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THE PROSPECT OF WINTER DRIVING

Not that it was a bad neighborhood. Under that half-inch of wet snow, the yard could have been anyone's. I looked for a window patched with cardboard—not uncommon in Vermont, even in winter—and saw none. Still, just remembering how I'd always driven *past* these houses made the dark footprints on the lawn look like holes in old felt. I couldn't help noticing that my car seemed to be the only one in sight without visible rust.

Alan and I got out. As we started for the door, a short blond woman in jeans and a yellow sweatshirt stepped onto the porch. She had a double chin, and she wore glasses with clear, heavy frames.

I suddenly felt like a bully for being so tall.

"I'm Sam Tighe." I shook her hand.

"I'm Ann Prossky," she said. "He'll be ready in a second. Do you want to come in?"

"No, thanks. We should be going."

"Sure. Are you a math teacher?"

I knew it.

"Yes."

"I think my husband's taking your class."

"I think he is."

"Joe wanted to be here but, you know, he had to work." She glanced behind, into the house. "I'll go and get Tom."

She went in, leaving the door ajar. In their living room, the parts of a newspaper lay spread out on a green tweed, slightly ragged sofa. A green plastic cup was sitting on a glass-topped coffee table, which stood on a red-and-black, oval shag rug.

"His dad's in one of your classes?" Alan asked.

"An evening class."

"How's he doing?"

I gave Alan a none-of-your-business look. "All right."

The door was pulled back and Tom and his mother came out.

"Hello, Alan. Hello, Mister Tighe."

Tom wasn't fat—just heavy—and fair, like his mother. He wore black-framed spectacles, and the lenses drooped onto his broad cheekbones. At his side he carried a small,

steel-cornered case, which I was sure contained a clarinet (too big for a flute; and no way it could be an oboe).

Mrs. Prossky folded her arms across her belly. “Well, I guess you’re ready to go.”

“We’ll call when we get home.”

The three of us walked to the car. I opened the trunk. Tom settled the black case into a hollow next to Alan’s French horn. He did this so gently, it might have been porcelain.

I quickly seated myself behind the wheel, and Alan got in beside me. Tom climbed in back.

“I appreciate your giving me a ride like this, Mister Tighe.”

“It’s no problem.” I got the car turned around. “Tom, what instrument do you play?”

“I play the clarinet, sir.”

“Really.” I hadn’t meant for the word to fall at the end, as if what he’d said were a wonder.

My son Alan is seventeen. He’s played the French horn for five years. He takes it very seriously, but it’s not his whole life. Anyway, I don’t think it is. I haven’t involved myself in his music the way Renee has. I forget how it happened but, years ago, she appropriated the job of taking him to his lessons and auditions. She’s frequently reminded me (and I’ve never disputed) that all of that driving is a nuisance. One thing she’s never admitted is that, at least, it’s a predictable one. Years ago, she also elected never to learn how to handle a stick shift. That Saturday, our Toyota was in the shop, so I had to take Alan and Tom down to Rutland.

They were auditioning to get into the “New England Youth Orchestra”. For Alan it would be his third and—necessarily—last attempt. He’d gone all out, even buying an expensive CD with the audition piece on it. He’d spent an hour every evening on school stuff and assignments from his private teacher, and followed that up with half an hour of listening to the CD and trying to duplicate the most difficult runs. He tended to practice exactly when I was putting on music of my own out in the living room, which I thought was pretty inconsiderate. We’d had words about it. But I hadn’t said a thing for two months.

That’s a bigger sacrifice than it sounds. Sometimes I’ll go all day with a piece of music running through my head. Maybe it’s the spooky piano at the beginning of *The Usual Suspects*; or a quiet, heartbreaking work like Barber’s *Adagio*; or a track from Jennifer Warnes’s *Hunter* album; or even—this is no lie—Messiaen’s *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*; so that, when I get home, I’m primed.

But the French horn will already be going. Alan keeps his door shut, and he isn’t that loud, but he can be lethally distracting. (Not with everything: *Star Wars* drowns him out.) Unfortunately, his tutor has told him that the best time to practice is when he feels like it, and that happens to be an hour or two after he gets out of school. As I said,

we've had words—and here the “we” includes Renee, who always sides with him. But, since September, I'd kept my mouth shut, and waited until late, with headphones on, to get my fixes.

For what it's worth, that is my situation.

Alan tried to gossip with Tom about teachers, but the talk soon trailed off. I gathered, what I could have guessed, that they hadn't taken many classes together. Still, it was strange that Tom didn't perk up when Alan mentioned some of their band teacher's more flagrant affectations (loud knitted vests; a waxed mustache).

Tom had a sort of whining drawl—like his mother's—and he seemed to need to put out a real effort to talk. I might have guessed that he was saving energy for the tryout if he hadn't fidgeted so much.

His father fidgets, too. But Joe talks like an American-accented Sam the Hobbit: fast, I think, because he feels guilty about taking up my time, even after I remind him that it *is* the office hour. He begins every session with an apology for not having “gotten it,” certain that “it” is pretty simple. (To be honest, “it” usually is.)

I like him, though; and I guess he likes me, or at least the way I teach. He's a pretty good student. Two years ago I had him for algebra; last year, pre-calc; calculus this term. He works in the university steam plant. He told me once that he'd been taking these classes, year after year, to get into the business school.

He's a big guy—like a Marlboro man—and he has large hands, with a nick missing from one index finger. When he sits in my overstuffed chair (the one I take naps in), his knees are right in my face, and they never stop twitching.

It's an hour and a half to Rutland, and an easy drive in good weather: just go south. Once in town, I had to depend on Renee's directions:

“Turn left at Williams. Don't worry, there's a light. Keep going till you see the parking lot. It's big.”

I'd hoped for at least a large sign over the Williams intersection, but every street marker followed the classic small-town pattern: two crossed panels narrower than license plates.

“Alan, wake up. Alan. Alan.” I shoved him. “Alan.” He looked at me. “Are you awake?”

“What?”

“What street? *Look*. Where am I?”

“What are you looking for?”

“I'm looking for the turn off. Where do I turn off?”

“I don't know. I think you're almost there.”

“What?”

“You’re almost there.” He pointed. “It’s two blocks after that Denny’s.”

I slipped into the left lane. “Maybe you should wake him.”

“Hey. Tom.”

Williams went straight for three blocks, broadened, and bent to the left. We passed an athletic field, a triangular traffic island, and a boulder with a corroded bronze plaque. Finally, the “unmissable” lot appeared on our right.

Thirty or so cars were huddled near the entrance to a three-story brick building, on which RUTLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL was spelled out in steel letters.

The boys got their instruments and we went in.

A registration table had been set up in the drafty, high-ceilinged foyer. Maybe it only seemed drafty. It was emptier than I’d expected. I stood against the rough brick wall while Tom and Alan confirmed their audition times and the room numbers.

“I’m upstairs,” said Alan. “Four-fifteen.”

“Tom?”

“Four.”

It was three-thirty.

“We’d better get to the warm-up room,” Alan said. “Come on. They always put it in the cafeteria.”

Tom and I followed my son to the lunchroom, where a dozen or so kids, obviously done for the day, were chatting at the red-topped pedestal tables.

Alan and Tom went to a free table and started to unpack their instruments.

Light was coming from what looked like a lounge. I walked across and leaned in. It was a huge office, with over a dozen desks, and posters on the walls that advertised colleges or enticed kids to stay off drugs.

A man and a woman were talking next to the Xerox machine. They fell silent when they saw me.

There didn’t seem to be any place to comfortably wait.

I walked back to Alan and Tom.

“I was going to go to McDonald’s, and I wondered if you guys were hungry.”

“No, Dad, we’re not. But thanks anyway.”

“No, thank you, Mister Tighe.”

“Well, let’s meet back at the entrance. A little before five?”

“Sure,” said Alan.

“Tom?”

He nodded.

“Okay. I’ll see you both at five. In case you need me, I’ll be across the street. You know—”

“We know, Dad.”

The air in the McDonald's had a kind of dryness I've come to associate with the onset of a head cold. The crowd was almost all kids—musicians—and what I guessed were their tired parents.

I stood behind a petite woman in a black overcoat. She had a small mustache, and she kept rubbing her hands together while her large eyes moved over the place. It was extremely uncomfortable to look at her, but I couldn't stop. Unfortunately, she was ahead of me for quite awhile, because the man in front of her had to give his order three times before they got it right.

Finally I got my coffee and apple pie, and took them to a small table by a window, far from everybody.

It had started to snow.

The only thing I hate about Vermont is winter driving. The prospect of it (I've lived here for fifteen years) has almost always been worse than the reality, which should have made the prospect become less scary. But it's done the opposite. All superstition, I'm sure. I appease the gods of black ice and freezing rain by worrying myself sick before the bad things have a chance to happen. Then, when they don't happen, I reason that my worry must have prevented them: reinforcement for the next time.

I foresaw the road closing; the desperate (futile) search for a hotel room; the night in a church basement, getting words of wisdom from a flatulent drunk; waking to find my wallet and boots stolen; the long explanation to unsympathetic police; a few days later, the flu.

Bad weather: in southern California, where I grew up, it meant rain. When it rained, and recess got called off, we played a game in which half the class put their heads on their desks and closed their eyes, while the others went around and tapped them on the shoulders. The kids at the desks had to guess who touched them. If they guessed right, they got to join the tappers for the next round, while the kids they fingered had to go back to their seats.

I got to be a tapper only once. I'd kept my eyes open and seen the kid's shoes as he passed. They were shapeless, black sneakers—very cheap—of a kind I don't think they even make anymore.

I was pretty sure who they belonged to. After Christmas vacation (this was long before political correctness), our teacher had gone around and had us tell what presents we'd received. I've forgotten mine, but I still remember his: some clothes, and a *Bewitched* card game. He'd been wearing the same shoes. Maybe they were the only pair he owned.

I scanned the line as if I were trying to decide, when really I was stealing glances at feet: I wanted to be sure. The poor guy grinned when my eyes fixed on him; and he ducked his head as I raised my arm to point.

Alan was sitting on a bench between two trophy cases.

“Sorry I’m late. How’d it go?”

“I think I messed up the sight-reading.”

“What about the rest?”

“My tone was good.” He shrugged. “I did all right.”

“Where’s Tom?”

“I haven’t seen him.”

The registration table, its legs drawn up, was leaning against a far wall.

“When was his?”

“I think he said four.”

It was five-fifteen. “Did he know we were meeting here?”

“He was there when you said it.”

“They must have run over.”

Alan didn’t say anything.

“They must have,” I repeated. “Don’t you think?”

“Do you want me to check?”

“You know where the clarinets are?”

“Yes.”

“Please.”

He walked off.

Five musicians were standing by the outer doors. A car’s headlights flashed against the windows, and three of the kids made fast goodbyes and went out.

I started to read the trophies.

“Dad.”

“What?”

Alan was alone.

“They’d already gone.”

“Gone where?”

“*Gone.*”

“What about Tom?”

“I didn’t see him.”

“What do you mean?”

“He wasn’t there.”

“Maybe you went to the wrong room.”

“It wasn’t the wrong room. I know which room it was.”

“You’re sure.”

“Dad, I know which room it was.”

I stood up.

“Dad, I already looked.”

“Stay here.”

I went back to the cafeteria. The light in the office was still on. I walked across and peered through the doorway. The same man and woman were there. The woman was sitting on a desk. She was leaning back on her arms and her legs were crossed.

“Can we help you?” she asked, sitting up.

“I’m looking for a musician.”

“Well, you’re *almost* in the right place.”

“His name is Tom Prossky.”

“Are you his father?” she asked.

“I’m his ride.”

“And you can’t find him,” said the man.

The woman glanced behind her.

A clarinet case was lying on the green pad.

“What is it?” I asked.

She slid off the desk and brought me the case. Something inside it was rattling softly.

“What’s this? Where’s Tom?”

“I think you’d better open it,” said the man.

I set it on a table and undid the catches. I pushed back the lid.

The clarinet looked as if it had been crushed with an anvil. The bell, mouthpiece, and middle shaft were flattened. Splinters and keys lay loose on the velvet.

“What is this?”

“It’s Tom Prossky’s clarinet,” the man said.

“Is Tom hurt?”

“He’s not hurt,” said the man. “We don’t think he’s hurt.”

“Apparently,” the woman said, “he didn’t do as well as he thought he should.”

“What do you mean?”

She rolled her eyes.

“I guess he thought he screwed up pretty bad,” said the man, “and he had a tantrum.”

“You mean he did this,” I said. “Is that what you mean?” They didn’t say anything. “Where is he now?”

“We don’t know where he is.”

“You don’t understand. I’m taking him home.”

“And we don’t know where he is. He just ran off.” The man drummed his fingers on the desktop.

“Could you help me look for him?”

“What?”

“Could you help me look for him?”

“Mister—” said the woman.

“Tighe.” I was closing the case: it had suddenly felt indecent to leave it open.

“We don’t really know what he looks like,” she said.

“But you saw him.”

“We didn’t see it happen,” said the woman. “One of the adjudicators brought in the instrument.”

“Okay,” I said. “He’s a little overweight. He’s got blond hair. He had on a brown jacket; maybe it was green. He wears glasses.”

“That’s fine,” said the woman, “but I have to go.”

“Please help me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

They stared at me for a moment. The man stood up and turned to her. “I can check the downstairs. That won’t take long.” He walked out.

“Thank you,” I called. “Thank you.”

The woman crossed the office and pulled a coat off the rack. She draped it over her arm and carried it back to the desk. She looked up at the clock.

“I’m sorry for this,” I said. “Can I use your phone? I’d like to call my wife. It’s to Burlington.”

She dropped the coat over a chair. “Yeah.”

I followed her to another desk, where she picked up the receiver and punched in an access code. “Just dial the number. Here.”

“Thank you.”

The phone rang and rang.

“Hello?”

“Renee, it’s me. I have to tell you something.”

“You got lost.”

“No, I did not get lost. It’s something else. We got here all right. Everyone’s fine . . . I don’t know how to say this.”

“Don’t know how to say what?”

“I can’t find Tom.”

“Who?”

“I can’t find Tom. I can’t find the kid I brought down here. He knew where we were supposed to meet and he’s not there.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Don’t say it’s ridiculous.”

“He must have misunderstood you.”

The man appeared in the doorway. Seeing me, he held up his hands and shook his head.

“No,” I said. “He had a tantrum.”

“What?”

“He got mad and smashed his clarinet. The people here say he . . . kind of screwed up.”

“Who says he screwed up?”

“I told you, the people here.”

“Are they sure?”

“I’ve seen the clarinet.”

“Oh, God,” she said. “You’d better look for him.”

“A guy just went and looked for him and didn’t find him.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want me to call his parents?”

“No, don’t call his parents.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Don’t do anything.”

“What are you going to do?”

The man and woman were looking at me.

“I’ll look for him. If I don’t find him, I’ll call you back. Then you can call his parents.”

“Can’t the people there help you look for him?”

“I told you, a guy looked.”

“But they could still help you.”

“I asked them. They can’t . . . It’s complicated.”

“What are you going to do if you don’t find him?”

“I don’t know . . . I told you.”

“Are you going to come home, or what?”

“I don’t know. I’ll call the police. I don’t know. I’ll decide then. I’ll call you first.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t call his parents until you hear from me.”

“I won’t call his parents until I hear from you.”

“Please don’t.”

“I told you I wouldn’t.”

“Good.”

We hung up.

I hurried out to the foyer. Alan was the only person there.

“What—”

“Give me your horn.”

“Is that Tom’s?”

“Just give me the horn. I’m putting these in the car.”

He handed me the case. “Where’s Tom?”

“I don’t know. Wait here. *Stay here.*”

Snow was coming down steadily. The area lights had put the lot under a vast yellow veil.

I had a sudden vision—of Tom, crouched penitently behind the Honda—and I walked around the car twice, just to make sure I hadn’t become prophetic.

“What was that?” Alan asked. “What did you do?”

“I put them in the trunk.”

“Where’s Tom?”

“Stay put.”

“Where is he?”

“Stay put.”

“What is going on?”

“I don’t know what happened. Tom wandered off. Right now, I want you to stay here. Right now, I’m going to search the building.”

“Why?”

“I can’t drive off without him. Okay?”

“Why did he wander off?”

“I’m going to look for him. That is what is going to happen. If I don’t find him, I’ll probably call the police.”

“The police?”

“The police.”

“Why are you going to call the police? Dad, what happened?”

I told him.

“Shit.”

“Stay here. If you see him, grab him.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you.”

I walked up to the second story. I heard noise from around a corner and hurried toward it.

A man with a briefcase was turning out the lights in a classroom.

“Excuse me! Excuse me!”

“Yes?” He stood in the doorway. “Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for someone. He played the clarinet.”

“I didn’t judge the clarinets. I believe they’re upstairs.”

“They’ve gone.”

"I don't doubt that. Have you tried the office on the ground floor? It's attached to the lunchroom." He pulled the door to and jiggled the knob. "They would be the ones to know."

"Yes. And they don't know where he is. He's disappeared."

"'Disappeared.'" He let go of the knob. "He played the clarinet, you say? I think I may know whom you mean."

Our eyes locked.

"I heard what happened," I said. "He's not my son."

"I'm relieved." He nodded toward the end of the hall. "He did it on the concrete, there. I didn't see the event, only the outcome. I wish I could tell you where he went. Have you checked the restrooms?"

"No, I haven't."

"That's the first place I'd look. Although, to be frank, I doubt that he's still in the building. If my wife and I weren't expected at her mother's, I'd stay and help you. Good luck in your search."

He walked off.

I doubled back to a boys' room and went in.

"Tom?"

I walked around to the front of the stalls. It was plain that they were empty, but I still opened every door, and then held each back for a full second—as if that could make the emptiness more certain.

Across the hall was a girls' room.

I knocked on the door.

"Hello? Anyone in there? I'm looking for someone. Hello? Is anybody in there?"

I listened, leaning toward the door, and not touching it.

I walked in. The air smelled of perfume.

"Tom?"

I pushed a stall halfway open. I tried the next one, and the next. I kept going over what I'd say if anybody walked in: *I'm looking for my daughter. She plays the trumpet. Her name's Alice.*

The lights were out on the third story. I exited the stairwell and they flashed on with a sound like a bolt being thrown back.

I kept walking, tripping other motion sensors. I hadn't brought a watch, but I guessed I'd been searching a long time. I pressed my face against a classroom's hallside windows, and found the clock where it should be, over the front blackboard.

It wasn't as late as I feared.

Outside, across the room, the snowflakes flickered. The corridor lights gleamed off big-bellied desks. I'd wandered into the elementary school.

The walls were decorated with paper menorahs and Christmas trees.

I found him a minute later. The lights came on, and he was at my feet. I almost fell. He had his arms wrapped around his upbent legs, like a lost hiker trying to keep warm. I held onto his sleeve while he got up.

"I'm sorry."

"Forget it." I pulled him toward the stairwell.

"I'm sorry."

"I said forget it. We've got a long drive."

"I'm really sorry."

"Forget it."

Alan jumped up. "Where'd you find him?"

"Never mind."

I dropped Tom's arm, got ahead, and unlocked the Honda. I fetched the scraper from the back seat. I threw myself into cleaning off the car, all the while thinking of skids, low shoulders, and the approaching night. The scraper's wooden handle snapped off. I hadn't brought gloves, and my hands were soon stinging. I tried to hold the scraper's hard plastic end in my armpit while I blew warm air into my cupped palms. It fell into the snow.

"Fuck."

Then I saw that the storm had stopped.

"Okay," I said. "Let's get in. Tom in front."

"Dad, do you want me to drive?"

"I'm all right."

"Maybe I should drive."

"I am all right."

We had the road almost to ourselves once we got out of town. I drove at forty miles an hour, staying in the ruts other cars had made. Finally, there were only two lanes, with farmland on both sides of us.

"I'm sorry, Mister Tighe."

"You didn't hurt me, Tom."

"I'm really, really sorry."

"Forget about it."

"My dad's going to kill me."

"Nobody's going to kill you."

"Now we'll have to buy it."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

I checked the rearview mirror. Alan seemed to be asleep.

Tom was shaking his head.

“Maybe it won’t cost as much as you think,” I said.

“*Three hundred dollars.*”

“Are you kidding?” I hadn’t meant for it to come out that fast.

“Three hundred dollars,” I said. “That’s a lot of money.”

Tom had taken off his glasses. “A lot.”

“What do you think your father’s going to do?”

“He’ll hit me.”

He wiped his eyes. He put the glasses back on.

“Do you want me to speak to him?” I asked. He didn’t respond. I asked again.

“What’ll you say?”

“Tell me what happened.”

“It was my fault. I messed up. I got so mad.”

“What do you mean, you messed up?”

“I messed up,” he said. “I really suck.”

“Did anybody make fun of you?”

“No, sir.”

For the last time, I asked, or thought I did: “Do you want me to speak to him?”

I was unsure of what Renee and I had agreed on over the phone. I half-expected to find police cars with flashing lights in front of my house. The actual street seemed to jump back from an alternate dimension.

“Your clarinet’s in the trunk.” I parked the car and popped the release. After Tom got out I turned to Alan. “Make sure he comes in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Renee was standing at the top of the stairs.

“We found him,” I called.

“Thank God.”

“But we shouldn’t talk about it.”

“Duh.”

The boys came in through the garage while I was unlacing my boots. When I reached the living room, Tom was alone, sitting on the couch with the case on his lap. I brought him the phone, and went to the kitchen to pour a glass of water.

I had no idea of what I would say when Joe Prossky arrived. I pictured him in the living room, me opening the case, and—blankness. I tried it a couple more times, and got two more blanks.

Renee told me to stop sighing.

“I’m done,” said Tom. He stood in the dining room and held the receiver out, as if our kitchen were a sacred space he dared not enter.

“When will they be here?” Renee asked, taking the phone.

“My dad’s still at work. My mom wondered—if you could take me back. She’s fixing dinner. She knows it’s a big hassle, but she wondered—if you could do it.”

Renee looked at me.

“I guess,” I said.

A blue pickup was in the driveway. As I pulled in behind it, Joe Prossky stepped out the front door and came toward us.

I rolled down my window. “Hi,” I called. “I’m fine.”

Tom got out and walked around toward the front door. Joe punched him on the shoulder as they passed.

“How’s it going, Professor Tighe?” His red sweatshirt had an oil stain across the chest. His hands were in his pockets, and he was shifting from foot to foot.

“It goes.”

“I didn’t know your son played an instrument. Or is it your son?”

“My son’s name is Alan. He plays the French horn.”

Joe looked at me as if I’d spoken Japanese. “Is that so?”

“It was no problem,” I said. “Taking him down.”

“Thanks again. Hey, do you have time for a question?”

“Ha ha.”

“I’ll be coming to your office on Monday.”

“I’ll see you.”

I arrived home fifteen minutes later. The snow had started again. I sat in the car and watched the wipers flick it away.

Renee stepped onto the porch.

“Aren’t you coming in?”

I unrolled the window just long enough to shout, “I have to go back.”

“Back where?”

I parked at the curb, turned everything off, and let the snow cover the car. Maybe I was hoping that somebody would come out and ask me what I was doing there. But no one did.

Mrs. Prossky answered the doorbell.

“Did you forget something?” She looked past me, as if the *something* could have been outside.

“Can I come in?”

“We’re having dinner.”

“I’m sorry. It’s important. Can I come in?”

She called behind her. “Joe.”

He was already getting up from the table.

“Come on in,” she said, stepping back.

“Is there something we can do for you, Professor Tighe?”

“It’s about Tom. Tom, please go get it.”

He didn’t move.

“Tom, please go get the clarinet.”

“What’s this about?” Joe asked.

I was thinking, *If he doesn’t move, I’ll leave right now*, just as he got up. He walked quickly into a room and returned with the case.

“Will somebody tell me what this is all about?”

I knelt on the rug. Tom was standing behind the couch, gripping its worn back with both hands.

I opened the case.

“Professor Tighe, what are you . . . Oh, shit.”

Mrs. Prossky covered her mouth.

“What the hell happened?” Joe turned to his son. “Did you do that?”

Tom was shaking, trying to blubber out a defense. Joe raised his left hand. It was open, and it looked as massive as an axe.

But it stayed. Then it slowly went down.

Joe and I looked at each other.

“What happened?”

“I didn’t see it. I just heard.”

“It’s junk now.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I don’t see what the hell you have to be sorry about.”

Mrs. Prossky picked up the case, shut it, and cradled it in her arms.

I stood up and moved toward the door.

“I told Tom I’d say something for him.”

“Is that why you came back?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you said something.”

“I promised . . .”

“What?”

“Your son is—really, really sorry about what he did.”

“Yeah, well, ‘sorry’ won’t pay for it.”

“I know.”

Joe Prossky opened the door. I backed onto the porch.

“Thanks for the thought. I guess you meant well.” He stood in the doorway. “This was none of your business.”

“I know.”

“Maybe you don’t know.”

He closed the door—quietly.

I walked to the car. I leaned inside, felt around for the scraper, and remembered where I’d left it.

I spent a couple of minutes blowing on my hands and rubbing them together. Then I tucked them inside my coatsleeves and started to brush the snow away as fast as I could. It was no use. The icy water quickly soaked the cloth, and I had to stop before I was half done. I buried my hands in my armpits. The falling snow filled up the newly clean spaces.

I’d just thought of searching the trunk—for rags, or a towel left over from summer—when Joe Prossky was beside me. I hadn’t even heard him come out.

“You’ll do better with this.” He handed me a whisk broom.

“Thanks.”

He stood and watched while I cleared off the car. The job went fast. I returned the broom, and walked around to get in.

“It was okay,” he said. “Coming back.”

“I didn’t intend to interfere.”

He brushed a clump of snow off the roof. “Sometimes you have to.”

My hands were still purple when I got home. I immersed them in warm water, then waited for the pain to fade. It took a long time. I could feel it even after my hands had returned to themselves. Strange, but I didn’t want it to go away—not entirely. I looked at my fingers, flexing under the clear water, and felt their gentle strength.