

BEFORE

A Novel



I FORGET

Tory Henwood Hoen

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For my daughter
and
in memory of my father

What you can plan is too small for you to live.

—DAVID WHYTE, “WHAT TO REMEMBER WHEN WAKING”

Chapter 1

I am stuck between selves. Right now, I am no one.

I am also stuck, literally, in the mud, the wheels of my janky hatchback spinning in fruitless circles as they work themselves deeper into the earth. I should have known better than to drive up this particular road in this particular car at this particular time of year, but I forgot. It has been a while since I visited my father's house. More than a while. It has been nine years.

As I rev the engine, I recall his classic refrain: "If you visit during mud season, you must really mean it." In this area of New York—way upstate, farther than most urbanites are willing to go nowadays—there is this murky fifth season that falls between winter and spring, when everything is brown and dense, when the dirt roads turn soft and unruly as they thaw inch by stubborn inch. The other four seasons have their obvious charms, but mud season is a slog, palatable only to the locals and navigable only with the deepest of treads. My treads are inadequate, and I haven't been a local for a long time, which is probably why my five-hour journey has reached a premature conclusion here, a mile short of the house, where the cracked asphalt yields to dirt (or in this instance, sludge). I climb out of the car and wave my phone skyward, trying to get a signal so I can ask my older sister, Nina, to come fetch me in her sturdy Subaru. But again, I should know better—this section of woods is especially dense, and there is no hope of cell service. As the sun starts to dip behind the pines, I realize I'll have to start

walking if I want to get to the house before dark. This would not normally be a problem—except my suitcase is on wheels.

I squelch my way around the car, pop the hatch, and dig through the miscellany that has accumulated in the back. If wealth were measured in complimentary linen tote bags, I would be a millionaire. I spot one that bears the logo of my employer, Actualize, and our tagline: WHAT WOULD YOUR BEST SELF DO?

“My best self can fuck right off,” I say and then immediately feel bad. I apologize to the limp bag. “Sorry. It’s not your fault. That was my quarter-life crisis talking.” I’m convinced I have hurt the tote’s feelings, so I grab it from the pile. Empathy is a good thing, but I might have too much of it.

I transfer a few essentials from my suitcase to the bag, then close the hatch and lock the car, although there’s no need for such caution. Almost nobody comes this way.

The road snakes uphill, and I take a few steps in the sucking mud before finding a smoother groove where the dirt meets the undergrowth. It occurs to me that this is the exact time of year when the black bears are emerging from their winter sleep, and while I am an animal lover, I’m not looking to encounter any large wildlife at this moment.

“Hi, bears! It’s me, Cricket! Just passing through! Nothing to see here!” I call out.

It’s not far to the house: just a half mile up and then another half mile down toward the water. It doesn’t take long for me to reach the crest of the hill, where I can see Catwood Pond stretching below—a ragged gash in the landscape formed by glaciers eons ago. Still partially frozen, its surface is mottled with patches of snow and inky soft spots, where water surges up from the ancient springs that feed the pond. Given its considerable size and depth, I always thought Catwood Pond deserved the designation of lake, but we don’t always get what we deserve. The pond was supposed to have been named for some guy named Gerald Gatwood, who built the first camp in this corner of the Adirondacks. Someone’s smudgy handwriting was to blame for

the misrecording of the pond's name in official records, and no one ever bothered to correct it. Catwood it was, and Catwood it would remain. Sometimes our mistakes define us—that's just how life is.

The dimness settles around me as I walk, and the familiarity of this place seeps back into my senses. I know it's only a matter of time until I stumble upon the one memory that is too hard to bear. Instead, I think back to last week and the call from my sister.



"Do you have a minute? It's about Dad..." Nina had said.

I braced for bad news, certain that he was dead.

"Dead? No!" Nina laughed off my panic.

"Well, why would you say it like that? 'It's about Dad...'"

"Sorry, sorry. There's no crisis. It's actually good news. I got offered a postdoc," she clarified. My heart still pounding, I tried to convert my worry into excitement as she continued: "In Stockholm."

"Stockholm?" I didn't even realize she had been applying for positions, let alone considering moving abroad. Her PhD is in computational biology, with a focus on maternal health, and she has spent the last few years studying endometriosis at the molecular level. Biomarkers, DNA sequencing, protein networks—these are the terms she uses to explain her work.

I had naively assumed that she was content to analyze DNA on this side of the Atlantic, but I could hear the excitement in her voice as she said, "There's an institute in Stockholm where I can jump right into the next phase of my research. Unlike this country, Sweden actually funds women's health studies."

"Women's health? I think I've heard of it. But surely it can't be complex enough to merit *research*," I joked.

"Shocking, I know," Nina said. "And I'll be working with Elin Sundholm, so it doesn't get any better than that."

I had no idea who that was, but it had been a long time since I had heard Nina this energized. I knew there was no slowing her momentum, so I turned to logistics. “Okay ... so how will that work? Dad will go with you?”

“I don’t think that would make sense. It would be too disruptive for him, and not ideal for me.”

“Right, of course. But who will take care of him?”

Nina was silent for a moment. “I’ve looked into our options. Dad’s Medicare doesn’t cover long-term care, so we’ll have to pay out of pocket. Full-time, in-home help is way too expensive, so I think our only option is to move him into a private memory-care facility.”

“Oh,” I said, letting it sink in.

“There are some not too far from here, near Lake George,” she continued. “They’re not cheap, but we could swing it if we sell the house. Unless you want to take over.”

I assumed she was joking about the last part. I live in New York City, and I barely have the wherewithal to take care of myself, let alone a seventy-four-year-old with dementia. I am only twenty-six, which means I am essentially a larva. In contemporary America, childhood can last well into one’s thirties, forties, and even fifties. I’ve seen it happen. And besides, my father doesn’t even know who I am anymore. He hasn’t recognized me for at least three or four years—I don’t know exactly when I faded from his memory, but I know I’m gone. “Me? Move to Locust? You’re kidding, right?”

“Only half kidding. Honestly, I think Dad would love it. He always liked you best.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is. Mom likes me more; Dad likes you more.” Nina said it as if everyone agreed on this point. It’s true that my father and I were once exceptionally close, but that seemed like a lifetime ago. She went on: “It could be good for you, too. Change of scene, change of perspective. Maybe Gemma would let you work remotely?”

“Doubtful. It’s hard to bring someone their matcha remotely.”

She snorted. “Fair enough.” In the silence that followed, I could almost hear her weighing her words. “Listen, Cricket. I know Catwood Pond is a complicated place for you. But there was a time when you loved it here. It was your favorite spot on earth.”

“I can’t, Nina. We both know I can’t.”

She didn’t push any further, and we eventually came to a mutual decision: find a long-term-care facility for our father and sell the house to pay for it. Really it was Nina’s decision—she is our family’s de facto leader—but she is skilled at including me without actually expecting anything of me. She has always known how to trick me into thinking I have agency. In that respect, she’s an exemplary older sister.



So that is why I’m here now, traipsing through the mud-laden woods in my flimsy canvas sneakers. This weekend, we will tour two potential homes for Dad. Nina leaves for Stockholm in two months, so we don’t have long to get organized, but she had the foresight to wait-list him a year ago, just in case, so we know he is guaranteed a spot. My sister is always a step ahead.

As I round the bend toward the house, I am hit by the scent of April—mossy and metallic, comforting and melancholy, woodsmoke on the cold wind. I reach the driveway and pass the carved-wood sign that bears our last name, Campbell. The nails holding it flush to the spruce tree have rusted, and dribbling sap has stained it over the years.

The undulating surface of the long dirt drive is still familiar underfoot. I avoid the deep grooves worn by tires, choosing instead to walk along the elevated ridge of matted grass between them. Before long, I emerge from the trees to see the illuminated windows of the house, unblinking, watching my advance. I sprint the final stretch like I used to as a child. Back then, it was to outrun the werewolves. Now, it’s to outpace the ghosts.

Chapter 2

The outer screen door drifts closed behind me, having lost its eager snap years ago.

“Helloooo?” I kick off my soggy sneakers and sock-creep through the mudroom, nearly tripping on a rusty fishing rod as I inhale the unchanged smell of the house: cedar, smoke, a hint of mildew.

“Cricket?” I hear Nina call in response. As I enter the drowsy light of the galley kitchen, she turns from her cutting board and comes in for a careful hug, extending her arms like a zombie so as not to smear me with her garlic-covered fingers. As usual, she looks like a more organized version of me: smoother hair, sharper features, better posture. Though we spring from the same source, I have always felt that she is the shiny floor model, while I am the problematic prototype.

My father shuffles in from the great room and looks at me with interest. “Well, hello,” he says with a quizzical smile, as if he’s pleasantly surprised to have a guest.

“Dad, Cricket is here,” Nina reminds him with excitement.

“Ah, yes, of course,” he says, matching her tone. I know he doesn’t know who I am, but he does a good job of feigning cheerful familiarity.

“Hi, Dad.” It has been over two years since I saw him in person, when Nina brought him to the city for a few days—and when I realized he didn’t know me anymore. Now, I wonder who I am to him. The word *Dad* doesn’t

seem to faze him one way or the other. Perhaps he has stopped ascribing meaning to it and just assumes it is his name. I open my arms, and as we hug, I am shocked by how diminished he is. Over Zoom, I have noted that a little less of him exists each time we talk, but onscreen, it's difficult to pinpoint where the recession is taking place. Now, in person, it's clear how slight he is. He once stood nearly six feet tall, but we're essentially the same height now. I may even be a hair taller.

"I think I've finally outgrown you, Dad."

"Impossible," he says. We step back to examine each other before he concedes, "Well, you may be longer in the thorax, but never in the legs."

His white hair has thinned. What's left of it encircles his head like the wispy pappi of a dandelion, ready to be carried away on the breeze. His eyebrows, however, are flourishing. They look like two scraggly animals that have hitched a ride on his brow.

"Still rocking the wide wale," I note, referring to his olive-green corduroy trousers.

"We love a wide wale," confirms Nina as she resumes her chopping and stirring, efficiently moving from counter to stove, stove to counter.

My father looks down to contemplate the texture of the corduroy. "The only problem is, I think these are women's pants." He turns to Nina. "Is it possible that they're women's pants?"

"Those are most certainly your pants, Dad."

"They're mine. But are they *meant* for a woman?"

Nina and I chortle as she assures him, "No! You've had them forever. They're definitely men's."

He accepts this answer without protest, and then turns his attention back to me. "So, my friend, where are you in from?"

"New York City."

"New York City!" He seems energized by the idea of it, as if it were an alluring concept rather than the place where he spent the first half of his life.

"Is that where you're living now?"

I've always lived there, technically, except for a few stints spent trying on different lives: a summer as a ranch hand in Wyoming, a winter as a ski bum in Big Sky, a spring as a ceramicist's assistant in New Mexico, and another winter as a waitress in the Florida Keys. Even if he didn't have Alzheimer's, I wouldn't blame him for not being able to keep track of me, given how aimless I've been since I dropped out of college six years ago.

"Yes," I answer. "I drove all the way up from New York. Five hours. Plus the time it took me to walk here from the main road."

"Oh no." Nina halts her chopping. "You got stuck?"

"It was inevitable. My car might as well be a go-kart."

"You drove the Raisin?" she asks, referring to the unfortunate purple-brown hue of my jalopy. "No chance of that car making it up the road. The mud is really bad this year."

"If you visit during mud season, you must really mean it," I respond, looking to bring the moment home, but I can tell my father does not recognize his own famous adage.

For a second, I feel a stab of sadness, and I clench down on it. Alzheimer's is a devious affliction. Not necessarily for the people who have it—who can say what their experience is, ultimately?—but for those who witness its machinations: a forgotten name or sacred memory, the lost thread of a story, the endlessly repeated questions. The ground is always shifting beneath us. Every time I speak to my father, I brace for minor heartbreak, but it still sneaks up on me.

"We can call someone to pull you out tomorrow," says Nina. "Do you want to go get your suitcase?"

"No need. I brought my desert-island items." I hold up my lumpy tote bag. "Excuse me for a moment. I'm going to primp." They know this is a joke. No one primps around here—it's a no-makeup, no-hairdryers, no-fuss kind of place.

As I leave the kitchen, I see the neatly painted sign my father created for our childhood dog, who had a penchant for nicking food off the table—or sometimes right out of our hands.

Crumpet's Rule

On the plate?

You must wait.

If it drops,

Lick your chops.

Crumpet died sixteen years ago, but her rule remains. I pass through the narrow doorway that leads to the great room, where the stone fireplace ripples with warmth, the flames casting spasmodic shadows on the ceiling, whose dark wooden beams are sturdy as ever. This house is well over a century old and was built according to the tastes of a long-gone generation that flocked to the Adirondacks in the late 1800s, erecting camps on the many lakes and ponds that dot the region. The Rockefellers and their ilk owned stately, sprawling properties, but more understated ones, like ours, were the norm. Many still don't have electricity or road access, which makes our main house—which is equipped with both—relatively modern. But it's nothing fancy, and it still bears the look and layout of a bygone age: constructed from heavy spruce logs, with exposed timber dominating the interior. Today, people build houses with airy, light-filled kitchens that open to fluid living-dining spaces. But here, the aesthetic is darker and more cordoned off. All of the rooms in this house have doors, designations, decisiveness. They don't flow; they function. They endure.

I ascend the worn wooden staircase, whose landing jogs left and then leads up to a small central hallway. My room has a set of bunk beds, a separate twin bed, a single window that peers toward the pond, and a steeply sloped ceiling that I smack my head on every time I return. The walls are paneled with knotty pine, giving it the feel of a tree house or a squirrel's drey, cozy and contained, if a bit claustrophobic. I switch on the wobbly ceramic lamp that sits on the dresser. There is a framed photo of me and Nina standing on the porch of this house. I must have been around ten, with braces and a Speedo tan, which means Nina would have been sixteen. I am dramatically mugging for the camera, while Nina looks as though she is

barely tolerating having her photo taken. She has one foot up on the railing as she ties her running sneakers. In those days, she was always either about to go for a run or just coming back from one. She rarely stood still.

Beside the photo sits a wooden box (also pine, always pine) with a *C* carved on the lid. Technically, *C* stands for Christine, my real name, but my nickname took hold almost as soon as I was born, because, as the story goes, I never cried—I chirped. The contents of the box have not shifted in the last decade: a tangle of woven friendship bracelets, a hair clip that's missing a few teeth, a smattering of coins, and a ring made out of a fishing fly with magenta feathers. I slip it on my middle finger, where it still fits perfectly. At the bottom of the box sits a slightly faded Polaroid. A blond teenager is airborne, having just jumped off a huge boulder by the edge of the pond. One of his legs kicks sideways and his wavy hair extends straight up over his head as gravity does its work. I remember waiting for just the right moment to snap this shot. Somewhere, there is an identical photo of me, taken by him. But that one is lost.

I remove the ring, put it back in the box, and slam the lid closed. Suddenly feeling cold, I move to the closet in search of a sweater. When I open it, I am confronted with the red swimsuit I used to wear as a lifeguard. It is faded now and starchy to the touch, its elasticity eroded. On the floor, my old Birkenstocks sit, bearing the imprints of my sweaty teenage feet. I take a green sweatshirt from a hanger, and as I pull my head through the neck, I notice the surprise that Nina has left on the pillow of the twin bed: it's Dandy, my beloved stuffed lion on whom I performed so many medical procedures (a tail reattachment, an eye replacement, a fluff realignment) that he now looks like an abstract approximation of a feline.

My phone lights up on top of the dresser, and I take a quick look at my texts. Nothing from Dylan, which is no surprise. We see each other when we see each other, without expectation. But I do believe he appreciates me, on some level, at least some of the time. And I feel the same way about him, more or less. There's a comfort to what we have. A sufficient compatibility. "It's not nothing," as he likes to say.

I know from experience that when people love you—*really* love you—they can end up in peril. So a long time ago, I resolved to date only people who didn't quite love me. It's not that they didn't *like* me, but there was no possibility of their making any kind of major effort or sacrifice on my behalf. To this day, I prefer a partner who values himself more than he values me. That way, I can protect us both.



"I'm glad to see Dandy is thriving," I say as I reenter the kitchen.

"He might be indestructible." Nina grins. "I found him in the attic. Never go up there, by the way. Unless you like mouse poop."

"Nothing wrong with a little mouse poop!" my father calls from the dining room. "It's fortifying."

Nina hands me two plates, and I carry them to the table where Dad is already seated and wearing an adult-sized bib whose pattern showcases a dizzying number of tropical fish.

"That's nice," I say. "Is it new?"

"New-ish," says Nina, settling at the head of the table. "And he looks great in it. Don't you, Dad?"

"It's very attractive," my father confirms, admiring his accessory. I realize that even if we had put a bib on him a decade ago, long before it was necessary, he would not have objected; nor would he have objected the decade before that. He has always been game for frivolity, delighted to oblige our whims and happy to laugh at himself. The opposite of our mother, who is ruthlessly goal-oriented and believes that any form of relaxing will lead to ruin.

"So what's the latest? What's been going on here?" I ask.

"Here? Mostly just birds," says my father. "Magnificent red birds."

"Cardinals," Nina specifies.

"That's right. Cardinals. We have all manner of wildlife here," he explains, as if I'm visiting this area for the first time. Then he whispers, as if

disclosing a secret: “And soon it will be time to swim!”

Nina offers him a bowl of grated Parmesan.

“What in god’s name...?” My father examines the feathery shreds.

“It’s Parmesan. You love Parmesan.”

“Looks like Grandfather’s eyebrows,” he says conclusively before dumping a spoonful onto his plate.

He’s not wrong, I think, although I have no idea which “Grandfather” he is referring to—his or mine. I only knew one of my grandparents—my mother’s mother—and she died when I was five.

“The thing about surviving the winter here is that you must love to read, which I do. And you should also have a dog, which we don’t. Do we?” my father asks Nina, who shakes her head and replies: “Just the cat.”

“The cat, of course. And the wildlife. Just last week, a bear tore through our garbage bins...”

He begins a story, and Nina fact-checks him as he goes. (“That was last year.”) I know she feels it’s important to keep him tied to the truth with regular reminders and corrections, but I don’t see the point. Even before he had Alzheimer’s, my father never let himself be inhibited by facts. To the contrary, his creative interpretation of events always enhanced his storytelling. His reality has always been an abstract work of art; and perhaps that’s true for all of us.

My father finishes his yarn, and then asks, “Is there anything more satisfying than a potato?” as he takes a bite of cauliflower.

This time, Nina doesn’t have the heart to correct him, so we just nod in agreement and exchange an amused glance. Alzheimer’s is not funny, except when it is, which is often. It has the capacity to be both devastating and hilarious, and those who witness it learn to live in limbo, because there’s nowhere else to live.

As Nina and I catch up, Dad does a convincing job of following along. He nods and laughs when we do, though it’s clear he doesn’t always get our references or grasp whom we’re snickering about. Nowadays, I only have superficial knowledge of the people in this town, but in the four years since

Nina moved here to take care of our father, she has gotten a fuller picture. Still, there is not much local gossip to report.

“The Seavey house still hasn’t sold,” she says. “That’s all I’ve got: news about what *hasn’t* happened. Off-season is lethally boring here. I’ll be glad for a change of scene.”

Nina always had a meticulous plan for her life, and moving back to Locust was never part of it—but even she hadn’t seen the pandemic coming. When the first cases of COVID were reported, she had been well-ensconced in her PhD program in Boston. But as 2020 progressed, we began to worry more about our father. His memory had been dwindling for a while, and when he backed his car out of the garage without remembering to open the door, it was clear he should not be living on his own any longer. Finding adequate at-home help was not feasible in those early days of the pandemic—the exposure risk was too high, as was the expense. So Nina quickly pivoted, relocating to Catwood Pond and arranging to write her dissertation from here while keeping an eye on our dad. Not long after, he was formally diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.

At the time, I was working on a ranch in Wyoming, and though my responsibilities were few, the idea of returning to Locust never crossed my mind. Plus, Nina had stepped up without hesitation, and we all knew—without even having to discuss it—that she was the right woman for the job.

“More?” says Nina, offering me the bottle of Malbec we have nearly finished. Before I can answer, I feel a cloud of fur brush past my legs, and suddenly there is an animal on the table.

“Our beauty,” says Dad, bopping the cat on the head. Dominic is a Maine coon of unknown age and origin. He appeared at the house the summer I was twelve and never left. That makes him at least fifteen, though he could be twice that for all we know. His voluminous coat gives him the look of a wolverine, and I notice that some fur has begun to clump around the base of his tail. For a time, he was my best friend. Now, he looks at me with skepticism.

“There you are!” I hold out my hand to stroke his forehead, but he dodges it. Maybe he doesn’t recognize me, or maybe I’ve lost my touch. For most of my childhood, I was obsessed with animals and determined to become a veterinarian, but that dream fell by the wayside when I dropped out of school.

“Hey!” Nina snaps her fingers toward the cat as he nips a piece of chicken off my father’s plate. Nina is not an animal person. “Stop it, Dom!”

“It’s quite alright,” says my father, giving the cat a head scratch. “We have an understanding.”

“I guess Crumpet’s Rule does not apply to cats,” I note. “But I’m glad to see Dom’s appetite is still robust. And that coat is glorious.”

“Oh yes. She’s a very handsome girl,” says Dad, whose grasp of animal gender was always tenuous and is now completely fluid.

“*He*,” says Nina. “He’s a boy.”

“A boy?” My father looks incredulous. “With a name like Dawn?”

Nina and I burst into laughter, and my father slips another hunk of chicken to the cat.

“Carl will have his work cut out for him,” says Nina, referring to a neighbor who has agreed to take Dominic when my dad moves to his new residence. Neither of the two homes we’re touring tomorrow accepts animals, and Nina is in no rush to take the cat to Sweden. I certainly can’t handle a pet right now, though the idea of re-homing Dom makes me sad. Or maybe it’s the idea of re-homing my dad that is actually weighing on me. It’s all mixed up together.

A lull settles over the table, and after a moment, Nina says, “Okay, Dad. Let’s get you ready for bed.”

“Already?” I look at my watch. It’s only 8:30.

“He goes to bed at nine o’clock sharp, and he needs a bath tonight,” she explains.

“A bath?” My father looks appalled. “During *mud season*? What’s the point?”