

Ashes to Ashes

A Portrait of David Fuller Peterson

Prologue: The Woodpile

The chainsaw is a Stihl, smaller than the ones he used to run. He's moved to the lighter saws lately—amazing how good they are now, how much power they pack into something you can handle all day without your arms giving out. He's gone through a lot of chainsaws over the years. Burned them up cutting wood in this timber.

He's on the family land today. The Vermillion farm, the place where it all started. Dennis works it now—sixth-born, seventy-four years old, still out here every day like their father was. Bob took the north section when they divided it up, but Bob is laid up now, mostly blind, lungs giving out, spending his days in bed in the farmhouse. The oldest Peterson brother, the one who got the height and the athleticism, reduced to waiting.

Dave doesn't think about that. His parents called him David, but everyone else has called him Dave his whole life. He thinks about the deadfall in front of him—oak and hedge, trees that came down in last spring's storms. Good hardwood, seasoned now, ready to be bucked into rounds and hauled back to Wamego. The wood stove on his porch will eat it all winter.

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Eighty-one years old and he's still cutting firewood. Alone. His doctor would probably object. His wife certainly does—she watches him load the chainsaw into the truck and says nothing, but he can feel her worry from across the kitchen. He goes anyway. Some things you don't stop doing just because you're old.

The saw bites into the oak and the sawdust sprays and he is ten years old again, running through these same trees with his brothers, faces smeared with crushed berries, bows made from willow branches, arrows made from nettles pulled from the timber floor. The Red-Berry Tribe from the east bank. The Purple-Berry Tribe from the west. They'd launch those nettle-arrows across the creek at each other, putting arc on the shots, trying to nail a purple-faced enemy on the other side.

He was the oldest one in the woods. Bob was bigger, more athletic, but Bob had other things to do—Dave was the one who led the raids, who picked the teams, choosing from the younger ones. John, Mike, Steve, Dennis, Tom—building armies from brothers. The girls stayed out of it. Anne, Kathy, Jean—they learned early to find the calm spaces, to move through the chaos of seven boys without getting caught in it.

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The saw runs out of gas. He sets it down, stretches his back, looks at the pile of rounds he's cut. Not bad for a morning's work.

His brothers are old men now. All of them still alive, which is something—ten kids, and every one of them made it past seventy. Bob barely, laid up the way he is. But the rest are still here, scattered across Kansas and beyond. Mike's out west somewhere. Steve's in Oregon. John's still in Wamego, just down the road. They don't see each other as much as they should.

But once or twice a year, they gather. The Fourth of July, usually, in the barn on Dennis' place—the same barn that was there when their grandfather bought the land, the one where they sweated through summers putting up hay. The family has grown so large now that David can't keep track of all the grandkids and great-grandkids. Faces he recognizes but the names... he's heard them but can't attach to the right child. The Peterson line branching and branching until it's a forest of its own.

When the brothers get together, they don't dwell on the old days. They talk about the weather, the news, what's happening with the kids. Ordinary stuff. But there's something underneath it—the shared knowledge of this land, this barn, this timber. They see Bernard in each other. The jaw, the stubbornness, the compulsion to be useful. They see themselves in each other too—the same pressures, the same patterns, the same weight they've all carried in their own ways. They don't have to say it. They all came from the same place.

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His father has been dead for years now. Bernard Peterson made it to ninety-four, though the last couple months were hard—his heart giving out, the body finally failing the will that had driven it so long. He'd moved to town in the early nineties, handed the keys to Bob and Dennis, walked away from the farm he'd worked for forty years. He had to leave. He couldn't see work that needed doing and not do it. The only way to rest was to put distance between himself and the land.

David understands that now. The compulsion to be useful. The inability to sit still when there's something to be done. He comes out here to cut wood, and when Dennis needs a hand, he shows up—but he's not a farmer, never really was. He left the farm at eighteen and never came back to work it. The connection is something else. The land itself. The timber. The feel of this place in his bones.

He thinks about the years ahead. He's eighty-one. His father made it to ninety-four. That's thirteen years, maybe, if the genes hold and the body cooperates. Thirteen more winters of cutting wood and feeding the stove. Thirteen more springs of watching the fields green up. It sounds like a lot. It sounds like nothing.

He doesn't fear death. He's seen it. Vietnam, his parents, the friends who went before him. And Trixie—fourteen years she was with him, his black lab-shepherd mix, rescued right after retirement. His walking buddy, his camping companion, the one who went everywhere with him. When he

buried her in the backyard, shovel in hand, dirt piling up beside the hole, something broke open. His shoulders shook. His breath came in gasps. He hadn't cried like that since he was a boy—uncontrollable, animal, the kind of grief that surprises you with its weight. What he fears is helplessness. The slow fade into someone who sits in a chair and waits for meals. Bob is fading that way now, and it's hard to watch.

But you don't get to choose. That's what he's learned. You don't get to choose how you go, or when, or what kind of old man you become. You just show up every day and do the work, and eventually the work stops.

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He loads the rounds into the truck bed, one by one. His shoulders ache. His back complains. He doesn't care.

The timber stands quiet around him. Sycamores and oaks and hedge trees, the creek running somewhere below, the same water that floated their terrible boats and swallowed their rope-swing failures. His father brought them here from Baltimore in 1949, four boys crammed into an overloaded Chevy, and this is what they found: a creek and a timber in the backyard, a treasure beyond anything their city-boy minds could have imagined.

Bernard wanted out. That's what David understands now, in a way he couldn't as a child. Out of the city, out of working for someone else, out of whatever pressure was squeezing him in Baltimore. An aeronautical engineer at Martin Baker who looked at his life and decided to become a farmer. Bernard never talked about why he left, not really. Maybe he hated the big-company bureaucracy. Maybe he was running his mouth to someone with more power, the way David would do decades later at Balderson. Maybe someone was annoyed by him, and he saw what was coming.

David sees the pattern now. His father needed out the way he needed out—the forest ranger fantasy David never acted on, Bernard actually pulled off. The farm wasn't a pastoral dream. It was an escape hatch. And it wasn't easier—God knows it wasn't easier, breaking your back on Kansas dirt with ten mouths to feed. But it was his. The pressure was his own to carry.

He can still smell Bernard's shop if he closes his eyes. Motor oil and welding smoke and the sweet, pungent bite of 2,4-D herbicide. The metal shop had green translucent ceiling tiles that turned the light strange—not daylight exactly, not electric, something in between that made the whole space feel underwater. Bernard would be in there for hours, bent over some piece of equipment, making it work again. The man could fix anything. David learned to fix things by watching through that green light, breathing that air, waiting for his father to need a hand.

There's a story the brothers still tell. Bernard was trying to cut a piece of pipe with a torch—it needed to be square, everything always needed to be square—and he was struggling with it, all the boys watching. Mike ran off and came back with his roller skates. Put the pipe on the skates so it could rotate evenly, spin it slow while the torch did its work. Perfect cut. Bernard looked at his son, pulled

a dollar from his wallet, and handed it over. The boys were in awe. Bernard was such a miser that him giving anyone a dollar was a notable event—the kind of thing you talked about for years. That was Bernard's vocabulary: the opened wallet, the silent acknowledgment. Ingenuity was the currency that mattered in that shop.

Bernard had his own hard years, though nobody talked about them. Around 1968—when David was just back from Vietnam, grinding through college, trying to build a life—something in his father broke. Depression, the doctors called it. He even went through shock therapy. They say today it was set into motion by the Corps of Engineers' plan to flood the valley—threat of losing the farm after everything he'd built. But David thinks it was more than that. It was the pressure of supporting a family of ten on a little 160-acre farm while everybody was watching.

That's the thing about a farm—everybody can see your work. How straight your rows are, how many cows you have, how prosperous things look. The neighboring farmers and families used to make light of Petersonisms—bigger loads on the truck, straighter rows, fewer weeds in the field. Like everyone else, just a little more. The Petersons took the snickers as a compliment. But Bernard's compulsions, his perfectionism—it must have made every visible flaw feel like a judgment. The weight of ten mouths and a hundred neighbors watching.

Bernard declined for two years, spent nearly a decade fighting his way back. Jackie held him together the way wives do, the way Mary Jean would hold David together later. The Peterson men didn't talk about what was eating them. They just endured, or they didn't, and the women kept the world turning while they figured out which.

There's something David didn't learn until after Bernard was gone. In those last hard months, when his father's heart was giving out, Bernard asked to speak to Mary Jean alone. He had a question—just one, the one that had been eating at him for years. What did I do wrong, he asked her, to make David leave the Church?

Mary Jean didn't have an answer. She just sat with him, held his hand, let the question hang in the air of that small room.

She told David later, after the funeral, after the grief had settled into something that could be carried. He thinks about it sometimes—his father on his deathbed, not asking about the farm or the family or the grandchildren, but about this. The faith. The leaving. What he'd done wrong.

David doesn't know if Bernard ever made peace with it. He suspects not. He suspects his father died still wondering, still carrying that question like a stone in his pocket. And David never got to answer it—never got to explain the seeking, the questions, the retreat that cracked everything open. Never got to say: It wasn't you. It was me. It was always me.

But sometimes, late at night, he talks to his father anyway. In his head, in the silence of the porch. He tells Bernard about the books, the seeking, the questions the Church couldn't answer. And sometimes—this is the part he doesn't admit—he finds himself saying things he might say to Mary Jean if he could. Why did you let a religion come between us? Why did the Church matter more than

the people in front of you? He doesn't know if he's asking his dead father or his living wife. Maybe both. Maybe that's the point. Some questions are easier to ask a ghost.

That's the conversation he didn't have. One of many. The Peterson men don't say things like that. They just keep working. They hope the work speaks for them.

David is the only one who still comes here to cut wood. Dennis runs the place, handles the real work of farming. David just visits—cuts what deadfall he can find, hauls it back to Wamego. It's not nostalgia. It's necessity. The wood stove needs feeding. The body needs using. The connection to this timber—to the memories, to the boy he was—needs tending.

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The truck is full. He stands for a moment, looking at the timber, the creek he can't quite see from here but knows is there. Somewhere in these trees, if you dug deep enough, you'd find old nettle-arrows rotting in the soil. Somewhere along the creek bank, the rusted remains of their failed Navy might still be buried in the mud.

He was happy here. That's the thing he sometimes forgets. Before Vietnam, before the job, before the years when his voice was the loudest thing in his house—he was a kid in the timber with berry juice on his face, hunting his brothers through the trees.

That boy is still in here somewhere. So is the other one—the man who came home from work full of rage, who carried the pressure of the day into the house, who was mean and cruel and controlling in ways he can name now but couldn't then. There were hard years. Years when the rage got the better of him, when his voice was too loud and his patience too thin and his family learned to read his moods like weather. His oldest son needed space and took it. His wife held on—not because she was a saint, but because she didn't know how to leave, and wouldn't have anyway.

He doesn't like to think about those years. But they're in here too, somewhere in the timber, part of the soil alongside the nettle-arrows. You don't get to keep only the parts of yourself you're proud of.

He sorts through the rounds before loading the last of them. Some of this wood will just be burned—fuel for the stove, heat for the winter. But a few pieces catch his eye. Good grain, interesting shapes. He sets those aside. He'll take them to the shop, let them dry, see what they want to become.

There's a piece of oak waiting for him at home. He cut it from a tree on Dennis' land last spring—a black oak that came down in a storm, old enough that its rings go back to the forties. He's done the math. That tree was a sapling when Bernard brought the family from Baltimore. It grew in this timber while David grew. The same rain, the same seasons, the same Kansas dirt. Now it sits in his shop, dried and ready, and he doesn't know yet what it wants to be.

That's the secret of woodworking, the thing he's learned over decades: you don't impose a shape on the wood. You remove what doesn't belong until the shape reveals itself. A tool handle, maybe. A

letter opener or a lamp. Something useful and beautiful both—because good tools should be both, and the best ones are.

There's power in that. Making something from this place. Holding a piece of his childhood in his hands every time he picks up the tool.

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His shop is clean, organized, everything in its place—but nothing gets wasted. That's the gift, the one he's proudest of: he can see the second life in things. A broken chair becomes lumber for a shelf. An old motor finds its way into something new. He's been improvising and repurposing his whole life—on the farm, in the Air Force, in forty years of fixing what was broken and making do with what was available.

The kitchen faucet handle broke once, years ago. He replaced it with a drill press handle—red knob and all. Mary Jean just went with it. She'd learned to live with his improvisations, the way you learn to live with weather. Brian's wife saw it on a visit and was appalled. She brought Mary Jean a proper faucet on her next visit.

The thrift comes from Bernard. A child of the Depression, his father would lick his plate clean at dinner—guests or no guests, didn't matter. The man had no shame about it. You didn't waste food, you didn't waste anything, and if someone thought less of you for it, that was their problem. The farm was spotless, the equipment maintained, the fences tight—Bernard was a model citizen in every way that mattered. He just didn't see the point in leaving good gravy on a plate.

David inherited the thrift, softened it a little. But the creativity is his own. The ingenuity, the pleasure of solving a problem with whatever's at hand. That's the part he loves.

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Tomorrow is Sunday. His wife will go to church, the way she has her whole life, believing things he stopped believing decades ago. He'll walk his four miles, read his books, maybe talk to one of the kids on the phone. They all call—David G on Wednesdays, regular as clockwork; Libby most weekends; Brian when he remembers, which is often enough. The week will unspool the way weeks do.

He wonders sometimes what his children see when they look at him. The peaceful old man on the porch with his books and his wood stove? Or do they still see the other one, the one who filled the house with his voice, who made them small? Do they know he's sorry? He's never said it. Petersons don't say things like that. They just keep going. They hope the going says what the mouth can't.

But today he cut wood. Today he stood in the timber where all of it started—the good and the bad, the boy and the man, the rage and whatever came after. Today, for a few hours, he was ten years old again, a red-faced Indian, the saw singing in his hands where the bow used to be.

He climbs into the truck and heads home, the bed full of oak and hedge, the weight of eighty-one years settling back onto his shoulders.

He is not the man he was. He's not sure he's the man he wanted to be, either. But he's still here. Still showing up. Still doing the next thing.

That has to count for something.

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Chapter 1: The Homecoming Queen

She wakes before him, the way she always does.

The bedroom is still dark. She lies there a moment, feeling the familiar weight of morning, then reaches for the rosary on the nightstand. She doesn't kneel the way she used to—her knees can't take it anymore, and God understands. She prays in bed now, the beads smooth and familiar in her hands, worn down by decades of fingers, her mother's before they were hers.

She prays for David, still sleeping beside her. She prays for her children, scattered across the country—for their safety, their happiness, their peace. None of them go to church anymore. She read somewhere that if the father isn't Catholic, eighty percent of children leave the faith. She doesn't know if that's true, but it feels true. Every Catholic mother she knows carries this guilt—the children who drifted away, the grandchildren who were never baptized. What could we have done? What did we do wrong?

Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee.

The words are a rope she holds in the dark. The words are the thing that doesn't move when everything else falls apart. She finishes the rosary, crosses herself, rises slowly. Her joints ache. Eighty-one years old, the body complaining about its age. She ignores it.

The house is dark except for the kitchen light she switches on. She moves through it quietly—coffee, toast, the small rituals of morning—careful not to wake him. He needs his sleep. He'll be up soon enough, out the door for his walk, four miles in the cold while she's already at the church, already doing what needs to be done.

She doesn't resent his sleep. Not anymore. There was a time when resentment was a constant companion—when she'd watch him load the motorcycle and ride off for a weekend while she stayed home with the kids, when he'd tell her they couldn't afford a family trip but somehow there was always gas money for the bike. When she'd asked once if they could go to Kansas City, just the two of them, a date, the answer was no. There was always gas money for the bike, but not for that.

She didn't have money of her own. That was the point.

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December, 1982. The kids are in bed. David is at the kitchen table, bent over his ledger the way he bends over it every night—columns of numbers, categories, every dollar accounted for. He's had

charts on the wall since college. She used to have to justify a pack of gum.

Mary Jean is at the counter, putting away the grocery receipt. She folds the change from her pocket—two dollars and thirty-seven cents—and adds it to the envelope in the drawer. The cookie jar, they call it. Two hundred fifty dollars a month for food, clothing, Christmas, birthdays—everything the family needs that isn't mortgage or utilities. That's her territory. What she saves from it is hers to keep.

David likes this system. It's a budget he can depend on, and it gives her some freedom. He approves of saving—admires it, even. Bernard was the same way, Depression-bred, suspicious of anything that looked like excess. What David doesn't fully see is what it takes to save anything from two hundred fifty dollars with three growing kids.

She's been at it since September. A dollar here, fifty cents there. Buying the store-brand soup instead of Campbell's. Walking to the far grocery store where chicken thighs are nine cents cheaper per pound. Clipping coupons, stretching every purchase, finding the margins where a little money can be set aside.

By December she has nearly five hundred dollars saved. Five hundred dollars she earned through frugality, through attention, through the quiet discipline of making less do more. She'll spend it on presents for the children, neatly wrapped. She'll put them under the tree, and on Christmas morning she'll watch her children's faces, and she'll know: I did that. I made that happen.

David doesn't love Christmas—doesn't see the point of the production. But she does. The kids do. And they have no idea what it takes to make Christmas normal for them. They just know Dad doesn't like Christmas. They don't know why, really. They know about the cookie jar, but not the coupons, not the year of careful saving, not what it costs her to skim enough from \$250 a month to give them this. They just see the presents under the tree, neatly wrapped, and think this is how it's always been.

It's not much to ask—a normal Christmas. But she earned it. And she is prouder of those five hundred dollars than of almost anything else she's ever done.

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She was fifteen when her sister died.

Shirley was seventeen. Two years older, a whole world ahead. The favorite—everyone knew it, even Mary Jean, even then. Their mother looked at Shirley the way you look at something precious, something you're afraid to touch too hard. Mary Jean was the steady one, the responsible one, the one you could count on. Shirley was the light.

The car crash happened on a county road outside St. Marys. A boy was driving. There was talk of speed, of alcohol, of the things that kill teenagers in small towns where there's nothing to do but drive too fast on empty roads. The police chief came to the house on that rainy night to get her father. The boys in the car were alive, he said, but Shirley had been ejected and they couldn't find her. Her father

asked them to roll the upside-down car over. They found her body crushed underneath.

The sound her mother made—not a scream, something lower, something that came from the floor of her body. Her mother's face went white that night and never quite got its color back.

Her mother lasted a few more years. Breast cancer, the doctors said, but the small-town doctor who'd known the family forever put it differently. She died of a broken heart. Mary Jean was barely twenty when she buried her mother, standing at the grave with her brown hair pinned back and her blue eyes dry because someone had to be steady. Someone always had to be steady.

Mike was still a boy. Somebody had to raise him.

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The Pope family had a talent for leaving.

Her oldest brother Bill left first—ran off and joined the Marines, became a fighter pilot, found a life as far from Kansas as he could get. Gary stayed but disappeared into the bottle, a slow-motion leaving that lasted decades. Jim died at thirty-two, bladder cancer, gone before his children were old enough to remember him properly.

And Shirley. Shirley left fastest of all.

Mary Jean stayed. That was her gift, her strength, her calling. She stayed and she coped and she held things together while everyone else fell apart or flew away. She graduated high school, got a job, helped her father with Mike, went to mass every Sunday, and waited for something good to happen.

She was good at waiting. Good at enduring. Good at being the one who didn't fall apart. She did what needed doing, because someone had to, and she was the one who could.

David Peterson was something good.

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She met him in seventh grade. She knew right away there was something special about him—he just stood out, more than anyone she'd ever seen. She was attracted to his strength, physical and emotional both. The way he carried himself. The way he seemed so certain of everything.

They were homecoming king and queen, if you can believe it. The farm boy with the blue eyes and the strong jaw, from a family the town respected, and the pretty girl with the brown hair who matched those eyes exactly. She still has the photograph somewhere—both of them young and shining, not yet knowing what the world had in store.

He left, of course. They all left. Football scholarship to Dodge City, then washing out, then the Air Force, then Vietnam. Four years gone. She got letters sometimes, postcards, promises that meant less and less as the months went on. She was barely twenty years old and alone in St. Marys, burying her

mother, raising her brother, waiting for a boy who might never come back.

She was young, and lonely, and human. There was a boy. There was a consequence. Her father sent her to California, to family, to have the baby and give it up and come home. It was what families did then, especially Catholic families. You didn't talk about it. You moved forward.

It was a Catholic adoption. She didn't get to name the baby. She didn't get to hold her. But they let her leave a note in the file, in case the child ever wanted to find her. A few sentences, a door left open.

Thirty years later, the door opened. A woman named Melissa, living in California, had found the file. They met. They talked. They began to build something across the decades of silence.

Melissa has two children of her own now. Dave and Mary Jean have met them, welcomed them. Another branch of the family tree, unexpected and precious. The integration takes time—there are schedules and distances and the simple awkwardness of learning to be family with someone you're just meeting. But they're trying. They're all trying. And Mary Jean is grateful, more than she can say, that the daughter she couldn't keep found her way back.

Some prayers take thirty years to be answered. But they get answered.

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David came back eventually. Not all at once—he drifted in and out for a while after his four years were up, still looking for something, still not sure what he wanted. She watched him circle, land, take off again. She'd seen enough leaving by then to recognize the pattern.

Finally, she told him: commit or go away.

They were parked in his '68 Chevelle, somewhere outside St. Marys, the engine ticking as it cooled. He'd pulled off the road with that look he got—the one that meant he wanted something from her. She let him lean in, let him kiss her, and then she put her hand on his chest and pushed him back. Not hard. Just enough.

She doesn't remember the exact words. She remembers the feeling—the exhaustion, the clarity, the vinyl seat sticky under her legs, his face half-lit by the dashboard. The absolute certainty that she could not spend one more year waiting for a man to decide if she was worth staying for. She had buried her sister. She had buried her mother. She had given up a daughter. She was done with halfway.

He chose her. He chose her completely, without hesitation, without conditions. Whatever had happened while he was gone—whoever Melissa's father was—he never asked, never blamed, never held it over her. He just loved her, the way he'd always loved her, the way he'd loved her since they were kids at St. Marys High School pretending to be king and queen of something.

That was fifty-seven years ago. She has never doubted his loyalty since.

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She finishes her toast, rinses the plate, sets it in the rack to dry. The kitchen is quiet. Through the window, the first gray light is coming up over the trees.

He keeps his books on the table by his chair. She's seen the spines—Eastern philosophy, consciousness, physics, writers whose names she doesn't recognize. Sometimes he tries to tell her about what he's reading, the ideas he's found. She doesn't engage. She can't. Religion is a DMZ in this house, a territory neither of them can enter without casualties. She doesn't feel safe expressing her faith here, in her own home, with her own husband. Her feelings get hurt too easily, and he's too good a debater, and the conversations always end with her feeling small.

She thought she married a Catholic.

When he was at the small college in Dodge City, before Vietnam, he went to mass every day. The priests commended him for his discipline. While he was overseas, she dated other boys—she was young and lonely and human—but she wouldn't see them more than once if they weren't Catholic. That mattered. That was the foundation everything else would be built on.

Then he came back. And slowly, over years, something shifted. The retreat at Shantivanam, the books, the questions. He came to see belief as a crutch—something people leaned on because they couldn't face the questions alone. She felt the words land like a blow. She'd used that crutch to bury her sister, her mother, her brother Jim. She'd used it to survive.

After that, the dinner table became a battlefield. He was seeking, always seeking, and he had the words, the arguments, the intellectual firepower. She had only her faith and her wounds. The kids watched it happen—Libby used to beg them to stop, please stop, her voice small and desperate across the table. They didn't stop. Not for years.

She found God in the ruins of her family. She found Him kneeling beside her mother's grave, found Him in the rosary beads her mother left behind, found Him in the quiet of the sanctuary when there was nowhere else to go. God did not explain why Shirley died, why her mother's heart broke, why Jim got cancer at thirty-two, why Gary crawled into a bottle. But He was there. He stayed. That was enough.

David found something different. He reads his books and sits on his porch and thinks his thoughts, and he left the Church decades ago because the Church couldn't answer his questions. She has made a kind of peace with that. The Church teaches differently now than it did when she was young—God is merciful, the priests say, and sees beyond the rules. Non-believers are not doomed. This teaching has given her more comfort than she can say. Her children, her husband—she no longer fears for their souls the way she once did.

But she still wishes he would come to church with her. Not to believe. Just to sit beside her. Just to be there, the way a partner would be. She's asked, over the years. He won't. And that still hurts, even now, even after everything.

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She is not a saint. She knows some people think she is—the woman who goes to church four times a day, who's been a sacristan for twenty years and a lector for twenty-five, who organized the prayer circle and helped start the volunteer hospice, who fills in at the adoration chapel whenever someone can't make their shift. But she's not going to mass that often. Mass once a day. The rest is service—Bible studies, visiting with friends, filling in at the adoration chapel when someone can't make their shift. And she doesn't feel holy every time she goes. Sometimes she doesn't want to go at all. She sits in the front pew because she doesn't want to be distracted, because her mind wanders, because she has to fight to stay present. She's not perfect. She slips. She doesn't pray hard enough, doesn't work hard enough, doesn't measure up to whatever standard she's set for herself.

Why does she go so often? If you were a Catholic under siege in your own home, wouldn't you want to be somewhere you felt safe? Somewhere with people who believed what you believed, who didn't question, who didn't make you feel small for needing the crutch that got you through?

Two of her children have left the faith entirely. The third still goes sometimes—he hasn't rejected it the way the others have, the way their father has. That's the slip she can't forgive herself for, no matter what the Church says about God's mercy.

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David is stirring. She hears him in the other room, the creak of the bed, the shuffle of feet. He'll be out the door soon, walking his four miles, doing his own kind of prayer in his own kind of church.

This is the marriage they have made: two people in the same house, two different paths to meaning, two different answers to the same impossible questions. They meet in the kitchen, in the practical matters, in the way he looks at her sometimes like she's still the homecoming queen, like fifty-seven years haven't passed, like he'd choose her again if he had to.

He would. She knows he would. And she would choose him.

This is what a lifetime teaches you. People are not one thing. Love is not one thing. You hold the whole of a person—the parts you understand and the parts you don't—and you keep going.

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There's mass today, and after that the bereavement committee—organizing who brings what to which family, who sits with which widow, the logistics of grief in a small parish.

She knows about bereavement. She's been studying it her whole life. She should do more, she thinks. She should bring the casseroles herself, visit the sick, take meals to the poor. Other women do. She doesn't, not the way she should. She gives her hours to the church instead—the praying, the organizing, the showing up day after day. It's what she has to offer. She hopes it's enough.

David is in the kitchen when she comes out, pouring coffee, moving slow. He looks up and nods. She nods back. They don't need to say good morning. They said it ten thousand times already, years ago, and now the words are just underneath, implied, understood.

"I'll be at church," she says.

"I know."

"There's soup in the fridge if you want lunch."

"Okay."

She puts on her coat, picks up her purse, pauses at the door. He's standing at the counter, coffee in hand, looking out the window at nothing in particular. The light catches his face—the jaw still strong, the blue eyes that match hers exactly, the boy she fell in love with still visible underneath the eighty-one years.

"I love you," she says.

He turns. The blue eyes hold hers. "I love you too."

It's true. It's the truest thing either of them knows. Fifty-seven years of choosing each other, day after day, through everything. Different faiths, different paths, same love.

She goes out into the cold morning, gets in the car, drives to the church. The same route she's driven a thousand times. Fifteen miles from the same small town she was born in, married in and will be buried in. Population nothing. The center of the world.

Behind her, in the house on the dead-end street, her husband finishes his coffee and goes out for his walk, four miles, same as yesterday, same as tomorrow. Two people moving through the same morning in different directions, joined by something stronger than the differences between them.

The stubbornness to keep choosing each other. The grace to let each other be. The love that, somehow, after fifty-seven years, is still enough.

* * *

Chapter 2: The Snicker

He walks past it every morning. Four miles through Wamego, same route, same pace, and right there on the east side of town—the plant. It says Caterpillar now, has for decades, but he still thinks of it as Balderson. Thirty-five years of his life are inside those walls.

At eighty-one the body is a negotiation, but he has kept his end of the deal. No excess. No sloth. The same breakfast every morning, the same distance every day, the same discipline that saw him through the bad years when discipline was all he had.

The walking is its own kind of practice. Not exercise, exactly—something closer to meditation. One foot, then the other. No destination that matters. The point is the walking itself, the rhythm of it, the way the mind settles when the body has a simple task. He figured this out decades ago, somewhere on a motorcycle, before he had language for it. Pirsig called it Quality. The monks call it presence. He just calls it showing up.

He doesn't slow down when he passes the building. Doesn't speed up either. Just keeps walking, one foot in front of the other, the way he's done every morning for years. The building is just a building now. The men who worked there are retired or dead. The man who ran it is long gone.

But some mornings, when the light hits it a certain way, or when his mind is wandering, he remembers.

* * *

He doesn't talk about it much. When he does, he tells it like a joke on himself—the arrogant young manager who thought he knew everything, who learned the hard way that knowing everything isn't the same as keeping your mouth shut.

But it wasn't a joke. It was the hinge of his life, the place where one version of David Peterson ended and another began.

* * *

By 1985, he was running manufacturing at Balderson. Forty years old, fifteen years with the company, responsible for the floor and everyone on it. He was also mayor of Wamego—a small-town honor, sure, but it meant something. David Peterson, farm kid from the Vermillion Valley, was running a manufacturing operation and running the town. He was good at both—really

good. He understood systems, processes, how to move materials and people to get product out the door. He'd come up through the ranks, learned every station, earned respect the hard way.

The problem was Clark.

Clark was the founder's grandson—third generation, born to the business, with a vision to match. He wanted to build Balderson into a huge international operation, prove himself by growing the empire his grandfather had started. He was smart, Clark was. Emotional, yes—led with instinct and passion—but smart. He thrived on chaos, on growth, on the next big thing.

David wanted something different. By forty, he was tired. Fifteen years of clawing his way up, of proving himself, and what he wanted now was to scale back. Optimize the Wamego operation for maximum profit, not maximum glory. Simplify. He'd had this fantasy, for years, of owning his own business. He'd somehow convinced himself that Balderson was partly his—that his voice in how things ran actually mattered.

It didn't. Clark owned the company. Clark set the direction. And when David disagreed—publicly, in meetings, with the barely concealed impatience of someone who thought he knew better—Clark noticed.

It came to a head in a meeting. Fluorescent lights, stale coffee, the usual faces around the table. Clark was presenting some growth initiative, gesturing at a slide, voice rising the way it did when he got excited. Something that pushed in exactly the opposite direction from where David thought they should go.

And David snickered.

Not a laugh. Not an objection. Just a small, involuntary sound—air through the nose, the ghost of a laugh—that escaped before he could stop it. The room went quiet. Someone coughed. Clark's hand froze mid-gesture.

The meeting continued. Nothing was said. But David watched Clark's neck go red above his collar, watched the jaw tighten, and knew immediately what he'd done. You don't embarrass the boss's son in front of his own people. You don't make him small. Not if you want to keep your job.

He'd crossed a line he couldn't uncross.

* * *

The demotion came quietly. No drama, no public execution. Just a conversation in Clark's office, the door closed, the terms laid out. David would be stepping back from manufacturing. A new role would be found for him. Something appropriate.

The word hung in the air: appropriate. Appropriate for a man who'd gotten too big for his station. Appropriate for someone who needed to be reminded of his place.

David sat there and took it. What else could he do? Balderson was the only game in town. In Wamego, Kansas, population four thousand, you didn't just quit and find another job running a manufacturing floor. You took what you were given, or you left.

He thought about leaving. For weeks after that meeting, he thought about it constantly—packing up, starting over, finding someplace where his talents would be appreciated and his mouth wouldn't get him in trouble. He fantasized about becoming a forest ranger, disappearing into some national park where the only politics were between the trees and the weather. He was forty years old and he'd just been humiliated by a man he didn't respect, and the rage of it burned in his chest every morning when he woke up.

But there was Mary Jean. There were the kids—David in high school, Brian in sixth grade, Libby in second. There was the house he'd helped build, the life they'd constructed piece by piece over fifteen years. You don't just walk away from that because your pride got hurt. You don't become a forest ranger when you've got three kids and a mortgage.

So he stayed. And he seethed. And he felt trapped in a way he couldn't admit even to himself.

Here's what he understands now, looking back: he was compelled to provide, resentful of the people he was providing for. It wasn't fair—he knew it wasn't fair even then. He'd signed up for this life, chosen his career, married his wife, had his children. They were just doing what families do. But when you're miserable at work, and you come home and everyone looks like they're having a party on your back, it makes you angry. Every dollar they spent felt like another bar on the prison. He once called them parasites. He's not proud of that. But it was how he felt.

His father had felt it too—David sees that now. Bernard trying to control spending, trying to maintain some grip on how far the family could bury him. The Peterson men, locked in jobs they hated, building prison walls of pressure for themselves out of an overdeveloped sense of responsibility. Loyal to the family, crushed by the loyalty. Nobody understands that weight except a head-of-household provider who hates his job.

And he quit smoking. Cold turkey, right in the middle of all of it. Balderson had been an old boys' club—smoky offices, ashtrays on every desk—and David had been part of it for fifteen years. Then one day he saw a picture of cancerous lungs, black and rotted, and something clicked. He threw out the pack and never touched another cigarette.

The timing couldn't have been worse. All that rage with no release valve, no ritual to soften the edges. Mary Jean and the kids lived with a man who was humiliated at work, seething at home, and raw from nicotine withdrawal all at once. The house must have felt like a pressure cooker with no vent.

* * *

There's a story he tells, when he tells it at all. A meeting in Clark's office, sometime after the

demotion. They were standing there talking, and Clark walked up close—too close—and stepped on David's foot. Just stood there, his weight pressing down, the leather sole grinding into David's instep, looking him in the eye.

David didn't move. His hands stayed at his sides. He could feel the bones in his foot compressing, could feel his pulse in his temples, could feel something in his chest that wanted out. But he held it. Three kids. One place to work. No other options.

Clark held the position for a beat, two beats, then stepped back. Conversation resumed. Nothing was said.

David went home that night and stood at the kitchen sink for a long time, water running, hands gripping the counter, trying not to put his fist through the wall.

* * *

Then Florida happened.

Balderson had acquired a company down in Jacksonville, a small operation that needed a plant manager. Clark offered it to David—a face-saving move, maybe, or a way to get him out of Wamego before the tension poisoned everything. David took it. What choice did he have?

The family moved in 1986. They rented out the house in Wamego and drove south, away from everything they knew, into a state that was green in a different way, humid and flat and full of strangers.

David found things to like about it. He rode his motorcycle to work year-round, never had to worry about ice or snow. The job was simpler, lower stakes, a chance to run something without Clark looking over his shoulder. On weekends, they explored—canoed in the Okefenokee, drove to the beach, tried to make Florida feel like home.

It didn't work.

Brian was getting bullied at school, coming home with stories that made David's fists clench. David G—seventeen now, a senior, testing every boundary he could find—was falling in with the wrong kids, coming home with eyes that didn't quite focus, staying out past curfew. Libby was still young then, but the boys were struggling, and Mary Jean was homesick, and the whole family felt like it was slowly coming apart.

David G left before the rest of them. Couldn't take it anymore, or couldn't take his father anymore—probably both. He went back to Wamego to live with a friend's family, escaped the pressure cooker of that small Florida house where everyone was unhappy and nobody knew how to say it.

The others begged to follow. Brian, Mary Jean, even little Libby in her way. Take us home. Please. Take us home.

* * *

But how do you go home when home is the place that broke you?

David sat in his Jacksonville office and worked on a presentation. A pitch. A reason for Clark to let him come back.

He would start a consulting business—Material Requirements Planning, the systems work he knew better than anyone. He would help other companies adopt best practices. He would bring value to Balderson in a new way, a way that kept him employed without putting him back in Clark's crosshairs.

He rehearsed the pitch in his head, refined the slides, practiced the words. He knew, even as he worked on it, that it was thin. A stretch. The kind of idea that sounded better in a conference room than it would in reality.

But it was all he had.

He flew back to Kansas and sat in Clark's office and made his case. Humble now, the arrogance beaten out of him, asking for permission to come home. Asking the man he'd snickered at to give him another chance.

Clark said yes.

David doesn't know why, exactly. Maybe Clark saw the desperation. Maybe he figured a humbled David Peterson was more useful than no David Peterson at all. Maybe he was just tired of the whole thing and wanted it over.

The reasons didn't matter. What mattered was: David could go home.

* * *

The house in Wamego was waiting for them. The lease was up, the renters were gone. They pulled into the driveway on a Tuesday afternoon, boxes in the back of the truck, kids piling out before the engine stopped. Same rooms. Same street. And when they opened the front door, the same smell—that particular mix of old wood and Kansas dust and something that was just theirs, unchanged after a year of someone else living there. Mary Jean stood in the doorway and breathed it in, and her shoulders dropped an inch.

Same small town where everyone knew everyone and everyone knew what had happened.

David went back to work at Balderson. Not in manufacturing—that door was closed—but in some invented role, some face-saving position that let him earn a paycheck without threatening anyone. He kept his head down. He did his job. He didn't snicker at anyone's ideas.

He ate shit, in other words. For years. He ate it and smiled and provided for his family and never once complained, not to Mary Jean, not to the kids, not to anyone. Whatever it cost him—and it cost

him—he swallowed it.

* * *

He thinks about his father sometimes, on these walks. Bernard Peterson drove a hundred miles to Peru State, Nebraska, to watch him play a football game once. Never said a thing about it beforehand, never said a thing after. Just showed up, sat in the stands, drove home. That was Bernard's whole vocabulary.

Bernard was always interested in the boys' sports—he liked sports, showed up for games, paid attention when his sons were on a field. But you had to do what Bernard liked to get his attention. When the boys weren't playing something, Bernard wasn't really there. David sees the pattern now, how it passed down. The way a father's attention can feel like weather—there when the conditions are right, gone when they're not.

They were never easy with each other, not really. Bernard was old-school Catholic, disciplined, suspicious of anything he couldn't understand. He didn't understand the motorcycles—dangerous, impractical, a young man's foolishness. He didn't understand the books David started reading after Shantivanam, the Eastern philosophy, the questioning. A good Catholic doesn't question. A good Catholic goes to mass and does his duty and doesn't chase after strange ideas.

David stopped being a good Catholic. Bernard never said anything directly—that wasn't his way—but the disappointment was there, underneath everything, a distance that never quite closed. They went years sometimes without much contact. David would visit the farm and they'd talk about weather, about the crops, about nothing that mattered. Two stubborn men circling each other, neither willing to bend.

Bernard died without them ever really talking about it. The faith, the distance, the disappointment—it all just hung there, unresolved, until there was no one left to resolve it with. David thinks about that sometimes. The conversations he didn't have. The things he never said.

But here's the thing he's only recently understood: Bernard ended up in the same place he did. Different roads, same destination. His father spent his last years in his chair in St. Marys, newspaper in his lap, crossword puzzle half-finished, at peace with whatever he'd figured out or failed to figure out. The old-school Catholic who never questioned and the son who never stopped questioning—both of them wound up in a chair, watching the evening come on, waiting for whatever comes next. Maybe the path matters less than the arriving. Maybe all the books David reads and all the crosswords Bernard filled in were just different ways of passing the same quiet hours.

He did the same thing for his own son, years later. Showed up. Six in the morning, middle of nowhere, Colorado. Brian stranded with a dead engine and nowhere to go. David didn't ask what happened. Didn't lecture. He just drove through the night, sat on a bench in a town with no name, and drank gas station coffee while the sun came up.

That's what he learned from those years at Balderson. Not how to swallow his pride—he already knew that. He learned that showing up is the thing. You show up for your family. You show up for work, even when work is humiliating. You show up day after day after day, and you hope it's enough.

That's not weakness. That's the hardest kind of strength.

* * *

But something had to give.

At home, during those years, the pressure found its way out. The frustration he swallowed at work didn't just disappear—it came home with him. He was mean. He was cruel. He was controlling. He knows this now, can say it plainly, but at the time he was just surviving—white-knuckling through every day, coming home with nothing left, and the family caught what spilled over.

David G was a teenager then—sixteen, seventeen, the exact wrong age to have a father under that kind of pressure. They clashed the way fathers and teenage sons clash, but worse. Libby got labeled the moody one, but all three kids were absorbing something. David G was provocative, pushing every button he could find. Maybe he was just trying to be seen. And his father—stressed to the breaking point, no cigarettes to take the edge off, humiliated at work and seething at home—had no margin left.

There was a night at the dinner table. The details blur, but the shape stays sharp: David G needling him, poking, provoking. Something snapped. Dave jumped up from the table, grabbed his son by the shirt, slammed him against the wall. He had a fork in his hand. He held it to his son's face and said something—a threat, something about putting it in him. Mary Jean screamed. David stop, David stop. David G tore loose and ran out the door.

He was gone for days. Stayed with a friend's family. Wouldn't come home.

Dave has apologized for that night. More than once, over the years. David G says don't worry about it, Dad. The Peterson way—absorb the blow, move on, don't dwell. But those words don't erase the image: a father holding a fork to his son's face while his wife screams and his other children watch. That was the tyrant. That was what the pressure made of him.

Mary Jean held the family together through those years. She wasn't the stoic saint some people imagine—she had her own wounds, her own resentments, her own moments of despair. But she stayed. She coped. She kept the house running while her husband raged and her oldest son tested every boundary and her other children learned to read the weather of their father's moods. She's not a strong personality, she'd say. She doesn't like a fight. So she backed away, and backed away, and held on.

Those years left their mark. They always do.

* * *

The change came from an unexpected place.

Someone told David about a retreat center, a place called Shantivanam—a cabin in the woods somewhere near Kansas City, run by priests who'd spent time in India, who blended Eastern philosophy with the Catholicism David had grown up in. It wasn't a weekend thing. It was two weeks in the trees, away from work, away from the family, away from everything that was crushing him.

He went. Two weeks of silence, or near-silence. Walking in the woods, sitting with his thoughts, learning to breathe in a way he'd never been taught. He doesn't talk much about what happened there—what cracked open, what he found in that quiet. But he met a priest who spoke a different language than the Baltimore Catechism, who asked different questions, who suggested that the spiritual life might be bigger than the rules he'd been taught.

Mary Jean blames that priest. She's never said it directly, but the kids know—she holds him responsible for turning David away from the Church, for starting him down a path that led to the porch and the books and the Sunday mornings alone. In her mind, that priest stole her husband's faith, and her children's faith followed.

Maybe she's right. Maybe that retreat was the beginning of the end of David's Catholicism.

Or maybe it was the beginning of something else. The beginning of the man who sits on the porch now, reading about consciousness, walking his four miles, no longer raging, no longer trapped. The man who found a way to let go of the anger that was eating him alive.

But there's a cost he's only recently begun to reckon with. He made Mary Jean a Catholic under siege—that's the phrase he uses now, and there's shame in his voice when he says it. He was seeking, questioning, debating, and he was good at it, better than she could ever be. She had only her faith and her wounds, and he came at her with arguments, with Pirsig and the mystics and the questions the Church couldn't answer. He didn't mean to bully her. He didn't see it that way at the time. But that's what it was. For years, she couldn't feel safe expressing her faith in her own home, with her own husband. He made her small. He made her retreat into silence. He turned the dinner table into a war zone and didn't understand why his children begged them to stop.

He sees it now. The peaceful old man on the porch—he's not just the product of Shantivanam and time. He's also the man who finally stopped attacking his wife's faith. Who learned to let her pray without commentary, without debate, without the constant pressure of his seeking. It took decades. It took too long.

* * *

The tyrant faded, slowly, over years. The yelling stopped. The explosions stopped. David found something at Shantivanam, or in the books that followed, or in the simple passage of time—some way to release the pressure without scalding everyone around him.

He never got his old job back. He never got revenge on Clark. But when Caterpillar bought Balderson in the nineties, Clark was mostly out of the way, and the tension that had defined David's working life just... dissolved. The work became more bureaucratic, but less tenuous. He kept showing up, kept doing the job, kept providing.

He retired in 2008, just as the financial crisis hit. Watched forty percent of his nest egg disappear in a matter of months. Another man might have panicked, might have sold everything and locked in the losses. David cut expenses, buckled down, and stayed in the market. The same discipline that kept him walking into Balderson every morning for almost forty years kept him from making a scared decision with his money.

It paid off. He's wealthier now than when he retired—wealthier, in fact, than he ever imagined he'd be. His father Bernard had done the same thing, become wealthy in retirement through prudent investing and living beneath his means. The Peterson discipline, it turns out, works as well with money as it does with rage.

But pride is overrated. That's what he knows now. Pride is what made him snicker in that meeting, what cost him his position, what almost cost him his family. The humility that replaced it—the willingness to eat shit and keep going—that's what saved him.

* * *

The building slides past on his right. He keeps walking, doesn't slow down, doesn't speed up. Just another morning, another four miles, another lap past the place that almost broke him.

It didn't break him. That's the thing. It bent him, humiliated him, sent him to Florida and back, turned him into a tyrant and then—slowly, over years—into something better. The man who snickered in that meeting room had to die. The humiliation was the price. You don't get the peaceful old man on the porch without the arrogant young one being broken first. That's the transaction nobody tells you about—that sometimes the worst thing that happens to you is also the thing that saves you.

The building is just a building now. The story is just a story. He tells it like a joke on himself, when he tells it at all. But it's not a joke. It's a resurrection story, disguised as a career setback.

In the shop at home, the oak is waiting. The piece from Dennis' land, the one whose growth rings parallel his own life—dark bands for drought years, wide ones for good seasons, scorched places where fire passed through. The whole history of a tree that grew up alongside him, including the damage. He'll work on it this afternoon, turn it in his hands, study the grain. The wood knows what it wants to become—his job is just to remove what's in the way. That's the art of it: not adding, but taking away. Not imposing, but revealing.

That's how he works now—slowly, with attention, letting things reveal themselves. When he was young he forced things. Materials, situations, people. He bent the world toward his intentions and called it strength. The snicker in that meeting room—that was the old David, the one who thought he

could impose his will on everything, who thought being right was the same as being smart. He knows better now. The shape was always there. He just had to learn to see it.

The morning is cold. His breath clouds in front of him. His legs move without instruction, the same legs that have carried him through four miles a day for years, through the bad times and the good, through the rage and whatever came after.

He keeps walking. That's all any of us can do.

* * *

Chapter 3: Another Country

The wood stove needs feeding. He opens the iron door and the smoke curls out before the draw catches, and for a moment the porch smells like burning, and he is somewhere else.

It doesn't happen often anymore. A wisp of smoke, a half-second of displacement, and then he's back on the porch in Kansas, eighty-one years old, holding a piece of oak from the timber where he played as a boy.

He stands there a moment, letting the memory settle.

* * *

He was twenty years old and ten thousand miles from the nearest wheat field.

We aren't in Kansas anymore. That's what he thought when he stepped off the plane at Bien Hoa. And they weren't. Vietnam was a whole other world—the heat that hit you like a wall, the green so bright it hurt your eyes, the smell of fish sauce and diesel and something sweet rotting in the humidity. The air itself had weight there, sat on your chest, followed you into the tent and lay down on your cot beside you.

He had come looking for something, though he couldn't have said what. Not patriotism—he couldn't have found Vietnam on a map six months earlier. Not duty. His father had done his duty, stayed stateside during the last war, built airplanes for the Navy while other men flew them into the Pacific. The son had no illusions about glory. He just needed to be somewhere else. The Air Force was a respectable way to do nothing after dropping out of college, and it got him out of Kansas.

Kansas had spit him out. He'd failed at the small Catholic college in the western part of the state, couldn't do the math. His father was a Notre Dame engineer who saw numbers the way other men see colors—whole and immediate and obvious—and the son stared at equations like they were written in a language from a country he'd never visit. Some things don't pass from father to son. Height, for instance. The capacity for faith. The particular architecture of the mind.

So he'd come home to the farm, and his father had asked him a simple question: What are you going to do now? Not angry, not disappointed—just practical. The farm could only support two families, Bob's and Bernard's. Dennis would stay eventually, but the timing was different for him, his coming of age lining up with Bernard's retirement. For David, there was no place. He couldn't hang around. He had to go somewhere else and figure it out.

The Air Force was somewhere else.

* * *

The bomb dump was not where the action was. The action was in the sky, in the cockpits of the B-57s that roared off the runway at Bien Hoa, pilots strapped in and invincible, climbing toward a war that looked clean from altitude. Down in the dump, the work was different. You loaded ordnance onto trucks. You drove the trucks to the flight line. You watched other men hang the bombs on the wings of aircraft you'd never fly.

It wasn't a war for him—not really. It was a job. Six days a week, up early, work until dark, back to the tent to sleep. They didn't go to town much. There wasn't time, and there wasn't much to do there anyway. Mostly it was just work—the routine of it, the discipline of it, showing up every day and doing what needed doing.

Five hundred pounds. That's what a bomb weighs when you're twenty years old and sweating through your fatigues in the Vietnamese heat. You learn to respect the weight. You learn the fuses, the safety protocols, the ways a thing can go wrong between the bunker and the aircraft. You move the weight from here to there, day after day, and the pilots take it from there to somewhere else.

He didn't dwell on the bigger picture. You couldn't dwell on that and do the job. You just showed up, did the work, and tried to stay comfortable in a place that was never comfortable—the heat, the tents, the smell of that green country that wanted to swallow everything.

* * *

May 16, 1965.

He was in the back of a truck, leaving the flight line. They'd finished a run, dropped their load, were heading back to the dump for more. Routine. The kind of morning you forget before lunch.

He felt the heat on the back of his neck before he heard anything.

That's what he remembers—the order of it, wrong, impossible. Heat first, then sound, then the sky turning black. The truck slewed sideways and someone was yelling and he was out, over the tailgate, running for the drainage ditch along the road, throwing himself flat into the mud and weeds.

He lay there for hours. They all did, faces in the dirt, arms over their heads, while the world tore itself apart above them. The B-57s had been parked wingtip to wingtip, loaded with the bombs he'd helped truck out there that morning, and a starter turbine had come apart and caught a fuse, and now the whole flight line was a chain reaction. Five hundred pounds setting off five hundred pounds setting off five hundred pounds. Shrapnel screaming overhead, hot metal singing through the air where a man's head would be if he were stupid enough to lift it.

He wasn't stupid. He pressed himself into that ditch and listened to the dying, and when it finally

stopped—when the explosions gave way to the crackle of fire and the shouting of men—he lifted his head and saw what was left.

The base commander would call it the worst disaster since Pearl Harbor. Twenty-six Americans dead. Aircraft scattered like broken toys. The control tower half gone. And Dave Peterson, twenty years old, mud on his face, alive for no reason he could name.

* * *

The next morning, they walked the flight line.

The smell was what he remembers most. JP-4 and burning rubber and something else underneath—something sweet and wrong that nobody named out loud. Vietnam always had a smell—diesel and rot, the green decay of a country that wanted to swallow everything—but this was that smell turned up past endurance. This was what remained.

The munitions troops walked line abreast across the concrete, looking for unexploded ordnance. They wore their piss pots—steel helmets with the chin straps unbuckled. Someone had told them not to buckle up, in case another blast came and the pressure wave ripped their heads off. He doesn't know if that's how physics works. He just knows he walked with his strap dangling, scanning the ground for anything that might still go off.

There was an M108 truck out there—the kind with a crane mounted on the back for loading and unloading bombs. It was still smoldering, tires burned down to the rims. The crane was bent like a question mark, twisted by heat or blast or both, pointing at nothing. He walked past it and kept walking, eyes on the concrete, looking for the shapes that didn't belong.

There were no bodies to pick up. Not really. Five-hundred-pound bombs don't leave bodies—they leave mist. The men who died out there were gone in a way that didn't leave anything to carry. What remained was the smell, and the bent crane, and the knowledge of what had been there a day before.

* * *

He puts the oak in the stove and closes the door. The draw catches and the smoke clears. The porch smells like woodfire again, nothing more.

* * *

He'd enlisted in '64, after the college failure, after the farm made clear there was no place for him. Vietnam came in the middle of it—'65, when he was barely twenty-one. His ticket out was hepatitis—bad water, probably, the kind of thing that happened over there. He spent months recovering in military hospitals, most of it at Sheppard AFB, his body slowly putting itself back together while the war went on without him. Then he went back to finish his tour. After that, he

finished out his enlistment stateside. Eglin, then Hill. Got out in '68, came home.

Home was not the farm. Home was a girl from St. Marys with a laugh he'd missed more than he'd known. Home was a degree he ground out at Kansas State, summers on construction crews reminding him why he wanted the desk. Home was a job, a house he helped build, children who would never know what their father had seen at twenty.

He didn't protest the war. Didn't grow his hair or march on Washington. He just went to work. That was the Peterson way—head down, next thing, brick by brick, don't complain about the mortar.

He didn't talk about it much. There wasn't that much to say. Mary Jean learned early that the year in Vietnam was just a year—not the defining event some people expected it to be. The children grew up knowing their father had been there the way they knew he'd been to college—a fact, not a story. He never woke up screaming, never flinched at fireworks, never gave them the dramatic symptoms they'd later see in movies.

Vietnam was a chapter, not the whole book. He'd seen things—Bien Hoa, the explosion, the aftermath—but he'd also just worked a job in a strange place for a year and come home. It wasn't comfortable. It was memorable. But it didn't break him. He's not sure it even changed him all that much, except to show him that the world was bigger than Kansas.

The Catholic boy from the Kansas farm, the one who'd knelt beside his family and never questioned—that boy started asking questions somewhere along the way. But whether Vietnam started the questioning or just happened to be where he was when it began, he couldn't say. What came home was someone who would spend the rest of his life looking for answers in places the Church couldn't reach.

* * *

He's eighty-one now. He doesn't stand when they ask the veterans to stand. Doesn't want his name on any memorial, doesn't need to be thanked. He doesn't glamorize what he saw, doesn't tell war stories at the VFW, doesn't pretend it was anything other than what it was.

But he remembers it. The adventure of it, strange as that sounds. Twenty years old, ten thousand miles from home, alive in a way you're never quite alive again. The heat and the green and the work and the waiting. Not comfortable, but vivid. Real in a way that ordinary life sometimes isn't.

That's the thing people don't always understand. A year can be hard and memorable and formative without being traumatic. You can carry something without being broken by it. Vietnam was a chapter. He turned the page.

* * *

Both his sons joined the military. He didn't stop them.

He could have. Could have told them what he'd seen, what he'd carried, what it cost. Could have said: Don't. Find another way to grow up. But he didn't. He believed—still believes—that service was good for a young man. The discipline, the purpose, the becoming. He just didn't love the war part.

David G went to Desert Storm. Came back fine, or fine enough. Did his time, got out, built a life.

Brian went to Saudi Arabia. Khobar Towers, 1996. A truck bomb killed nineteen airmen in their barracks, and Brian Peterson—his youngest son, the one who'd ridden on his gas tank at age five—was supposed to be there. Would have been there. Missed it by a day.

David didn't know until after. Brian called, told him what happened, told him he was okay. And David stood in his kitchen in Wamego, Kansas, holding the phone, and felt the ground shift under his feet the way it had shifted in that ditch in 1965.

He hadn't pushed them toward it. Hadn't wrapped himself in the flag or told them they owed their country anything. But he hadn't stopped them either. He'd seen what the military did for a young man—the structure, the skills, the growing up fast—and he'd let them go. And one of them had almost died for it. Almost become another name on another wall, another boy from a small town who went away and didn't come back.

He thinks about that sometimes. The phone call that came, and the one that didn't. The margin between the life he has and the one he almost had to live.

* * *

He's made his peace with all of it. Or something like peace.

But he understands something that civilians never will. The ones who were there—who breathed that air, saw that green, felt the weight of what they carried—they share a country inside the country. A knowledge that doesn't translate.

He met a man once, years ago, at a trailhead in southern Missouri. Early March, the trees still bare but something in the air saying soon—that first softness before spring commits. He goes down there sometimes when Kansas is still frozen, looking for an early taste of green.

They got to talking the way strangers do when something recognizes something. It came out that they'd both been in country. Both at Bien Hoa. Maybe even overlapped.

They didn't swap stories or compare notes. They just stood there a minute, two men on the side of a road in America, the redbuds not yet blooming but thinking about it, letting the silence hold what words couldn't.

Then Dave Peterson—the pacifist, the man who'd walked away from all of it—did something he hadn't done since he was twenty years old. He straightened. He brought his hand to his brow. He saluted.

The other man held his eyes and saluted back. They stood like that for a moment, honoring something with no name. Then they dropped their hands and went their separate ways—back to their trucks, their lives, the country they'd built on top of the country they'd survived.

* * *

The fire is burning well now. He settles into the chair and picks up his book, but he doesn't read. He watches the flames through the stove's glass window, orange and clean, nothing like the black smoke of that other fire, that other life.

Sixty years. The boy who lay in the ditch is gone. What remains is an old man on a porch in Kansas, feeding a stove, waiting for his wife to come home from church, thinking about nothing in particular.

The smoke rises up the chimney and disappears into the gray December sky.

He turns a page. He reads. The memory folds itself up and goes back to wherever it lives, and the day continues, ordinary and ordinary and ordinary, which is all he ever wanted, which is the whole point, which is the thing he built with his own two hands from the rubble of everything that tried to kill him.

* * *

Chapter 4: How to Speak to Your Father

The phone rings on Sunday afternoon. He's back from his walk, showered, just woke from a nap in the chair on the porch. The book he was reading is still open on his lap. It's Libby—she usually calls on weekends—checking in, telling him about her week. They talk for twenty minutes. Her patients, the weather in Minnesota, what the grandkids are up to.

After they hang up, he sits with the phone in his hand for a moment. The house is quiet. Mary Jean is at a church committee meeting, won't be back for another hour.

He thinks about his children. All three of them, scattered across the country, living lives he only partially sees. David G called Wednesday, same as always—they talked about work, about the grandkids in Atlanta. Brian will call sometime this week, maybe, when he comes up for air from whatever project has his attention. They all stay in touch, each in their own way.

How did they turn out the way they did? What did he give them, and what did they find on their own?

The motorcycle. That's where it started—or where he started, anyway. The motorcycle was the door he knew how to open.

* * *

The motorcycle was therapy.

Not for his kids—for him. David Peterson was a talker, always had been. He could hold forth on ideas for hours, loved the volley of conversation, the exploration of a thought turned this way and that until it revealed something new. But at home, with the pressures of work and kids and money and ambition, talk could turn to argument. The relaxed version of himself—the curious one, the wondering one—got buried under the stress of ordinary life.

On the road, that other self came back. Something about the engine's rhythm, the horizon pulling forward, the simple problem of getting from here to there. He found Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* in the eighties, after *Shantivanam*, and it explained something he'd felt but never articulated—why the riding mattered, why the attention you paid to the machine and the road and the moment was its own kind of meditation. The heavy stuff about Quality, the philosophical underpinnings—that came later, if it came at all. It's a hard book disguised as a father-son motorcycle trip. He understood the disguise first.

He'd ride for hours and arrive somewhere quieter inside. The kids who rode with him got to meet that version of their father. Not the one preoccupied with work or worried about grades, but the one who'd pull into a gas station in the middle of nowhere and want to talk about the nature of time, or why some towns survive and others don't, or what it felt like to be alive on a morning like this one.

It was an adventure. That was the thing. You didn't ride with him because he demanded it. You rode because it was the best invitation he knew how to offer.

Mary Jean didn't ride. She stayed home, kept the house, held down the center while he roamed. They were different that way—he needed the road, she needed the home. It was a balance they'd worked out over decades, each giving the other space to be who they were. She understood what the riding did for him, even if she didn't share it. And he always came back.

He came back calmer, quieter, more himself. The road gave him something he couldn't get any other way—perspective, maybe, or just the simple problem of getting from here to there. She gave him something too: a home worth coming back to. A center that held.

He still camps now, even without the motorcycle. An A-Liner trailer he pulls behind the truck, solo trips to campgrounds in the middle of nowhere. Mary Jean is puzzled by this sometimes—he says he goes for the quiet, but she doesn't talk much. What quiet does he need that she can't give him?

Last fall he camped alone at a lake in the Ozarks. Woke before dawn, made coffee on the little stove, sat in the camp chair watching the mist lift off the water. A heron stood in the shallows, motionless, waiting for something only it could see. He watched it for twenty minutes. Didn't think about anything. Didn't have to wonder if Mary Jean needed something, or if that sigh meant she was tired or disappointed or just breathing. The heron didn't need him to read its mood. The lake didn't care if he was paying attention.

That's what he goes for. Not silence—Mary Jean is quiet enough. But fifty-seven years of marriage means you're always calibrating. Is she okay? Did I do something? Even when neither of them speaks, he's reading her weather—the way she used to read his, all those years when his moods were the dangerous ones. The tables have turned, or maybe they've just balanced. Now it's his turn to pay attention, to watch for signs, to wonder if something he said landed wrong. It takes energy he doesn't always have. In the woods, alone, there's nothing to interpret. Just the heron, the mist, the coffee going cold in his hands.

She doesn't fully understand this, and he's never explained it well. But she lets him go. And he always comes back.

* * *

His daughter had her own hard years.

By the time Libby hit her teens, David and Mary Jean were tired. They'd spent their energy on the boys, on the Balderson crisis, on Florida and back. The reins loosened. Libby was looking to be

seen—not by her peers, but by her parents. She found a crowd, the kids who liked to party, who stayed out late, who pushed against the edges. The "wrong crowd," people called them. But Libby saw something else in them: people who needed someone to show up. People nobody else was paying attention to.

There was an accident. She was driving. Totaled the car on a county road. There was talk of speed, of alcohol, of the things that kill teenagers in small towns. Libby walked away. She faced the consequences and somewhere in there started to find her footing.

She wasn't a natural rider—she had to work at it—but she wanted in on whatever her father had found out there. So she learned. She wobbled through the basics, got her confidence, and eventually rode with him and her brothers through Montana and Idaho and glacier country, on roads that tested everyone's nerve.

She met her husband on one of those trips. Kurt was Brian's Air Force buddy, a Minnesota boy, a schoolteacher. He showed up for a camping trip and never really left her life. They married eventually, settled into a farmhouse fifteen miles from his family's land, built a quiet life in the frozen north.

Libby stopped riding years ago. She didn't need it anymore—she'd gotten what she came for. But she found her own road. She's an in-home care nurse now, driving the back highways of rural Minnesota, visiting the lonely and the dying in their farmhouses and trailers, making them comfortable. She comes to people in their last months, their last weeks, and sits with them. Holds their hands. Lets them talk or not talk. Helps them go easy.

The same people, really. The ones nobody else is paying attention to. The thread that started in high school—the instinct to show up for the overlooked—it just found its proper form.

She says it's her calling. The old man believes her. There's something in his daughter—some steadiness, some willingness to be present in hard places—that he recognizes. She got it from somewhere. Maybe from all those miles on the back roads, learning that the journey mattered more than the destination. Maybe from watching her mother tend to the parish, the sick, the grieving. Maybe it was always in her, waiting to emerge.

They talk about her patients sometimes—not the details, but the weight of it. How do you hold that much sorrow and keep going? She doesn't have an answer. She just does it. She shows up, day after day, and does the next right thing.

He knows something about that.

* * *

His oldest son lives in Atlanta now. David works for Lockheed, writing software for C-130s. The cargo planes, the workhorses, the ones that fly into disaster zones and war zones and anywhere else the world is falling apart. He's good at it—really good, from what the old man understands. He found

his place.

The old man thinks about this sometimes. His son, who played piano, who drew, who wanted nothing to do with football or hunting or any of the rough stuff—he ended up working on aircraft. Just like his grandfather Bernard, the aeronautical engineer. The line curves back on itself in ways you can't predict.

They don't dwell on the past. There was no big reconciliation, no tearful conversation where everything got said. That's not how Peterson men work. Somewhere along the way, the tension just eased. David G grew up, got quiet, became steady in a way that comes with age and experience. The restless teenager became a measured man. The old man doesn't know exactly when it happened or why.

What passed between them, only they know. The old man apologized—more than once, over the years—and David G said don't worry about it, Dad, the way Peterson men do. But beyond those words, something deeper shifted. The old man changed. Year by year, he stopped being the man who needed to apologize and became someone else. What the world sees is the after: two men who can sit in the same room, talk about nothing much, and let the past stay where they put it.

David G calls every Wednesday. Has for years. They talk about work, about the grandkids, about whatever the old man is building in the shop. Surface stuff, mostly. But there's warmth underneath it. Scar tissue, but healed.

The old man doesn't need more than that. He's learned to let people be who they are. His oldest son doesn't ride, doesn't camp, doesn't need the road the way the rest of them did. He found his own way to show up in the world, and he's doing it well. That's enough. That's more than enough.

* * *

Brian still rides. Two of Brian's kids ride too—the thing passed down now to a third generation. The old man thinks about this, and it brings something complicated. Pride, yes. But guilt too. And something like wonder that Brian is still alive at all.

His youngest son was reckless when he was young. Wild. A car accident that could have killed him. Khobar Towers, missed by a day. The Air Force years were one near-miss after another, and even now there's a restlessness in Brian, a throttle that doesn't quite close all the way. He's settled down—wife, kids, a business he built himself—but the old man sees something in his son that looks familiar. The restlessness. The need to push against the edge of things. He doesn't know if Brian got that from him or if it was always there, waiting.

Brian had his own running moment. In his early forties, trapped in a corporate job he hated, he walked out in the middle of a meeting and never went back. Started his own business. Three generations of Peterson men who needed out. Bernard escaped to the farm. David tried to escape—Florida was supposed to be the way out—but the family rejected it, wanted to go home, and

he ate the disappointment and ground out another twenty years. Brian escaped because the world had changed, because he had options his father never had. Sometimes the pattern breaks. Sometimes it doesn't.

He's said it out loud, more than once: he introduced his children to a dangerous activity because he wanted riding buddies. He wanted companions on the road, and he recruited his own kids. They could have been killed. Any of them, any time, on any of those trips through the mountains or across the plains. They weren't killed. But they could have been, and that would have been on him.

He sold his last bike a few years after he retired. Didn't make a big deal of it—just let it go. He camps in an A-Liner now, a little pop-up trailer he can pull behind the truck. Solo trips, mostly—the same way the motorcycle trips were never really family vacations, just him and whoever wanted to ride along. More comfortable now. Much safer. He still gets out there, still finds campsites in the middle of nowhere, still wakes up to the sound of birds and wind. But he does it at ground level now, with a mattress and a roof and no lean angle to worry about.

He's made his peace with that too. The riding years were the riding years. They gave him something he needed, and they gave his kids something too—not just the adventure, but access to a version of their father they might not have met otherwise. Whether that was worth the risk, he can't say. It's done now. The miles are logged. Everyone survived.

* * *

The photography started in Vietnam. A Mamiya bought from a shop in town—Good camera, GI. You like.—and he shot everything. The base, the aircraft, the guys he worked with, the green that went on forever. Something about holding the camera made it real and not real at the same time. You were there, but you were also watching. Bearing witness.

He never stopped. The camera became how he showed up for the people he loved. When Brian was chasing a national enduro championship in 2011, the old man went to every race—not to coach, not to advise, just to be there with his camera. Brian flying through the woods, the crashes, the victories, the long drives between races. He edited the footage into something the family would keep.

He does this for all of them now. Stays on the edges, waits for the moments that matter. The grandkids don't always notice him filming. That's how he likes it. He's collecting evidence that they were here, that they were together, that it meant something. Somewhere down the line, someone will watch footage from 2019 and see the old man in the background, tending a fire, and they'll know: he was there. He kept the record.

* * *

The afternoon light is fading. He sets the phone down and picks up the oak—the piece from the timber, the one that grew when he grew. The grain is beautiful, dark lines swirling through the pale

wood, each ring a year they shared. A narrow band from 1966—drought, and he was in Vietnam. A wide one from 1974—good rain, and he was building this house. The whole history written there if you know how to read it. He'll make something from it. He doesn't know what yet. Something useful. Something that will outlast him.

Outside, the sun is dropping toward the horizon. Somewhere in Minnesota, his daughter is probably resting before another week of back roads and bedside vigils. Somewhere in Atlanta, his oldest son is doing whatever he does on Sunday evenings—maybe playing piano, maybe not, but good at what he does either way. And Brian is probably in his shop somewhere, building something, the same restlessness that never quite settles.

They all found their way. Not his way—their own ways. That's how it's supposed to work. You give them what you have, and they take what they need, and they leave the rest behind. You don't get to choose what sticks.

His grandchildren only know the man he became. The patient one, the quiet one, the one with the camera. When stories from the old days come up—and they do, sometimes, at family gatherings—the grandkids can't quite picture it. They look at the grandfather who makes things in his shop and tells them stories about the timber, and they see who he is now. The earlier version is just a story, something that happened a long time ago to someone they never met.

Maybe that's the best he could hope for. A whole generation that only knows the after.

The motorcycle stuck for some of them. The faith stuck for none of them, not really, not the way it stuck for their mother. The discipline stuck, maybe. The showing up. The belief that you keep going until you arrive.

But he wonders sometimes what his children needed that he couldn't give. The showing up was real—he knows that, he's proud of that—but it was also the only language he had. The words got stuck somewhere between his father and him. The softness took decades to emerge, and by then his children were grown, finding their own ways to love, carrying whatever he'd given them and leaving the rest behind.

But they came back. All three of them. They call, they visit, they talk. He listens now in a way he couldn't before.

His grandchildren get the softer version. The patient one. The one who listens. Maybe that's the shape that was always underneath—the thing that emerged when the pressure and the rage finally got carved away.

The wood stove ticks. He turns the oak in his hands and waits for the shape to emerge.

* * *

Epilogue: The Shape

Mary Jean comes home as the light is failing.

He hears her car in the driveway, the door, the familiar sounds of a woman returning to her house after a long day of doing for others. She'll have stories—who said what at the committee meeting, which family needs meals this week, the small dramas of a small parish in a small town. He'll listen. He always listens, even when he doesn't understand why it matters so much to her. It matters. That's enough.

She comes onto the porch and stands there a moment, looking at him. He's in his chair, the oak in his hands, the wood stove ticking as it cools. The evening is coming on.

"You've been out here all day," she says.

"Mostly."

She sits in the other chair, the one that's been hers for many years. They don't need to talk. They've said most of what needs saying, and the rest can wait, or never come at all. The silence between them is not empty. It's full of fifty-seven years.

* * *

He thinks about time differently now.

When he was young, time was a road stretching out to the horizon—endless, inexhaustible, more of it than he could ever use. He spent it carelessly, the way young men do, assuming there would always be more. Then the road started to curve, and he realized he could see the end of it, and everything changed.

His father made it to ninety-four. That's the number he holds in his head, the benchmark. Thirteen more years, if the genes hold, if the body cooperates, if nothing comes out of nowhere the way things do. Thirteen years. It sounds like a lot. It sounds like nothing.

He's not afraid of dying. He's seen enough of it—Vietnam, his parents, friends who went before him, Trixie in the backyard with a shovel in his hands—to know it's just the last thing that happens, no different from all the other things except that there's nothing after. What he fears is the before. The decline, the dependence, the slow fade into someone who can't do for himself. He watched his father at the end, those last hard months when Bernard's heart was giving out. He doesn't want that. He

wants to be cutting wood in the morning and gone by evening. Quick and clean, like a light switching off.

But you don't get to choose. That's the thing about mortality—it doesn't care what you want. It comes when it comes, how it comes, and all your discipline and planning don't mean a damn thing.

* * *

He looks at his hands. The same hands that pulled buttonweeds as a boy, that loaded bombs at Bien Hoa, that built this house board by board, that gripped handlebars across a hundred thousand miles of American road. The same hands that held a fork to his son's face one terrible night. They're old now. Spotted, veined, the skin looser than it used to be. But they still work. They can still shape wood, still hold a coffee cup, still reach for his wife in the middle of the night.

That's something. That's not nothing.

* * *

Mary Jean is quiet beside him. He wonders what she thinks about when she sits here—if she counts the years the way he does, if she's made her peace with the end or if she's still negotiating. Her faith should make it easier. Heaven waiting, reunion with everyone she's lost, the whole story finally making sense. He hopes it does make it easier. He hopes she believes it hard enough that it carries her through.

He doesn't know what he believes. He's read the books, done the seeking, sat on this porch and thought about consciousness and what happens when the brain stops firing. He hasn't arrived anywhere. The mystics say that's the point—that the seeking is the finding, that the question is the answer. Maybe. Or maybe that's just what people say when they don't know and can't admit it.

But he's learned this much: you can't force an answer any more than you can force a shape from wood. You hold the question lightly, the way you hold a chisel. You pay attention. You wait. And sometimes—not always, but sometimes—something reveals itself that you couldn't have found by looking.

What he knows is this: he's here now. The porch, the stove, the woman beside him, the oak in his hands. This moment, this place, this life he built from the rubble of everything that tried to break him. It's enough. It's what he has.

* * *

The grandkids will remember him, for a while. The videos will help—decades of footage, labeled and archived, evidence that he was here, that they were together, that it meant something. His children will remember longer, will carry him the way he carries Bernard, a presence that fades but

never quite disappears. And then they'll be gone too, and their children, and eventually there will be no one left who knew David Fuller Peterson, no one who can say what he was like or what he did or why any of it mattered.

That's not sad. That's just true. Everyone disappears eventually. The question is what you leave behind before you go.

He thinks he's left enough. Three kids who found their way. Eight grandkids and counting. A house that's stood for fifty years. Some videos, some photographs, some stories that might get told around a campfire someday. And the oak—the piece that grew in the same timber he grew in, drank the same rain, weathered the same droughts. It might become a tool handle or a lamp or something he can't yet see. Something useful and beautiful, something his hands will make, something that will outlast him, something a grandchild might pick up in thirty years and remember: my grandfather made this. From wood that came from the place he came from.

The wood and the man. Both grown from the same soil. Both still being shaped. Both waiting for the form to emerge.

The best stories work the same way, he thinks. They look simple on the surface—an old man cutting wood, a weekend on a porch, nothing much happening. But if you look closer, if you're paying attention, there's something underneath. A father-son motorcycle trip that's really about the nature of quality. A weekend portrait that's really about how a man becomes who he is. You can read it fast or you can read it slow. The story doesn't care. It just waits there, the way the oak waits, the shape already inside it.

That's not nothing.

* * *

"What are you making?" Mary Jean asks.

He turns the wood in his hands. The grain is beautiful—dark lines swirling through the pale, a record of years of growth and drought and seasons turning. He's been studying it for weeks now, waiting for it to tell him what it wants to become. You can't rush that. You can't force it. The shape is already in there, hidden under what doesn't belong. His job is just to find it.

"I don't know yet," he says. "Something useful. Something beautiful."

She nods. She knows how he works. She's watched him for fifty-seven years, shaping wood and shaping himself, removing what didn't belong until something emerged.

* * *

She watches him turn the wood in his hands. Fifty-seven years of watching this man, and she's still learning what to make of him.

He was faithful, as far as she knew. In a world where marriages fell apart for that reason all the time, hers never did. That was the foundation, even when everything else was hard.

And somehow he pulled it off. The house, the kids, the life. Her family had always struggled with money—her father working himself ragged, her mother stretching every dollar, the constant low hum of worry. David made that worry disappear. He helped build this house, fed three children, and arrived at eighty-one with more than enough. She still doesn't quite understand how he did it. The discipline, the planning, the ledgers she used to resent—they added up to security she'd never known.

He can fix anything. That's the thing that still amazes her—give him a broken machine, a stuck door, a furnace that won't light, and he'll tear into it without hesitation. No fear. He just figures it out. Her father would have called someone, paid someone, worried about the bill. David just fixes it.

And he's still a gentleman. Eighty-one years old and he still opens the car door for her. Every time. She's never asked him to. He just does it, the way he's done it since they were teenagers in St. Marys.

She watches him with the children and grandchildren sometimes—the hour-long conversations, the easy way he draws them out, asking questions, actually listening. She admires that. She's never been good at holding conversations the way he is. She runs out of things to say, gets nervous, retreats into small talk. He just talks, and people want to talk back.

And he played with them. That's what she remembers from the good years, the weekends when the pressure lifted—Big Bad Wolf in the backyard, the pool, the roughhousing that made the kids shriek with laughter. His father Bernard never played with his children. Not once. Bernard showed up for sports, for things he liked, but he didn't get down on the floor, didn't chase anyone through the house, didn't make himself silly for the sake of a child's joy. David did. He never quit playing. Even in the hard years, even when he came home exhausted and angry, he'd find his way back to them on the weekends. That's not nothing.

When she needs help, he helps. No sighing, no complaining, no making her feel like a burden. The kitchen faucet, the heavy boxes, the trip to the doctor—he's just there.

He sent her to California once, while he was tearing the kitchen apart. Go see your family, he said. This will be a mess for weeks. She came back to a new kitchen.

And Ireland. Her dream trip, the one she'd mentioned for years without really believing it would happen. He planned the whole thing. They stood on the Cliffs of Moher together, wind whipping her hair, and she thought: he listened. All those years, he was listening.

Now he gives her money at Christmas. A generous check, hers to spend however she wants. No accounting, no ledger, no cookie jar. Just: this is yours.

She wishes she had known, back then, what was happening to him. The pressure at work, the humiliation, the feeling of being trapped. He never told her—not really, not in a way she could understand. She saw the anger but not the wound underneath. If she had known, would it have changed anything? She doesn't know. But she wishes she had known.

* * *

The sun is down now. The porch is dark except for the glow of the stove, orange light flickering through the glass. Somewhere out there, his children are living their lives—Libby in Minnesota, David G in Atlanta, Brian wherever Brian is. Somewhere out there, his brothers are getting older, the farm is waiting for spring, the timber is standing in the cold the way it's stood for a hundred years.

He's eighty-one. He's been a son, a soldier, a husband, a father, a tyrant, a seeker, an old man on a porch. He's been the worst version of himself and something better than he thought he could be. He's not done yet—there's wood to cut, walks to take, grandkids to film, a wife to sit beside in the evenings—but the end is closer than the beginning, and he knows it, and that's alright.

That's alright.

* * *

Mary Jean reaches over and takes his hand. Her fingers are cool, thin, familiar. They've held each other's hands for fifty-seven years, through all of it—the losses, the fights, the money wars, the faith that divided them and the love that somehow didn't. She isn't reading her prayers tonight. She's just sitting with him, the way she used to before everything got complicated. The way she still does, sometimes, when the evening is quiet enough.

"I'm glad you're here," she says.

He doesn't know if she means here on the porch, or here in this life, or here still alive and holding her hand. It doesn't matter. The answer is the same.

"Me too," he says.

The stove ticks. The dark comes down. Somewhere a dog barks, and then is quiet.

They sit together, two old people at the end of a Sunday, at the end of a weekend, closer to the end than the beginning. Divorce never entered their minds—not once, not even in the worst of it. When they said I do, they were in. Her loyalty was Catholic, practical, fierce: how else would she provide? His loyalty was Peterson, bone-deep, unexamined: you don't leave. You don't even consider it. The magic, if there is any, is that they were in a bad time together. Two people who couldn't quit, wouldn't quit, who kept showing up even when showing up was the hardest thing either of them had ever done.

The oak waits in his hands. The shape will come.

It always does, eventually. You just have to be patient. You just have to keep showing up.

* * *

Tomorrow he'll walk his four miles. He'll feed the stove, read his books, maybe drive out to the farm

and see what's happening. The week will unspool, ordinary and ordinary, and that's fine. That's the whole point. You build a life out of ordinary days, and if you're lucky, you get enough of them to look back and see it was something after all.

He's been lucky. He knows that. Lucky to survive Vietnam, lucky to survive himself, lucky to end up here on this porch with this woman and this life. Not everyone gets that. Not everyone makes it through.

He made it through.

The rest is just waiting for the shape to emerge.