settle into the worn comfort of the press-back rocker.

"The night your father returned from overseas, Grammie baked a batch to celebrate. She left them on the dining-room table to cool, but when she went to get them for tea, that useless dog of ours had eaten every last one, paper liners and all. And them hard to come by after the war."

Mumma's smile grows wicked. "Your grandmother *never* swore, but when she saw what Rowdy had done, she let out a furious oath: *That damn dog! I hope he doesn't SHIT for a week!*"

Gleeful, complicit, we laugh until tears run down our cheeks. The story strikes me as doubly funny because Mumma is a more pious woman than my grandmother ever was.

"Tell it again, Mumma," I urge, hoping to prolong the happiness I see sweeping across her face.

But the light in her eyes fades like a pebble dropped into dark water, and she looks suddenly stricken.

"What was I talking about?"

After lunch, I lock the door and set off for the riverbank. The sun strikes warm on my face, and a light breeze stirs my hair. Hay stubble dotting the field is still ringed with snow, but the ground beneath is sodden. Following

ancient wagon ruts, I cross the field to a break in the split-rail fence and stop to listen to the sound of snow dripping from boughs of pine and balsam fir. Farther along, where the undergrowth thickens, wet branches slap me in the face, sending droplets of water showering down my back.

Through mossy birch and tamarack, past rotted deadfalls and a rusty-hinged gate, I approach an older stand of trees. Broken and misshapen, many of them, with trunks furrowed by burrowing insects, or single outstretched limbs that implore the sky. And yet they endure.

Close now to the steep drop of the riverbank, I pick my way along an old path, spongy with layers of fallen pine needles. Instead of retreating to more solid ground, I move to the edge of a gully that careens downward and twists darkly out of sight towards the river. Impulsively I grab an overhanging branch and lean forward to peer into the chasm. My stomach clenches and I jerk back onto the safety of the path.

Anxious now for a better view of the river, I hurry along towards a place where the undergrowth thins. From beneath a snarl of branches a winter wren flits. Its high tumbling trill fills the air with tremulous sound, and is gone. The song is pure and beautiful while it lasts.

In a clearing, I sit on a rotting stump and scan the Nepisiguit. For the most part, it is as it has always been—silent and serene. But at its centre, where the current is strong, blue-black water rushes through a ragged break in the ice. The sun arcs westward and casts indigo shadows across the river. Now only the uppermost tips of trees on the opposite bank are still touched by light. As the sun drops in the afternoon sky, the air cools and I return home.

“I’m back, Mumma,” I call into the stillness.

There is no response. The kettle is boiling and I cross the kitchen to unplug it. A chill colder than ice water shoots through me. But I find Mumma softly snoring in her La-Z-Boy. Unwilling to disturb her, I tiptoe to the sink to get a drink. There on the counter is the silk flower arrangement I gave her for Christmas. I wonder why she has moved it from the middle of the dining-room table. It is only when I spot the empty two-cup measure she uses for watering flowers that I understand.

Both hands against the counter for support, I lean my forehead against the cupboard door. Behind my closed eyelids, an image floats into view: Mumma on her hands and knees in the summer garden, weeding the churchyard ivy gone rampant among her tiger lilies. Dark locks of hair straggle

from beneath her sun hat, and her hands are streaked with dirt. But her eyes are luminous, joyful as she urges me to join her. "Come," she beckons. "Come feel the good earth between your fingers."

Looking again at the drowned silk flower arrangement, I feel the warning prick of tears. The familiar thump of the La-Z-Boy against the wall causes me to stiffen. Feigning a sudden interest in the breadbox latch, I do not turn as Mumma scuffs into the kitchen. In a display of affection so uncommon since her illness, she hugs my waist and presses her cheek against my back.

"What's that for?" I ask.

"Because you need it."

Turning, I see her eyes are no longer glazed, but clear and startlingly blue. Something powerful passes between us and, for a moment, Mumma is keenly present. I wrap my arms around her and rest my head on a thinning patch of her white hair.

"Oh, Mumma. What are we going to do?"

She does not answer me, for what is there to say? Instead, she pulls me closer and fists my back with a fierceness that renders me almost breathless. And there we stand, the two of us, in the middle of the kitchen floor, rocking each other against the deepening winter twilight.

Later that evening, Mumma retreats once more into silence. She dozes in her La-Z-Boy while I watch TV. Glancing sideways at her bowed head, I wrestle with the weight of sadness. I think then of the winter wren at the riverbank, trilling wild and beautiful beneath a tangle of fir. And for the first time I begin to believe, really believe, that somewhere deep inside the shadowed passageways of her mind, Mumma's spirit still resides. Vital and aware.

Reaching towards her sleeping form, I place a hand over her arthritic fingers. Gently, so not to startle her. Her lids flutter open. She looks at me, blankly at first, and then with eyes that grow warm and lucent in the lamplight.