

Everything According to Ruth

Forty-two summers at Pinewater

Stories from the people who loved them

*For Mom, who is turning eighty-one, from
everyone who was ever handed a job at Pinewater.
Forty-two summers. You said we'd make room,
and you did.*

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CHAPTER 1

Miriam Shaw

her eldest daughter

The Checkbook



The kitchen at the old house smelled like lemon polish because she'd cleaned it the night before, the way you'd prepare for company, only the company was me and a stack of receipts. I was eleven. She sat me down at the kitchen table with one of her ledger pads and explained, very calmly, that other girls learned piano or ballet, but I was going to learn to see where money went. I thought it was punishment. It wasn't, but I didn't know that yet.

Every Saturday morning it was just the two of us. Dad would take Ben and Leah somewhere, or pretend to, and she would spread everything out in columns: gas, electric, mortgage, food. She'd point at a number and say, "See that? That's what we said it would be." If it didn't match, she'd make me find where it went. I hated it. It was tedious. But she never once raised her voice, and she never let me leave the table until the columns matched. I think she wanted me to feel that money wasn't magic, that someone was watching it and always would be, and that it might as well be me.

Then there was one morning, maybe the second summer, when I found the error before she did. Eight dollars and forty cents. She was going down the column with the calculator, tap tap tap with her thumbnail, and I said, "It's the phone bill. They charged us for directory assistance twice." She stopped and looked at me over the top of her glasses. I think she wore them to look like an accountant from central casting, because she never actually needed them for reading. She said, "Yes. That's right." That was all. No praise, no gold star. But she put the calculator down and let me finish the page myself. She didn't make a fuss. That was how you knew it mattered.

She still taps her thumbnail on the calculator. You can hear it through a closed door. It is not unpleasant. It's the sound of someone watching the numbers, and it might as well be me.

The approval was never announced. It was logistical. She had a whole vocabulary of silence. The lemon polish was one of them. The way she'd fold a dish towel after you'd left it on the counter was another. If it was folded, you'd done fine. If it was refolded, you hadn't. She could be warm; she wasn't cold. But warmth looked like action. She'd rearrange your sock drawer while you were at school, and that meant she approved of the socks. I'm making it sound stranger than it was. At my law school graduation she didn't clap the loudest or cry. She'd gotten there early and saved seats for the whole family. That was the review. Five stars.

When I'm doing my own books now, I watch the columns the way she taught me, looking for the number that didn't do what we said it would do. I still hear it sometimes, and it's not unpleasant. When I was eleven, I thought it was punishment. I was wrong. It wasn't. It was the thing she knew how to give.

MIRIAM SHAW

You Don't Have to Be Funny

"You don't have to be funny." She said it without looking away from the television, where another episode of the most boring British mystery series you can imagine was inching along. She said it the way she says most true things, quiet and even, and for a second I didn't know what to do with the silence. So I just kept watching.

In 1998 I was recovering from a failed pregnancy. I hadn't told many people, but of course Mom knew. She came down to Brookline without calling first. Peter let her in. I didn't ask her to come, but there she was. I don't remember exactly what she said when she arrived, because she didn't say much. She went straight to the kitchen and started filling the freezer with casseroles I didn't ask for. I could hear her moving around in there, opening and closing the freezer, putting things away. Then she came into the living room, sat down beside me on the couch, and we watched. Hours of it.

She didn't ask how I was doing. That was the thing. She didn't lean in with questions or try to coax me into talking. She just stayed. At one point I made some brittle joke, trying to be funny the way I do when I don't know what else to do with myself, and she said, "You don't have to be funny." I don't bring that up often.

It isn't the kind of thing I know how to explain, because it sounds so small until you are the one sitting on that couch. Then we kept watching, the two of us in the low light of that television.

She stayed three days. She reorganized the pantry, which was classic Mom. I didn't ask her to do any of it. She also just sat with me, for long stretches where neither of us filled the quiet. When she left, she had refolded every dish towel in the kitchen. I checked. Not one was the way I had left it. All of them folded her way, which is to say, correctly. I stood there a minute with the drawer open, taking in that neatness. She didn't mention the dish towels either. I only found them after she had gone.

I think that's the thing people don't know about her. They see the competence, the spreadsheets, the way she can manage a crisis like she's conducting an orchestra. But the warmth is in the staying. She doesn't give you words. When I opened the freezer later, it was full of casseroles I didn't ask for. I already knew she had been there. She gives you her presence and a freezer that's suddenly full.

MIRIAM SHAW

Drainage Misunderstanding



The catering truck backed across the lawn and drove directly over the leach field. Shortly before dinner, every toilet at Pinewater stopped working. It was the summer of 1994, my wedding day, hot and clear, with the tent up and 112 people on their way.

I had wanted a small wedding. Peter and I were twenty-three. We had no money. We were going to do the courthouse, then maybe a dinner. But Mom said it should be at Pinewater. She told the tent man the property could take 112 people, and she said it like it was a law of physics, not a hope, not a guess, a fact of the ground. She had a way of making a number sound like it had been measured. My father brought up the septic system, and she said, "We'll make room." Which was not an answer.

Then the truck. To be fair, she was magnificent. She never made an announcement. No warning, no explanation; she just had the band start early, moved everyone toward the dance floor, and had Peter's cousin ferry people to Gus's cottage for the view. Peter's cousin ran the ferry back and forth, and people came back talking about the light on the water. The lake went gold in the late light, and the whole thing began to feel like a planned excursion. My father and Gus came back with mud to the knees of their good trousers. Mom stood at the edge of the dance floor with her arms folded, watching everything. Later she called it a drainage misunderstanding, as if a truck over a leach field were a small clerical error. I still find that funny. And slightly infuriating.

She didn't say a word about the toilets. Not to me. I found out from Peter's mother, who found out by trying one. I was standing in the receiving line, doing the thing, kissing cheeks, shaking hands, trying to remember names, and Mom leaned over and

Ruth Kaplan

said, "The band is very good." That was her entire report. I kept waiting for her to pull me aside and explain. She didn't.

Later, when we were cutting the cake, she came up beside me and said, "Everyone is dancing. That's what they'll remember." And she was right. People still talk about the band. They mention the ferry rides, like it was a feature, like we'd planned a lake excursion at golden hour. That is the thing I remember most: she never once said what had gone wrong. She just aimed everyone at the good thing and let that carry the day.

The truck was the problem. I'm sure of it. But to be fair, she never blamed the truck. She never blamed anyone. She just managed it. And the photographs are lovely.

MIRIAM SHAW

The Red Canoe

The summer after Dad died, Mom repainted the red canoe herself. She didn't ask for help. She just did it herself. She stood over the canoe with a brush and a can of red paint, and at the waterline the paint ran a little and pooled, uneven and thick. I watched and didn't say a word about it. It seemed important to her that the canoe look the way it always had, even if the line wobbled.

That was Pinewater. She kept it as close to constant as a house with weather can be. Wet bathing suits hung on the porch hooks. The brass dinner bell was there. The whole place smelled of lake water and sunscreen and pine needles, and you arrived in early summer and nothing had moved. Same mugs, same stack of puzzles with missing pieces. They never changed, summer after summer. The porch hooks were never empty. I think for a long time she believed if she kept the house exactly as it was, the family would keep coming. The red canoe was part of that promise, the same as the mugs and the puzzles. If nothing changed, neither would we. And we did. For years, we did.

I never mentioned the paint at the waterline, not that summer or any summer after. It seemed like one of those things you let go because noticing it would have meant noticing everything else

that had changed. But the house stayed the same, and so we kept coming. The red canoe looked a little rough at the waterline, but it still looked like ours.

But houses don't hold people forever. The porch slopes now. The stairs are steep. Her knees are bad. It is not safe for her now, and she finally admitted it. When she finally said it out loud, it wasn't a big speech. It was just a fact she had been turning over for a while. That is the practical reason. The rest is sentiment, and she would say sentiment doesn't fix a roofline.

Last spring I drove up for a weekend, and she announced it. "I've had the realtor out," she said, the way she might have said she'd had the gutters cleaned. I asked if she was sure. She told me the house was an hour from a hospital, and the porch was falling away from the house, and she wasn't going to be one of those women who pretends a lake house is a life raft. I told her we'd help. "I know you would," she said.

Then she asked me to check the property line markers, because apparently the survey from 1984 was wrong, and if we were going to sell, she wanted the paperwork to be correct. That's my mother. She can break your heart and file the deed in the same afternoon.

MIRIAM SHAW

The Midnight Swim

I had watched my mother go into Pinewater at midnight for most of my life, and for most of those years she was the last one off the dock. She would stand there in the dark until every one of us was already in the water, and then she would go in herself, no countdown, no ceremony. Just the splash. But the summer after Dad died, she didn't wait. She walked to the ladder and pushed off before anyone else was in the water.

I remember the lake that night, dark in the complete way Pinewater gets at midnight, so black you can't see much beyond the stars and the faint lights from the house up on the hill. You could hear everything instead: the dock creaking, someone's laugh from the shore, the water moving against the hulls. I watched her push off from the ladder and move out past the dock lines. Her stroke was slower than I remembered, but every stroke was deliberate. She looked smaller in the water than I expected. I stood there thinking, She's not going to stop. She's going to keep doing all of it, the swim, the dinner bell, the canoe, until the house itself gives out. In one way that was comforting, and in another it made me tired on her behalf. I could hear the water moving against the hulls long after I lost sight of her.

She started the midnight swim in 1998, the last Saturday of August, no exceptions, no lights. It's cold, even in August. The dark isn't frightening, just complete. Everyone goes in. Mom waits until the last person is in the water, and then she goes off the dock herself. There's no ceremony, no countdown. You just hear the splash. One year she floated on her back for a long time, and I was watching from the ladder. She said, without opening her eyes, "This is the only place I can hear myself think." Then she swam to shore and went up to the house to make cocoa. She wouldn't want me to make it sound mystical. It's cold water and a dock and a family that showed up. But it's the closest thing we have to a ritual, and she made it. I have never missed one. This year will be the last one at Pinewater. The tradition wasn't about swimming well. It was about showing up in the dark and getting wet.

She never enforced it by yelling. Ben tried once, maybe seventeen, said he had a cold. Mom didn't argue. She just stood at the door with a towel folded over her arm and waited. She didn't move from the doorway. The towel stayed folded over her arm, and after a minute he went in. Noah asked once if he could just sit on the dock with a flashlight. Mom said, "You can hold the towel." He got in. Leah missed a few years, but that was different, not about the water. The way Mom did it, not swimming felt like a violation of the calendar itself, like refusing August. The only time I ever saw her waver was the summer after Dad died. We all thought she might not go down to the dock. But she did, and she didn't wait for anyone.

That was the night I got in faster than usual. I didn't cry. I'm not one for that. But I didn't want her to be the only one out there beyond the dock. Not that she needed me. She's never needed

me. But I wanted to be in the water with her on that particular night. So I was. The water was cold, even in August, and out beyond the dock lines the house lights looked small and far away. I could hear her stroke in the dark after I got in, steady and slow. I don't know how to swim at midnight anywhere else. That's not rational, it's just true.

I'd want her to know that I noticed. The things she did quietly, without being asked. The way she moved the kitchen clock two minutes fast so we'd leave anywhere on time. The way she answered the phone at Dad's office during the bad year, with his name and hers in the same breath, like they were one firm. The way she kept the house after he died, touching his mug and not moving it. I'd want her to know I never asked about the hard years, the money, the sacrifices, because I was busy with my own life. And I'm not asking now. But I noticed enough to know something was being carried. I still check my columns twice. I hear her thumbnail on the calculator when I'm tired, and I keep going. That's not a small thing she gave me. That's the whole inheritance. The rest is just a house we're selling.

CHAPTER 2

Joan Adler

her younger sister

Spilled Punch at the Elks



I remember the smell of shoe polish on my hands, because I'd been helping close up my father's store. I was thirteen and supposed to be asleep, but I wasn't. Ruthie came in late and sat on the edge of my bed with that look on her face, like she'd gotten away with something and wanted to enjoy it out loud.

She told me about the Elks dance in Worcester. Everyone thinks they know this story. For sixty years, Ruthie has told people that David stepped backward into her and spilled punch down his shirt, and she helped him clean up, and the rest is history. Very sweet. Except that night she told me the truth. She had walked across that room on purpose and spilled the cup herself so she'd have to help him. Deliberate. Calculated. Then she did this little shrug and said, "He had kind eyes, so I gave him a reason to talk to me."

I remember thinking, oh, so that's how you do it. You don't wait. You make the thing happen. She was twenty-one, and I thought she was the most sophisticated person in Massachusetts. Which, to be fair, she might have been that summer. I have never once told Ben or the girls, because she'd kill me, but someone should, and she won't. She's been polishing that little accident story for decades like a shoe. Which, if you knew our father's store, is the right metaphor. I've kept that secret so long it almost doesn't feel like mine anymore, except every time she tells the accident story, I can still smell the shoe polish on my hands.

She confided in me when it suited her, which wasn't the same as treating me like a friend. I was the little sister, but by then I was also her audience. She'd tell me things because I'd react the way she wanted, with my mouth hanging open. But if I ever tried to give her advice, or god forbid, disagree, she'd pat me on the head

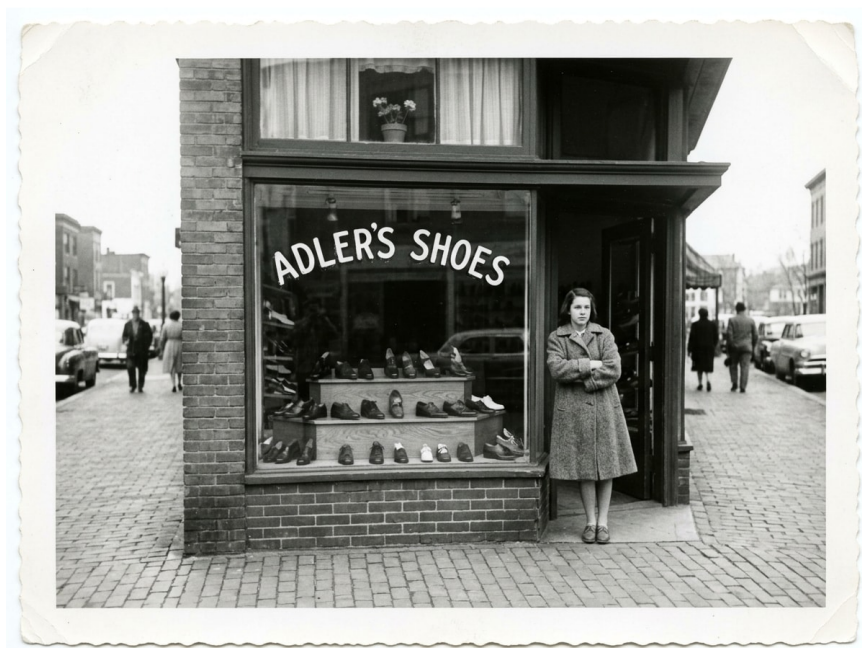
and tell me to go set the table. She said that to me once when I was fourteen. "If you're going to sulk, at least set the table." And she's used it on her own kids ever since like she invented it. Which, I guess, she did. On me.

I see her in all of them now, which I'm sure they'd hate to hear, each for different reasons. Ben has her stubbornness, the quiet kind, where you think he's not listening and then he does exactly what he planned. Leah has the sharpness, the part of Ruthie that can size up a room in ten seconds and find the exit or the weak spot. And Miriam, poor thing, has the burden of being the one who thinks she has to manage everything. Ruthie raised her to be competent and then acted surprised when Miriam started making decisions for her. The table-setting line, the "no one ever died from being early," all of that, it's in them. They may not know they're quoting her, but they are.

That's the thing about Ruthie. She was always running the show, even when she was the one who needed looking after. She walked across that room and made a decision, and then she let everyone believe it was an accident. She just made it look like she was fine. Still does.

JOAN ADLER

Sleeping on the Shop Floor



I was twelve, and some nights I'd wake up and she'd be gone, and I'd know exactly where she was. She was down at the shop, asleep on the floor with her coat over her, because she wouldn't leave the inventory or the till. She left college in 1965. Our father got sick, or "ill" as they said, and the store was failing, and she just came home. She ran the store and she ran me. Not in a saintly way, but in a practical, unglamorous way.

She never made a speech about it. She just did it. She didn't talk about what she gave up, not then, not in a way that would make me feel like I owed her. I think that was intentional. She can be very careful about that when it matters. She let me be a kid. She made sure I had a normal-enough childhood, or as close as she could manage. I didn't realize until much later what that cost her. By then she didn't want to hear it. You try to thank her and she changes the subject to whether you've had enough to eat. Classic Ruthie. Feed everyone, feel nothing, move on.

Occasionally something would slip. If I complained about homework, she'd look at me over her glasses and say, "Some of us learned bookkeeping by lamplight, Joan." It wasn't true, it was fluorescent, but you get the idea. That was the closest she came to telling me what she'd given up, and it came out as a joke.

Now when people talk about Ruthie, they talk about the lake and the pies and the canoe. Which is all true. But there was a girl sleeping on a dusty carpet so her little sister wouldn't have to. That's the part that gets left out.

And then there's the famous blueberry pie. Her filling, her effort, her performance. But let me tell you something about that crust. I'm fairly sure it's been from a box since the late nineties. The

edges got too even. You can't get that uniform crimp by hand, not every single time, not after forty years of doing it. But I've never caught her. She'll stand at that kitchen counter at Pinewater, flour on her shirt for show, and tell you it's all from scratch. And everyone believes her because she says it like it's the weather. I'd like to catch her, just once, red-handed with the Pillsbury box. Not because I care about the crust, the pie's delicious, but because it would be nice to see her admit something. Anything. Even a small, flaky, fraudulent thing.

And also, the pie is very good. I've eaten three slices in one sitting and I'd do it again. That's what I mean about Ruthie. People miss how much she's carried without telling anyone. It's maddening. She'd rather die than be wrong, but she'll spend all day making you feel right.

JOAN ADLER

The Midnight Swim Was Mine

The summer of 1998, it was so hot you could feel the air in your lungs, and we were all at the lake. I was sitting on the dock with my feet in the water, and I said, "Let's go in." Just like that. Ruthie looked at me like I'd suggested robbing a bank. Then she said, "Well, get a towel, then." And we went in, the two of us, in our clothes. The water closed over us, and it was so dark you couldn't see your own hands under the surface. I want it on the record: the midnight swim was mine.

She got out first, dried off, and announced that from now on, this was a tradition. She made it a rule. I'll give her that part, because making it a rule is the harder job. But it started with me. She has taken credit ever since, and I let her, because it's easier, and because watching her decide something was her idea is one of the great entertainments of my life. She didn't invent the swim. She just turned it into law.

That night was the first time I'd seen Ruthie do something purely for the joy of it, not because it needed doing. And it was my doing, which I admit I was smug about. The thing about that swim wasn't just the water. It was that she didn't turn it into a lesson. She didn't tell me I was being immature or foolish, which she could have, because I was forty-five and she was fifty-three

and we were both fully grown women in our underwear in a lake. Usually there'd be a plan, or a caution, or a comment about the temperature. But that night, for once, she followed me. She didn't plan it. She didn't manage it. She got in.

By the next day she was running the whole house again the way she always does. The moment had passed. But for twenty minutes, I was the one who knew something she didn't. That's a rare thing with a sister like Ruthie. You learn to savor it, and I did. She knew it was my idea. She let me have it for one night. Then she took it and made it hers. That's family.

I still think about it every time I'm at the lake and the water's warm and the lights are off. I remember my feet going in. I remember the hem of my clothes getting heavy, the dark water closing over my hands, and Ruthie right there beside me, not lecturing, not organizing. Just in the lake. In the dark. She'd never admit now that it started with me, and I don't need her to. I know it, and she knows it, and that's enough.

JOAN ADLER

Two Cups on the Dock

The two cups were already on the dock when I got there. Ruthie didn't look up. She just handed me one, and I sat down next to her. The tea was lukewarm, which told me she'd been sitting there a while. She didn't say much, and she didn't send me away. That's the part I hold onto.

Was I surprised? Not even a little. That's Ruthie. She'd rather be caught looking prepared than admit she needed someone. Most of the time with Ruthie, she leads and I follow, or I don't and there's a sulk on one side or the other. But this was the exception. Much later, she let me in. Not let me lead, exactly, but let me see her without the armor.

After David died, she stayed at Pinewater for three weeks and wouldn't let anyone come. When I tried, she said, "I'll make room when I'm ready." You have to understand, our mother used to say that, and Ruthie hated it. But there she was, saying it to me. So I stayed away, because she asked, and because I know what it means when she uses our mother's words.

At the end of the third week, I went up anyway. Uninvited. I found her on the dock with the two cups, like she'd been expecting me. She didn't say much. She just handed me the cup and we sat

there. I don't know what she said to David that morning, or what she said to herself for three weeks. She's never told me, and I think she'll take it with her. But that day, she let me sit with her in it. That's not leading or following. That's just showing up. And for Ruthie, I think that was the hardest thing of all.

When I sat down, she said, "You're early." Like I'd missed my cue by three weeks. I said, "No one's ever died from being early," and she laughed, actually laughed, and then she didn't say anything for a long time. But she didn't send me away.

The two cups, I know what they were. She probably set them out that morning, or the night before, just in case, and then told herself she was being practical. She wasn't. She was waiting. But she'd never say that. She made room. Maybe not with words. But with those two cups, and the space on the dock next to her, that's as close to an invitation as Ruthie gets. And I took it. I'd have taken it even if the cup was empty. Which, I should say, it wasn't. It was tea. Lukewarm. I drank it. Would've drunk anything.

You don't get many moments like that with her. You learn not to waste them.

JOAN ADLER

The Clink of a Bracelet

I remember the phone ringing one afternoon in 2001, and Ruthie's voice on the line, steady in a way that meant she had already made up her mind. "Joan," she said, "tell me if I sound desperate." She was practicing a call she planned to make to one of Kaplan Office Supply's suppliers. She had taken the company books home and set them up on her dining table, and now she was working down the list, one vendor at a time, asking for payment terms. She ran through it once for me, those few sentences she would repeat to strangers on the other end of the line. There was no shake in her voice, no edge of pleading. She sounded like a woman who expected to be accommodated. It was magnificent. I had heard her sound many ways over the years, but that was new: not asking, not hoping. Expecting. I have thought about that phone call many times. It was the moment I understood that Ruthie would not just worry; she would act.

Kaplan Office Supply had lost its biggest account that year, and David was too ashamed to tell her. She found out from the checkbook. If you ask her about it now, she will wave it off, but I know what it was. She drove to the office, took the books home, and did not give them back. For a year, the company accounts lived on her dining table, the same table where she had served holiday dinners, now covered in ledgers and the checkbook and

the phone. She called suppliers herself, talked them into giving David more time. That was Ruthie: she did not raise her voice, she just took over. She didn't slam doors or make speeches. She just became the person holding the books.

And then she sold our mother's jewelry. The bracelet with the little clasp you can still hear, the ring, the pearls. The bracelet had a tiny clasp that clicked when it closed. I can still hear that click, the way a small, private sound can carry decades. She drove them to a dealer in Boston so no one in Worcester would know. She told me because someone had to know, and she wanted me to have first refusal. I could not afford it. That is the part I do not say lightly. My own sister offering me our mother's things before they disappeared, and I had to tell her no. I have turned that moment over in my mind for years. I wanted to say yes, to keep something of our mother's in the family. But the money was not there, and Ruthie needed it to keep the business alive. She did not hold it against me. She just needed one person to know what she was about to give up.

The children knew money was tight that year. They did not know their mother sold her inheritance to keep their father's company alive. She was firm about that. She never told them. If you asked her today, she would say it was nothing, but it was not nothing. The bracelet, the pearls, gone. And she never let David apologize, not properly. Any time he started, she would steer the conversation back to the next vendor call. The apology was in the work, not the words. She just took over the books and saved them all. The children never heard it from her. They still may not know. That is how she wanted it.

That is Ruthie. That is the woman the children do not see. They see the steady one, the one who makes things work, but they do not see the clink of a bracelet being handed over so no one else has to carry it. But I was there. I heard it. I will always hear it. The clink of that bracelet is not the kind of sound you forget. It is the sound of one woman quietly handing over her own inheritance to keep everyone else's world from cracking.

CHAPTER 3

Ben Kaplan

her son, the youngest

Enough Already



The sky was fine, and then ten minutes later it was green-black, like someone turned off the sun. The waves started breaking over the side, and I was pretty sure we nearly capsized twice. Leah was screaming the whole time. I was not screaming. I want that on the record. A sneaker went over the side and disappeared into Lake Pinewater. It's still down there somewhere. Mom stayed silent, paddling like a machine, and she steered us into this little cove where the trees hung over the water and the wind couldn't reach us.

It was August 1987, and I was eight years old. Mom decided we were canoeing across Lake Pinewater to pick blueberries, and when Mom decided something, you got in the canoe. The red canoe is called Enough Already, which tells you everything about my mother's sense of humor. Leah was in the front, Mom was in the back, and I was in the middle trying not to lose my other sneaker.

We huddled in the cove under the overhanging trees, and then Gus rounded the point in his motorboat. The engine was howling and the gasoline smell was everywhere, and he towed us home. Mom never once said she was scared. She just said, "The weather turned early."

That night she made pancakes for dinner, which never happened, and I sat there in one wet sock. Dad used to say the lake was six inches deep where we were. I choose to believe that's a joke.

The canoe's name is the kind of name that sticks. I don't know the origin story, but Dad probably named it, because it sounds like something he'd mutter after Mom dragged him out on the

water for the fifth time that weekend. When I was a teenager, Mom handed me a tiny brush and some red paint and said, "Make it legible." I did, and my E came out looking like a backwards three. For years that backwards three stayed on the canoe, a permanent record of my incompetence. Then my son Cal fixed it up a few summers ago, repainted the whole thing properly. The backwards three is gone now, and I'm a little sad about it, because that was history. Mom stood there with her arms crossed, watching him, and when he was done she said, "Well, at least someone in this family can paint a straight line." That was a direct shot at me, obviously. Cal thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. He was twelve, and he'd been having a rough go of it, and that was the first time I'd seen him really laugh in months. She has a way of insulting you that feels like a hug. Better than a hug, actually, because you don't have to do anything back. You just have to take it. And if you take it well, you're in. Cal took it well. She likes that.

I've been telling that storm story for forty years, and I keep adding waves. But the part I never have to add is Mom in the back of the canoe, silent, paddling like a machine. She never once said she was scared. She just said, "The weather turned early." And then she made us pancakes for dinner, which never happened, and I sat there in one wet sock. That's Mom. She insults you in a way that feels like a hug, and if you take it well, you're in.

BEN KAPLAN

The Cursed Fishing Lures

The googly eyes came first, staring up out of the coffee cans in the shed like a hundred tiny disturbed faces. Dad had hundreds of them in there, old wooden ones, rusty hooks, some with feathers, some with googly eyes, all of it together like a serial killer's craft project. It should have been creepy. It mostly was. Half funny, half haunted. But Mom didn't treat it as creepy. She treated it as a job, which meant Cal got the job. Mom decided Cal needed a job, so she gave him that.

Up at seven, dock check, bell at noon, and then the lures. He cleaned every single one, sorted them by type, and wrote them all down in this old ledger in his terrible twelve-year-old handwriting. Pages and pages. The work was slow and careful. "Silver spoon, three inches, missing one hook." Like a tiny accountant. I could picture him sitting there with a can on one side and the ledger open on the other, working through whatever Dad had left behind.

I called one weekend and asked Cal how it was going. He said, "Grandma says I'm the first person in forty years to treat Grandpa's lures with respect." Then he said, "I found one that looks like a frog." And I could hear Mom in the background going, "That's a Jitterbug, Cal, don't call it a frog." She knew all the

names. He'd repeat them back to me like he'd discovered a secret language. Silver spoon, Jitterbug—he said them like they were passwords to a club only Grandma knew. I don't think he missed his phone the whole summer. For a twelve-year-old, that was its own quiet miracle. Which is weird, but good weird.

I assume she kept that ledger. She keeps everything. I mean, she still has the Monopoly box from 1985 with half the hotels missing and emergency money taped under the lid, which I found by accident once and she made me swear not to tell anyone, so, sorry Mom, it's in the book now. That's how she is with paper, with old records, with anything that holds a story. She probably has that lure ledger in a drawer somewhere at the house in Worcester, or maybe she brought it back to the compound.

Actually, Cal asked about it last year. He wanted to see his handwriting from when he was twelve, because he's seventeen now and deeply embarrassed by everything he's ever done. Mom told him she'd show it to him if he came back to the lake and organized the toolshed. She's still negotiating with him, even now. That's her whole parenting philosophy: never give anything away free. Make them earn the memory.

BEN KAPLAN

Best Butterfinger I Ever Had

I was nine years old and I was a criminal mastermind, which is why I stole a Butterfinger from the general store in town and just shoved it in my pocket like nobody would notice. There was no grand plan. I just wanted it and I took it. I remember the crinkle of the wrapper against my leg and the way I tried to walk out the door like nothing was happening. It was the smoothest, coolest crime of my life, right up until Mom grabbed my wrist before we even got to the car.

She didn't yell. That was almost worse. I kept waiting for her to yell, but she never did. She just turned me around and walked me back inside. I could feel my face burning the whole way to the counter. She made me put the Butterfinger on the counter and apologize to Mr. Delaney. I'm pretty sure Mr. Delaney had seen everything and was trying not to laugh. Then Mom did something I did not see coming. She bought the candy bar, handed it to me, and said, "You can have it when you've earned it."

At nine years old, that made no sense. I earned it? I apologized, didn't I? I apologized to Mr. Delaney, in front of the whole store. That should have been enough. But no. She meant it literally. I had to earn that Butterfinger one plate at a time. I had to do

the dinner dishes for a week. Every night after dinner, I stood at the sink with my hands in the warm water, and the whole time that Butterfinger was sitting on top of the fridge, looking down at me. I'd scrub plates and think about how unfair it all was. It became the longest week of my life. But I did the dishes. And at the end of the week, she took it down and gave it to me. By then it was room temperature and slightly melted from sitting up there. Best Butterfinger I ever had. Not because of the candy. Because of what it took to get it.

That was her whole thing. You don't get the thing until the thing means something. Which is exhausting. And also, I don't know, probably why we all turned out okay. She didn't need to yell. She just needed to make you earn it. And she was right. She could have just made me apologize and been done with it. But that wasn't her. The lesson had to stick. That's how I remember it, anyway. Leah probably remembers me crying, which I did not do. But the Butterfinger part is true, and the part about Mom making me earn it, that part is the whole point.

BEN KAPLAN

The Kugel Is the Message

The package on my doorstep in Seattle is always the same. A styrofoam cooler with ice packs inside, and inside that, a frozen noodle kugel. The cooler sits there on the mat like a medical shipment, and my neighbors have learned to recognize it. They see the white box with the tape and the ice packs and they think I'm receiving organs for transplant. It's just kugel. For twenty years now, every few months, a box shows up at my door from Massachusetts, and I never know when it's coming. She doesn't ask if you want it. She doesn't announce it. It just arrives. And every time, I open it the same way: lift the lid, feel the cold air come out, move the ice packs aside, and there it is, a solid frozen block of noodle kugel. She has never once asked me if I like it. She has never once sent a card with a greeting. It's just the cooler and the kugel and whatever one-line note she decided to stick in there.

When I call to say thank you, she says, "Did it thaw?" Like I'm reporting on a package inspection. No "I miss you." No "when are you coming home." Just logistics. She wants to know if the ice packs held, if the noodles made it intact, if I followed the reheating instructions. And I always have to say, "Yes, Mom, it thawed," and she says, "Good, then eat it." That's the whole conversation. The kugel is the message. The kugel is the whole

message. You know? It's not a big thing, but it's the kind of thing she does. She doesn't ask if you want it. She doesn't announce it. It just arrives. And if you call to say thank you, she treats it like a luggage inspection. That's Ruth Kaplan.

Sometimes there's a note inside. A folded piece of paper tucked between the ice packs and the kugel. Most of the time the note is a single line. "Don't tell Elena I used full-fat cheese." That one I ignored and told Elena, and she laughed, and then she ate half of it, because my mother's kugel is genuinely excellent. It's not just good, it's the kind of kugel that has a reputation. People have asked me for the recipe, and I have to tell them there is no recipe, not one she'd write down, because she doesn't cook that way. She just knows. And she knows that full-fat cheese makes the difference, and she knows that Elena would give her a hard time about it, so she writes the note as a warning and a wink. And I always tell Elena. Because that's the game. The game is: my mother sends food, I tell my wife, my wife laughs, my mother pretends she didn't mean for it to happen. The kugel arrives, we eat it, and nobody says what's actually going on. Until after the divorce.

Once, after my divorce, maybe a month after, a box shows up. Same styrofoam cooler, same ice packs, same frozen noodle kugel. But inside with the kugel there's a folded piece of paper. I'm expecting "did it thaw" or "reheat at 350." Instead it says, "You're still a good father. You'll figure out the rest." That's it. Two sentences. I stood in my kitchen holding this cold noodle casserole in one hand and a note from my mother in the other, and I just, uh. Yeah. I didn't know what to do with either. The noodles were frozen solid. The note was warm, in a way, even though it was just paper. And I just stood there, holding both of

them, feeling the cold seep through my fingers, reading the note again. "You're still a good father. You'll figure out the rest." I read it maybe three times. Then I looked at the kugel. Then I looked at the note. And I didn't call her.

I didn't call her because I knew what would happen if I called. She'd answer, and she'd say hello, and I'd say something stupid like "I got the box," and she'd say "Did it thaw?" and I'd say yes, and she'd say "Then eat it," and that would be that. Because my mother doesn't do phone tears. She doesn't do long speeches. She does kugel. So I texted "it thawed" and she texted back "then eat it." Which is the most Ruth Kaplan exchange possible. Two people who love each other, one of them holding a frozen noodle casserole and a note that says more than either of them will ever say out loud, and the entire conversation is about whether the package survived the trip. But I kept the note. It's in my desk drawer. I don't look at it much. But I know it's there. And I know that somewhere in Massachusetts, my mother is standing in her kitchen, packing a frozen kugel into a styrofoam cooler with ice packs, and writing a one-line note. Not because I asked. Not because she wants a thank-you. The kugel is the message. The kugel is the whole message.

BEN KAPLAN

The Midnight Swim



The summer Cal stayed with her, Mom woke him up in the dark on the last night and walked him down to the dock. It was midnight, the lake black beyond the boards, and he was still half-asleep, I'm sure, but he went. They went into the water together, no hesitation, the cold closing over their feet. That was his first midnight swim. He called me afterward and I asked, "Was it cold?" He said, "Grandma said you don't complain about the lake to the lake."

That line is the whole tradition. The midnight swim is an institution. Every summer, on our last night at the lake, everyone has to get in the water at midnight. No exceptions. It doesn't matter if you're thirteen and sulky or half-asleep and confused. Nobody gives a speech about it. You just do it. I tried to skip it once when I was maybe thirteen, just being a sulky teenager. Mom found me on the dark porch and said, "If you're going to sulk, at least set the table." Which made no sense because it was midnight and we weren't eating. But I got in the lake anyway. I didn't complain to the lake either, once I was in. That was her way of saying the sulking didn't matter, the water did.

The thing is, she didn't make it fun. She didn't turn it into a big magical moment. She just did it. Every year. Like brushing your teeth. Ordinary, unskippable, not up for debate. She never made a fuss about whether the water was warm enough or if the kids were too tired. She just went, and so you went. You don't need a reason. You don't need a speech. You just show up, and you get in the water, and you're together. Now I think that's maybe the most her thing of all.

Cal's first midnight swim was the summer he stayed with her. She woke him up and walked him down to the dock and they

went in together. He told me about it on the phone. I asked if it was cold, and he gave me the line, like it was the most natural answer in the world. "Grandma said you don't complain about the lake to the lake." Classic Mom line. I don't know if she made it up on the spot or if she's been saying it for forty years. But it worked. He loved it.

So that's what I'd add. The midnight swim. The thing she never made a big deal about, which is why it became one. She never said, this is our tradition. She just got in the water, year after year, until it was. No announcement. No speech.

CHAPTER 4

Leah Kaplan

her younger daughter

The Red Canoe



The light went strange first, a kind of yellow-green, and then the rain came down flat and hard on the aluminum paddle, so loud it sounded like someone drumming on the whole lake. I was twelve. Mom had decided we would paddle across to the blueberry side, me and Ben and her. I was holding the paddle wrong, and then I froze. Ben just sat there with his mouth open. I cried, which at twelve felt like the worst part.

The canoe was old even then, red but faded in patches, kind of chalky to the touch. The inside was scratched up from years of lake gravel and sandy feet. There were two wooden paddles and one aluminum one with a bent shaft, and I always ended up with the aluminum one because I was the older kid and could "manage it." That day the rain hit it so loud it was like someone drumming on the whole lake. I remember the sound more than anything. And the water coming off the gunwale in these long silver threads. The canoe's still up there, I think. Mom repainted it after Dad died, the summer after. She did it herself. I don't know why she kept the aluminum paddle. Maybe she didn't think to throw it out. Or maybe she liked the noise.

Mom didn't yell. She didn't say much of anything. I think she said, "Lean toward the middle," or "Stay low," something calm like that. It wasn't dramatic. She just got us back to shore. And then she made pancakes for dinner, which I understood even then was her apology without actually saying it. I remember being furious about it, actually. I wanted it to have been a crisis. I wanted some acknowledgment that I'd been scared. But no. We got to shore, and she made pancakes, and that was the whole event. Ben lost his shoe somewhere, and that became the funny part, which made me even more annoyed. She never brought it up again. I

don't know if she was scared. I suspect she was, but she'd never have shown it. Not to us.

Ben was eight that summer, so I was supposed to be the capable one, which made the whole thing worse. He was just sitting there, not even holding on, like he hadn't decided yet whether to be scared. And then his shoe was gone and he thought that was hilarious. That's the story now, mostly. The time Leah lost her mind in the canoe and Ben lost his shoe. It gets trotted out at summer dinners, usually by Ben, and Mom lets him tell it. She never corrects the details. She'll be at the sink or the stove, not quite listening, and then she'll say something like, "It needed to look intentional," which was her phrase for any mess that could be passed off as deliberate. I don't know if that was about the canoe or the pancakes or me crying. Probably all of it. It was just the canoe story. Every family has one. That was ours.

We've never sat down and said, "Were you scared, Mom?" It comes up now and then, usually when Ben's around, but not like that. I think if I asked, she'd probably look at me like the question was slightly ridiculous. Maybe say something like, "We got back to shore, didn't we?" That's how she is. She doesn't revisit things unless she decides there's a reason. And maybe she'd be right. We did get back. But I think about it more than I'd have expected, especially lately. The sound of that paddle. The way the light changed. And the pancakes. I always thought the pancakes were an apology for not making a bigger deal of it. Now I wonder if they were just what she knew how to offer.

LEAH KAPLAN

The Repainted Canoe

I walked down to the water and there it was, red again. The canoe sat at the edge, tied up and clean, the aluminum paddle still in it. Up close you could see the brush strokes, a little uneven, maybe a drip near the stern. She had found a red close enough to the old color that from a distance you might not notice it had been done at all. Not a new red, exactly. It looked the same, but not too careful. She hadn't tried to make it flawless. She'd tried to make it continuous.

That was the next summer after Dad died. The summer before had been strange. The house felt bigger and smaller at the same time. Mom stayed up there alone for those three weeks after he died, right after, and we didn't push her to come back. I don't know what those three weeks were like for her. She never said. By the time I saw the canoe, she had done the painting sometime in between. She never mentioned it. I just walked down to the water and there it was, red again, with the paddle still in it. I sat on the dock for a while. I don't know what I was feeling. Not sad exactly. More like I had caught her in the middle of something private.

I think it was more that she wanted it there. Ready, maybe. Or just not gone. I don't remember seeing her take it out much that

summer. She'd sit on the dock with her coffee, or she'd be in the garden, or in the kitchen doing something with her back to the room. But the canoe was always right at the edge, tied up, clean. She kept the paddle in it, which meant anyone could go out, but I don't think she did alone. Or if she did, she didn't tell me. That's what it felt like, seeing it tied up and clean.

The garden was part of the same holding on. She grew things that could take the lake weather, tomatoes and zucchini and green beans and herbs. She had a row of sunflowers one year that got enormous, taller than Ben, and she left them up long after they'd gone brown because the birds liked them. I remember her hands in the dirt, no gloves, and the way she'd come into the kitchen with soil under her nails and start cooking without washing them first. That drove Dad crazy. He'd point at the sink and she'd say, "It's from our own garden, David," like that settled it.

She grew rhubarb too, along the side of the shed, and made a pie every June that nobody else could get right. I've watched her make it. I still can't. It's not a complicated recipe. It's just her hands, maybe. The way she cuts the butter in, the way she doesn't measure the sugar, the way she rolls the crust like she's mad at it. That pie was the taste of summer up there. Everyone's version of the lake house probably starts with that, or the canoe, or the porch. For me it's the rhubarb and the red paddle, weirdly. Both red. Maybe that's the theme.

The kitchen was hers too, not in a territorial way exactly, but she had a rhythm in there, and if you got in the middle of it, you'd be handed something to do. That's how I learned, I guess. Not from lessons. From doing. She'd say, "Don't stir it like you're punishing it," or "The pan tells you when it's ready." I didn't understand that

for years. But it was another way she kept the shape of things, quietly. She'd stand in the kitchen with her back to the room, doing something, and you knew not to interrupt.

That's the thing about Mom. She'll do something like repaint a boat and not say a word, and then if you ask her about it she'll shrug and say it needed doing. But the repainting wasn't about the boat needing paint. We both knew that. It was her way of holding onto the shape of their life up there. Just without him in it yet.

LEAH KAPLAN

The Sewing Room Studio



I was always making things as a kid. Little animals, pinch pots, lumps that were supposed to be people. Mom kept all of them, which I didn't know for a long time. But the lake is where it became mine.

The ironing board used to squeak in that room. Then one year I came up to Pinewater for a week and the sewing room wasn't a sewing room anymore. Mom had moved her machine against the wall. The fabric was still there, but folded back. In the middle of the floor there was a table with a canvas cloth over it, a shelf with my old tools, a bucket for slip, a board for wedging. She'd put down a floor covering too, the kind you could sweep, like a rug that belonged in a workroom. I thought it was a whim, something she'd done on a Saturday. It wasn't until years later I realized how much planning that room must have taken. But at the time I just stood in the doorway.

She said, "If you're going to do this, do it somewhere with good light." That was it. No big announcement. No "I believe in you." Just good light. And she was right. The room has two windows facing the lake, and in the afternoon the sun comes in low and gold. I've made some of my best work in that room, as a teenager, as an adult. The first thing I made after she set it up was a mug. A bad one. The handle was too thick and the glaze ran and it came out the color of lake mud, which wasn't what I'd intended. Mom used it anyway. For years she used it. It sat on the kitchen shelf with the others, and she'd put pencils in it or use it for her coffee when the other mugs were dirty. She never said, "This is the first thing you made in that room." She just used it. That's very her. The object itself was the point. Not the story attached to it.

During the worst years, when we weren't speaking, I didn't go up. But the room stayed there. I knew it did. That's a strange thing to say, but I did. I knew it was still there, waiting. Just the table with the canvas cloth, the two windows, the afternoon sun coming low and gold. I think that's part of why I came back.

I think about that now when I'm teaching or when I'm making something that's not working. Sometimes the thing doesn't have to be good. It just has to be used. And loved enough to be used. Mom understood that without ever saying it.

LEAH KAPLAN

The Loon in the Waiting Room

Mom made a loon. A terrible loon. The neck was too long and one wing was bigger than the other, and she held it up in the middle of that Boston waiting room without a hint of apology.

It was Dad's surgery, 2016. She and I sat in plastic chairs for eleven hours. The coffee was burnt and neither of us said a word about why I had stayed away. We just sat there, two people holding the same worry in different rooms of themselves. At some point I took out a bag of clay I had in my car, because I always have clay in the car, and I started making little ornaments, just to keep my hands busy. She reached over and took a piece without asking. That's her, of course. No "May I." Just took it.

And she made a loon. The neck was too long and one wing was bigger than the other. She held it up and said, "It only needs to look intentional." And I laughed. I hadn't laughed like that in a long time, maybe years, and it wasn't because the loon was funny. It was because I'd missed her.

That's the thing nobody tells you about not speaking to your mother. You don't stop loving her. You just get very, very tired of being angry. And then one day you're in a hospital waiting room

and she's making a deformed bird out of your clay, and you think, okay. Okay. This is what we have. I'll take it.

So I came back to the lake that summer. Not for long. But I came. And the sewing room was still there, and the light was still good. And we didn't talk about it. We just didn't. But we sat on the porch and she asked about my work, and I told her about the kiln I'd just bought, and she listened. Actually listened. That was enough. For a long time, that was enough.

Mom's not a still person, usually. She's always doing something with her hands or getting up to check a pot or fold a towel. But when she listened, she'd go quiet and look at you without blinking, and her hands would rest in her lap like she'd forgotten they were there. That's what I remember that day on the porch. I was talking about the kiln, about cone temperatures and glaze chemistry, things that bore most people, and she was just watching me with that expression. Not smiling, exactly. More like she was taking notes in her head, which she does. She files things. Then maybe two weeks later you'd get a package with a book on crystalline glazes or a postcard from some place she saw a pottery show. She never says, "I thought of you." She just sends it. That's her listening. It comes back later, in a way you didn't ask for but somehow needed.

She used to do that when I was a kid too. I'd mention a color I liked and a month later there'd be a shirt in that color on my bed. Not wrapped. Just there. If you asked, she'd say she found it on sale. But she never found anything on sale that matched that exactly. I think I needed to believe she didn't see me. It made staying away easier. But she did see me. That was the problem, in a way. She saw me so clearly that she couldn't leave me alone.

Ruth Kaplan

And I couldn't stand being seen like that when I was falling apart.
So I shut the door.

But she was right about one thing. "A family is not a collection of locked rooms." That's what she said to me once, on the porch, the summer of the worst fight. I told her she didn't get to own every key. I still think that's true. But so is what she said. Both things. They just can't hold hands, those two sentences. They stand on opposite sides of the lake, and neither of us ever built the bridge. We just took the canoe across when we were ready. That's probably the truest thing I can say about it.

She was always paying attention. More than I gave her credit for. And when she sat on the porch that summer, listening to me talk about kilns and glaze, she got still and actually listened.

LEAH KAPLAN

The Shelf of Broken Animals

I was standing in the sewing room, and I couldn't stop looking at the shelf. The one next to the window, where the light falls across all the little clay things I made as a kid. There were lumpy animals, pots with cracked bottoms, and the thing that was supposed to be a horse but looked like a sad giraffe. She kept all of them. Dusted them. Even the ones that broke, she'd glued them back together. Badly, in some cases. You could see the glue. She didn't care.

I found that shelf after we'd started speaking again, and I just stood there for a while. Over the years I'd thrown away so much of my early work, embarrassed by it. I never wanted anyone to see the wobbly pots or the misshapen animals. But my mother had kept every piece. Every single one. It wasn't a collection for show. It was a shelf full of things I made when my hands were small and I believed I was an artist. There was no dust on any of them. She had been dusting them for years, those small clay things I forgot I'd made. In that moment I understood something about her that I had missed before. She had been paying attention the whole time, quietly, without ever telling me.

That shelf is the most honest portrait of how she loves. My mother doesn't gush. She doesn't say, "I always believed in you."

She doesn't make a speech about talent or pride. She just keeps the sad giraffe. For forty years. On a shelf. Next to the window. Like it deserved to be there. It never occurred to her that those broken clay animals were embarrassing. They were mine, so she dusted them, and when they cracked, she fixed them with glue that dried white and obvious. She didn't sand the seams or hide the repairs. That wasn't the point. The point was that I had made them, and that was enough for her. She didn't keep them because they were good. She kept them because they were mine. That is the whole secret.

I don't think I ever thanked her for that. I'm not sure how I would. "Thank you for keeping the sad giraffe" sounds like a joke, but it isn't. Maybe I won't say it. Maybe the book is enough. I might never say it out loud, because the words would be too small. If the book can carry it, let the book carry it. But if you're looking for something people don't know about Ruth Kaplan, it's that. She's got a shelf full of broken clay animals she won't throw away. Not because they're valuable. Because they're mine.

CHAPTER 5

Gus Bell

her neighbor at the lake since 1984

The Red Canoe

I can still see it clear as day. The boy was missing a shoe. I noticed that before anything else when I found them. The red canoe was pulled up under the hemlocks down by the old Henderson place, and all three of them were wet through. The canoe had about two inches of water in it. They were fine, really. Sheltered cove. But there was that missing shoe, and the sky still coming in dark from the north.

Well, I'll tell you, there's not a whole lot to say about people who just show up, year after year, and do what needs doing. Ruth's not one for fanfare. But if I'm gonna start somewhere, I guess it's the canoe. That red canoe. I've seen that thing on the water for forty years. In the summer of eighty-seven, Ruth took it out with the two young ones. I saw them push off from her dock and I thought, well, that's a poor decision. A sky was coming in from the north you wouldn't take a rowboat out in. The water had gone flat, then dark. You could smell the ozone before the storm. I don't forget that.

Then the wind hit. I went out after them in the outboard. It didn't take long to find them, because they'd pulled up in a sheltered cove under the hemlocks. The boy had lost a shoe somewhere, I suppose. I towed them back to her dock. Ruth thanked me in about four words. "Thanks, Gus. We'll manage." Something like that. Then she got the kids up to the house and that was the end of it, far as she was concerned. I never did ask why she went out with that sky. Didn't seem my business. She never mentioned it again, and I never brought it up. That was that.

I never went out in the canoe with her after that. Not in the canoe, no. That was her thing with the family. I'd see her out there early mornings sometimes, just her, paddling along the far shore. No fuss, no company. Just her. She'd lift a hand if she saw me on the dock. I'm not much for canoes myself. I've got the outboard. But I watched her plenty.

That's the thing about Ruth. She knows that lake better than most folks who claim they do. She knows where the wind will kick up, where the water goes shallow under the surface. She's not reckless, exactly. Just, she'd made up her mind about a thing and that was that. Like the canoe trip in eighty-seven. Probably told herself the storm would hold off. And it mostly did, till it didn't.

That's Ruth.

GUS BELL

The North Chimney

When the wind comes from the north, I can smell Ruth's chimney before I see it. The smoke curls down over her roof, and I walk over and say the same thing I've said every summer since the eighties. "Ruth, cap the chimney." She looks at me and says, "Gus, tell the wind." And that's that. The smoke keeps curling down. The wind keeps coming from the north. We've been having that argument so long neither of us wants it settled. It's almost a ritual now.

The north chimney has been smoking for forty years whenever the wind comes from the north. It needs a cap, and I've told her that every summer since the eighties. She says it needs the wind to change. She's stubborn in a way that doesn't make you mad. Just makes you shake your head. I go over, the smoke curling down over the roof, and we do our two lines. She won't cap it, and I won't stop telling her to. That's the whole argument, and neither of us wants it settled.

Half the repairs I've done over there, she didn't ask for. She'd mention something offhand, not exactly asking, just commenting, and the next thing I know I'm under the sink with a wrench. She paid me in pie, mostly. Blueberry. Good pie. I never

complained. A sink repair for a blueberry pie is a fair trade, if you ask me.

Ruth isn't one to get down in the dirt with you. She'd hold the flashlight or hand me a tool, but mostly she'd stand there and ask questions. She wanted to know why a thing failed, what I was doing to fix it. Sharp questions, too. Not just making conversation. She understood more than she let on. She'd ask a question that sounded simple, and by the time I answered it, I'd realize it was the right one. That's Ruth.

David was the one who'd get in there with me. Hand me a length of pipe, hold the wet vac, whatever. He and I spent a fair amount of time in that crawlspace over the years. Ruth'd bring out coffee, or lemonade if it was hot. Set it on the steps and go back inside. She trusted David to tell her if it was bad. Sometimes he did and sometimes he didn't. That was between them. I stayed out of that part.

The north chimney still smokes when the wind comes from the north. I still go over and say the same thing, and Ruth says, "Gus, tell the wind." It doesn't make me mad. It just makes me shake my head. And the pie was blueberry, and it was good. I never complained.

GUS BELL

The Creaking Boards



The Saturday we replaced those decking boards, Ruth came out around noon with sandwiches. This was back in the late nineties. David had the lumber delivered that morning, and we had spent the first part of the day pulling up the rotted boards and cutting new ones. He wasn't a carpenter, but he was careful. Measured twice, cut once, all that. She stood watching us for a few minutes without saying much. Then she said, "Leave the last two boards. I like the way they sound when you walk on them."

And we did. We left those two old boards right there at the end of the dock. They creaked when you stepped on them. Not a dangerous creak, just a little give and a sound like the wood was settling back into place after all those years. I think she liked hearing that creak. Like the dock was talking back to her. I never knew if David thought that was strange or if he just knew better than to argue. Either way, those boards stayed till the flood took them. That was the end of that.

Most people buy a lake house and start improving it, straightening things out. Ruth and David didn't do much of that. They fixed what broke, mostly because I told them to, but they didn't go looking for projects. The house settled, the paint wore, the dock creaked, and that was all right by Ruth. She'd sit out there with her coffee in the morning, and if a board creaked under her, she'd just smile. I don't know that I ever heard her complain about the house itself. The weather, sure. The traffic on the road, maybe. But not the house. She and that place had an understanding. You don't see that much anymore. People want everything new. Ruth wanted it to stay. I think that's why the flood hit her harder than she let on. Not the damage, exactly. The change.

When the water went down, she called me the morning after and asked me to come have a look at the dock cribbing. It was worse than she'd said on the phone. Water had come up into the boathouse walls and the cribbing was twisted. Eddie came out and rebuilt it, half the boathouse framing too. That was more than a patch, whatever Ruth told the family. I helped where I could, but Eddie did the heavy work. Ruth stood on the shore and watched them take the old boards out. She didn't say anything about the creak. I don't think she needed to. I think she'd already made up her mind about selling before that flood ever came. The flood just gave her a reason she could say out loud. Something you could put a number on. People need that sometimes. A reason with a price tag.

I think it was the one place she could let her shoulders down. I don't know what her life was like in Worcester, not really. She never talked about it much. But up here, she was different. Not softer, exactly. More like, she didn't have to keep such a tight hold on things. She'd come out in the morning with her coffee and just sit on the dock, not doing anything. That's not a woman who needs to be busy every minute. That's a woman who's resting. The lake was her rest. David too, I think. They'd sit out there together at night, not talking. Or talking low so you couldn't hear from my dock. You could just see the shapes of them against the light from the house. It was a good life up here. Simple. I think she'd tell you that if you asked. Simple and hard to leave.

The creak is gone now. I know that sounds like a small thing to miss, but for Ruth it wasn't small. It was the sound of the place telling her it was still there. She didn't say anything when it went. She didn't have to. I'd known her long enough by then to see

Ruth Kaplan

what she was doing on that shore. She wasn't just watching old boards come out. She was saying goodbye to the way the place had been under her feet. She'd made up her mind about selling before the flood, I think. The flood gave her a reason with a price tag. But the goodbye was the same either way.

GUS BELL

The Midnight Swim

"Come on in, Gus."

Ruth's voice came across the black water every August, and it never sounded like a dare. It sounded like an invitation she fully expected me to decline, but she wanted it on the record anyway. She'd already be out there, floating on her back in the dark, the kids around her in the early years, the grandkids later. I'd be on my own dock with a flashlight, standing there in my dry clothes like the one man at the party who doesn't dance. "No thank you," I'd call back. Every year, same answer. She knew I wouldn't. But she asked anyway.

I think she liked the asking. I know I liked the being asked. There's something in that, being asked to do a thing you both know you won't do. It says, I remember you. It says, your no is part of this too. The swim was never about swimming for me. I didn't need to be in the water to be part of it. Being on the dock with that flashlight was my place in the ritual. In all that darkness. I'd sweep the beam across the water now and then, picking out heads and shoulders in the dark. I heard the kids laugh and splash. In the later years it was the grandkids, same sounds, different voices. Nobody ever needed pulling out. Not

once. I never once went in. But I kept my post, and Ruth kept asking, and neither of us ever acted like it was strange.

The fuse box was another one of our rituals, and it worked the same way. The pump house had an old fuse box, older than God. Every so often the pump would kick off, and Ruth would call me over. It was never the fuse. I could have walked down there in the pitch black and known it was a loose wire before I opened the box. But I'd fiddle with the fuse anyway, because it made her feel better. She'd stand there with her coffee, watching me like I was doing delicate work. "Is it the fuse?" she'd say. "Might be," I'd say. Then I'd tighten the wire and tell her the fuse was fine.

She knew. I knew she knew. But we kept doing it, every time, because it was our thing. The midnight swim where I never swam, and the fuse that was never the fuse. The asking and the answering and the showing up. That was the whole friendship, when you get right down to it. She never expected me to jump in, and I never expected the fuse to be broken. But she'd call, and I'd come, and that was enough.

GUS BELL

David's Last Morning

I heard her call my name across the water. Not a scream. Just my name, twice, in a voice I'd never heard from her. The lake carried it flat and thin that morning, and I pulled on my boots and went over, the way you do when a neighbor calls.

David was in the shed. He'd been about to start scraping the canoe. There were red paint flakes in his palm, dry and bright. Ruth was on the floor next to him with her hand flat on his chest. She said, "He's gone, Gus." Then, "Call them." I did. I stayed with her until the ambulance came, and after. She didn't cry. She just sat there on the shed floor with her hand still flat on his chest. I remember thinking I should say something, but there was nothing to say. Later we had coffee on the dock. Hers was full and cold. She never did drink it.

She stayed out here three weeks after that, by herself. I went over every day with something. Some days it was tomatoes. One day a fuse I said needed replacing. Most days it was just an excuse. I'd knock, she'd come out, and we'd sit on the dock and not do much talking. Half the time neither of us said a word. She never said what they talked about that morning, and I never asked. But I was there. And I won't forget it.

The next summer she repainted that red canoe herself. I figure David had been about to do it, and she finished his job. That's how I see it, anyway. She didn't say why she did it. She just got out the paint and put that red back over the hull. I watched it come back, bright as it ever was. Same canoe, but it felt different, like she'd put her own hand on it. That's Ruth's way. She didn't stand around and talk about a job. She did it.

Ruth is someone you can count on. Not in a showy way. She doesn't make speeches or promises. She just shows up. Year after year. And when things are bad, she sits with you. That's rarer than people think. I don't know what'll happen to Pinewater now. I don't think she wanted to leave it, not really. But sometimes a thing's time is done. I'll miss seeing her on that dock. I'll miss the pie. I'll even miss arguing about that chimney. You tell her the north wind's still blowing, and the chimney's still smoking. She'll know what I mean. And if you see her before I do, tell her the fuse is fine. She'll know that too. That's the kind of person she is.

CHAPTER 6

Elena Morales

her former daughter-in-law, Cal's mother

Sorting Lures by Color



Cal would sit on the porch at Pinewater with Ruth's old fishing lures spread around him, sorting them by color. The lures had belonged to David, hundreds of them collected over the years. Cal didn't sort for any reason. He did it just to do something with his hands. Ruth would sit with him, maybe with a cup of tea, and she wouldn't talk. She didn't try to fill the silence or get him to open up. Most adults want to fix you or get you to talk. She just stayed. For a kid like Cal, that wasn't nothing. That was everything. I didn't see it up close, not every day, but Cal has told me about it enough that I can see it.

That summer Cal was thirteen and everything with his anxiety got bad. It started with Ben. Ben had him for part of the summer, and Cal was struggling, but Ben treated it as something else, as attitude or backtalk. It took about a week for Cal to get worse. I was in Seattle, and I could hear it in his voice on the phone. He sounded flat. Not sad, just flat. I called Ruth. That wasn't Ben's idea. It was mine. I called his mother and said, I think Cal needs to get out of there. She said, "Send him. We'll make room." She didn't ask for details, she didn't defend Ben, she just said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. So Cal went to Pinewater.

Ruth never once used the word anxiety. Not with him, not with me. She called it "a rough patch," and she never asked him to explain himself. That was exactly what he needed. She just let him be there. He spent a lot of time on that porch with the lures, and she'd sit with him, no pressure, no questions. But she did make sure he got help. There was a therapist in the next town, a woman with an office above the pharmacy. Ruth drove him every Thursday and paid for it herself. She called me that first week and asked, "Are you all right with this, as his mother?" That's how I found out. Not from Ben. From Ruth, checking with me. That

told me a lot. She didn't make Cal explain himself, but she also didn't pretend nothing was wrong. She found the help and then made sure I knew. Most people choose one or the other. Ruth did both. I've gone over it a hundred times, and that's the part that still gets me: she didn't make Cal explain, and she didn't let him go without help. She held both things at once.

Ben didn't know about the therapy then, and he still doesn't. Ruth asked me not to tell him. She said, "Because he'll make it about him." I thought, that's unkind, and it's also true. I've never told Ben. Cal hasn't either. I don't know if that was right, but it's what we did. I think Ruth was protecting Cal. Maybe she was also protecting her own picture of Ben, I don't know. I've stopped trying to answer that. But I know she didn't make it about herself, and she didn't let the summer become about her or about Ben. It stayed about Cal.

What I know is that Cal came back steadier. Not fixed, but steadier. He's seventeen now, so he talks in fragments, but he's said that summer was the first time he didn't feel like he was failing at being a kid. That stayed with me. He started keeping those lures in a little box, sorted by color, like a reminder that he knew how to make order out of chaos. She made room and she stayed. That's what I keep coming back to. I think he learned that from her.

ELENA MORALES

Divorce Changes Paperwork

One summer at Pinewater, a neighbor introduced me as "Ben's ex." I don't remember if I flinched or just went still. Before I could even open my mouth, Ruth corrected her. "She's Cal's mother." That was the whole correction. Not a lecture, not an explanation. Just a re-centering. The neighbor blinked and the moment passed, but I have never forgotten it. In that one sentence Ruth picked up the whole complicated mess of a divorce and set it down where it belonged, with me still inside the family.

Ruth doesn't do big declarations. She does small, stubborn things. After the divorce, she kept inviting me to Pinewater. Not every summer, but most. I'd come with Cal, or sometimes on my own, and she'd set a place for me at dinner like it was the most natural thing in the world. There was no extra chair dragged over, no moment of hesitation. My place was just there, next to everyone else's, the way it had always been. The table simply had room. No one made a speech about it. No one pointed it out. It was simply understood that I would be there, and that my plate would be waiting.

She said to me once, "Divorce changes paperwork. It doesn't erase dinner." I don't remember why she said it. Maybe I'd apologized for being there, for still coming around. I have a

feeling that's exactly what happened, that I'd said something about not wanting to intrude, and she corrected me as gently as she corrected the neighbor. She said it like it was the end of the conversation, and I believed her. I still believe her. The sentence stayed with me. It was Ruth in miniature. She never undid the fact of the divorce. She just refused to let it undo dinner.

There was a Fourth of July when I showed up feeling sorry for myself. I was sad and trying hard not to show it. Ruth must have seen it anyway, because she handed me a sparkler and said, "You're not a guest. You're a person with a job." She had me hold it for Cal. Just a silly thing. But it worked. I stood there with that sparkler fizzing in my hand, concentrating on keeping it steady for Cal, and the sadness loosened its grip a little. She had given me a reason to be there that had nothing to do with Ben and everything to do with Cal. I wasn't performing grief or working hard to fit in. I just had a job, and the job was to hold the light.

So yes, there were moments. Small, quiet moments that didn't announce themselves. She never said "you'll always be family." She didn't need to. She just kept leaving the door open, year after year.

ELENA MORALES

The Midnight Swim

I remember standing on the dock in a borrowed suit, trying not to shiver, and Ruth was up there counting heads like a camp counselor. It was 2008, the week of my wedding to Ben. I was nervous about it, not really a strong swimmer, and the night air was freezing. She had this clipboard in her head, I think. Her eyes moved over the dark water, and she knew exactly who was in and who wasn't. I remember thinking, she's not just hosting this, she's guarding it.

My mother was there that week too, and she was not a swimmer at all. Ruth got her settled on the dock with a blanket and a cup of tea, and for the rest of the swim my mother kept saying, "She's very organized." That was the highest compliment my mother had. Ruth is organized, yes, but it is more than that. She was making sure nobody got lost in the dark. I remember looking back at the dock and seeing her standing there with her arms crossed, not smiling, just watching. And I felt safe. That's the word. I felt safe in the water, even though I couldn't see the bottom.

By the time I got there, everyone talked about the midnight swim like it had been happening forever. I never asked Ruth when it started. I guess the truth is, I never thought to ask where any of

it came from. It felt older than me, older than my marriage. Like the lake itself had been doing it before we showed up. It was just one of those things at Pinewater that you either did or you didn't, and nobody made a big deal about it either way.

I've done it every year I've been invited, including the years after the divorce. Even after Ben and I split, the invitation to come for the swim stayed. I remember one year, maybe 2016 or so, I was standing on the dock and I thought, I'm still here. Not in a sad way. Just in a, this is still mine, way. And that was because of Ruth.

The year David died, there was no midnight swim. Or if there was, I wasn't there. Cal and I came for the funeral, and the water just sat there all day, still and flat. Nobody mentioned the swim. It would have felt wrong. But the next summer, Ruth repainted the canoe herself. I don't know why that felt connected, but it did. Like she was putting the summer back together piece by piece.

That's what I keep coming back to. The water was dark and I couldn't see the bottom, and she was the one on the dock making sure nobody got lost in it. She made the swim feel like mine, even after the marriage ended. And I think that's a rare thing to feel around another person.

ELENA MORALES

Arroz Con Gandules

The arroz con gandules sat on the table looking nothing like my mother's. The rice was gummy, the grains stuck together in pale clumps, and the cilantro had been chopped way too early, so it had gone dark and limp. Ruth served it anyway, with a straight face. "I'm learning," she said.

People don't always know that side of Ruth. I don't know if they notice how much she watches. She's not the kind to hover. But she notices when someone's plate is empty, or when a kid is getting too quiet, or when two people are on the edge of an argument. She'll just appear with a task for you. Not always a kind word. A task. "Come help me with the tomatoes." "Hold this." "Walk with me to the shed." And it always works. It breaks whatever was building. I think people see her as the one who keeps the family fed and the house running. And she is that. But underneath, she's a person who sees more than she says. She once told me, "I'm not criticizing. I'm noticing." I think that's the truest thing about her. A task looks like nothing, but it changes the whole shape of a moment.

The rice was one of those times, years ago, when my mother came to Pinewater. Ruth asked her for the recipe for arroz con gandules. I remember being surprised that Ruth even asked. She

didn't ask like a tourist collecting a recipe. She asked like it mattered. I remember Ruth writing it down in that careful way she has, then going into the kitchen to try it. It was a disaster. She chopped the cilantro way too early, and the rice came out gummy. My mother was horrified, quietly, in the way Puerto Rican mothers are horrified. She didn't make a scene. She just looked at the pot and then at Ruth, and I could feel the horror in the room. But Ruth served it anyway, with that same straight face, and said, "I'm learning." I don't think she ever tried again.

But the fact that she tried at all, for my mother, that's something people might not know. It meant a lot to me. She had been watching. She saw that this dish mattered, that it was a piece of my mother's home, and she tried to make it. She didn't get it right, and she didn't pretend it was good. She just served it. It wasn't a grand gesture. It was a pot of rice that didn't come out right, but she put it on the table anyway. That's Ruth. She watches, and then she acts in these small ways that look like nothing but aren't.

ELENA MORALES

Leaving Room at the Table

I set a place for Cal now at my own table. The plate goes down before I even stop to think about it, and then I hear Ruth's voice, the way she said it once, plain and certain: "Divorce changes paperwork, it doesn't erase dinner."

I never took the invitations for granted. Not one. Even the years I couldn't come, just knowing the door was open mattered. It wasn't a small comfort. It was the difference between feeling like a former daughter-in-law and feeling like a person who still had a place. I think about that a lot now, with Pinewater being sold. I don't know the details of why, just that it's time, but I suspect she's more conflicted than she lets on. That house held so many of us, in so many states of falling apart. Some of us arrived there in pieces, after hard seasons, and the house held us anyway. I have been one of those people, and Ruth never looked at me like I was failing. She has never been one to make a show of her own feelings, so you learn to watch the small things, and I watch them now and think she is holding more than she says.

The way she handled Cal's rough patch changed something in him, and in me. She didn't try to fix him. She just stayed. When you are Cal's mother, you carry worry in a particular way, and you brace for the moment someone decides it's too much. Ruth

never made it feel like too much. There was no performance of worry, no long checklist of what he should be doing. She simply made sure he had what he needed, and she did it without making a show of it. That is harder than it looks. That quiet steadiness, the staying, is not a small thing to a mother.

So I guess I'd just say thank you. For the swims, the dinner table, the sparklers, the bad rice. And for never once making me feel like a guest. A guest is someone you perform for, someone you keep at a polite distance. Ruth never did that to me. Even after the divorce, I was just someone who belonged at the table. The bad rice is part of it too. She fed us even when the food wasn't perfect, and the point was never the food. The point was that we were all there together. That line, divorce changes paperwork, it doesn't erase dinner, it stays with me. I hear it when I set my own table now. I set a place for Cal, and sometimes I think, I learned this from her. Not just the setting of the plate, but the leaving room for whoever might show up.

That's the thing I'll keep.

Sophie Shaw

her granddaughter, the oldest grandchild

Midnight Swim

The water at midnight hurt. It was cold in a way that felt personal, like it was squeezing you from the inside, and nobody got out until Grandma said enough. I always remember being little and thinking it was this huge, secret, dangerous thing, and she would stand on the dock in her robe, like some kind of general, making sure everyone was in. The moths hitting the porch light were so loud you could hear them from the water. The last Saturday of August, every year, everyone in the lake at midnight, no exceptions. It is the best thing about our family, and Grandma invented it.

She had a whole system. She'd start hinting at dinner, "People are coming," and we'd all pretend we didn't know what she meant. Then she'd go around with that specific look on her face, and if you hesitated, she'd say, "No one has ever died from being early." Which is objectively not true, by the way, but it worked. My dad always claimed he had to check something on the boat, and she'd just stand there on the dock and wait. Not angry, just immovable. I remember one year my brother Noah tried to fake

a stomachache, and she said, "The lake will do more for your stomach than lying on that couch will." He got in. We all got in. Even when the air was freezing and nobody wanted to, we got in.

Then it got quiet. During the day the lake is all shouts and splashing, but at midnight it was just bodies in black water, and the occasional whisper. Nobody wanted to be the first to break it. Grandma would wade in last, after everyone else. She'd stand there in the water up to her shoulders, looking back at the house, and I always thought she was checking on it, making sure it was still there. And then she'd say, "All right, enough," and we'd all race to the dock because it was so cold. She'd be the last one out, and Mom would already have towels stacked on the porch. I don't know why that part sticks with me, the towels. Mom is always ready for the end of it. Grandma is the one who made us stay in.

From the water, the house looked smaller, which I guess is obvious, but at night with the porch light on, it was just this glowing square behind her. Like a little box of light. And she'd be in the dark water in front of it. I remember thinking once, probably as a teenager, that she looked like she was guarding it. But she never said anything dramatic about it. She isn't a big one for speeches. She'd just stand there, and then she'd say "enough," like a spell breaking. The moths were always the loudest right then, like they were annoyed we were leaving. And then we'd drip all the way up the lawn, and no one was allowed to turn on the inside lights until she got there, because she said it ruined the dark. So we'd all be tripping over shoes and life jackets, and she'd come up last with her robe wet at the bottom, and then, click, the house would light up.

That was it. That was the whole thing. Grandma made the lake at midnight into our family's ritual, and she is the one who made us stay in until she said enough. She'd be the last one out, her robe wet at the bottom, and then the house would light up. That was the whole thing.

SOPHIE SHAW

You'll Need Better Shoes



The rain came during my first week of film school and by the time I stepped outside my shoes were completely ruined. The leather had gone soft and the water had soaked straight through to my socks. I just stood there on the sidewalk, not ready to walk anywhere, and I thought, God, she knew. She had said it to me the day I got in. I had told her the news, waiting for some big reaction, and she said, "You'll need better shoes." That was it. No congratulations. Just that. I was a little hurt, honestly. I had been expecting her to be thrilled for me, and instead she went straight to my feet. It was not until I was standing in the rain with ruined shoes that I realized she was right. I remember looking down at my feet and shaking my head, because of all the things she could have said, that was the one that came back to me.

I didn't call her from that sidewalk. I called my mom. I told her what had happened, and I could hear myself almost laughing about it, because what else was there to do. I did not tell Grandma. I thought about it, but it felt like giving her the satisfaction. I know that sounds terrible, but she has this way of being right that makes you want to not admit it. I should have told her. I mean, I should have. I was worried that if I told her she was right, she would just nod and say, "I know," and then I would have to live with that. So I let it hang there. I let the moment pass and I never brought it up again. It wasn't that I thought she would gloat. It was that she wouldn't have to. That nod would have been enough.

She can talk for hours about the garden, the boat, what my mom did wrong with a brisket, but when it matters, she says one sentence and it just lands. She trusts people to understand. That is flattering, but also terrifying, because sometimes I didn't understand. You would just have to catch up later. I always felt

Ruth Kaplan

like I was catching up with her, even when I was little. She can wait years for you to come around, and I think she probably expected that from me too. She never pushed.

The thing is, I think she always knew I would get it eventually. That was the patience in it. She didn't need me to call her and say she was right. She already had her answer. She is patient with being right. She can wait years. I don't know if that is wisdom or just stubbornness. Maybe both.

SOPHIE SHAW

Church Parking Lot



She sat in the passenger seat with her hands folded in her lap, perfectly calm, while I sat in the driver's seat sweating through my shirt. The church parking lot was empty except for us, and I was barely moving, but it felt like I was flying. It wasn't her idea to teach me. I asked her because my mom was too anxious and my dad was too... my dad. I thought Grandma would be calm, which she is, but she is also terrifying in a quiet way.

The quiet way meant she would sit there with her hands folded and say things like, "The brake is not a suggestion." Or, "You're driving as if the telephone pole owes you money." Her voice never went up, not even when I hit the imaginary telephone pole in my head. I didn't know whether to laugh or apologize, so I just kept both hands on the wheel and waited for the next instruction. Grandma never yelled. She didn't have to. The quiet was enough.

I remember one Saturday I was so nervous I was sweating through my shirt, and she reached over and turned the air conditioning all the way down. Not because I was hot, but because she said I needed to "feel the car." I had no idea what that meant. I still don't, honestly. With the AC off, the car got warmer and quieter, and I sat there trying to figure out what I was supposed to be feeling. She didn't explain. She just let me sit with it, which was very much her style. She would wait for me to figure it out on my own. I kept waiting for her to tell me what it meant, but she never did. Maybe she knew I wouldn't get it until I stopped thinking so hard.

We did it for six Saturdays. Six weeks of the same empty parking lot, the same two cones, and the same folded hands in the passenger seat. By the end, I could parallel park between those two cones, which she had moved to make it harder. She never

told me she was moving them. I would just show up and the gap would be tighter than it had been the week before. That was the test, and she made it harder on purpose. It felt endless at the time, but now I see it as six Saturdays of her not letting me off easy.

She is like that. Even when she is teaching you something, she is testing you, quietly, without ever raising her voice. The license test felt easy compared to that parking lot. I didn't tell her that, because some things don't need to be said. She knew exactly what she was doing. If I'd told her, she would have said, "That was the point."

SOPHIE SHAW

Drive to the Pharmacy

"Too wide." "Too fast." "That was a yield, Sophie, not a suggestion."

She said them one after another, without raising her voice. I was gripping the wheel like it was going to fly off. This was the summer after I got my license, and my grandmother had asked me to drive her to the pharmacy in Worcester. She sat in the passenger seat and criticized every single turn I made, her voice steady and certain. I kept my eyes on the road and didn't dare look over at her. I'd been driving all summer without a problem, but now I wasn't sure I could manage a straight line. Each time she spoke, my hands tightened another notch on the wheel.

When we pulled into the parking lot, I finally let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding. She just said, "Well. You got us here." That was it. That was her version of a compliment. I remember feeling this huge wave of relief, like I'd passed some test she never told me I was taking. Then she made me wait in the car while she went in. I sat there for twenty minutes listening to talk radio, the host droning on about something I couldn't have repeated if you'd asked. And I thought, "I'm her favorite." Which is so embarrassing to say out loud, but I really did think that. I still think that, actually. Don't tell my cousins. That day in the parking lot, I let myself believe it.

And the drive back was really quiet. Not tense quiet, just done. Like she'd used up all her notes and now she could just sit. She had her purse on her lap, and she was looking out the window at the houses we passed. She said, "Your grandfather would have liked this car." It made no sense to me at the time, because Grandpa had been gone for a while and it was just my mom's old Honda. But I think she meant the drive. The ordinariness of it. Just running an errand with me. We could have been going anywhere. The pharmacy didn't matter. I didn't say anything back because I didn't want to break it. I just kept both hands on the wheel and let the silence settle around us.

We pulled into the driveway and she said, "You can park it straight." I did. She got out and went inside without looking back. I sat there for a minute with the keys in my hand, feeling like I'd been handed something. I still don't know what. Maybe just the car. But it felt bigger, and it still does, even now, when I think about it.

SOPHIE SHAW

Tree Number Two

I was in high school doing a project when she first showed me the folder. I can't remember what the project was about, but I remember her reaching into a drawer and pulling out a plain folder with my name on the tab. It wasn't just my name, though. All of us had folders, she told me, but mine was the fullest. She opened it and started laying things out one by one, like she had been waiting for someone to ask.

Inside was the program from my sixth grade play, where I was Tree Number Two. I'd almost forgotten that part, but she hadn't. There was a clipping from the local paper about a film workshop I did one summer, so small I would have missed it if she hadn't cut it out. And there was the ticket stub from my first documentary screening, which was in a church basement with twelve people in the audience, maybe fewer. She kept all of it. Every school program, every press clipping, every little mention of any of us. She didn't show it off. She just kept it there, in order, as proof.

I used to think the folder meant she was proud of me, and she was. She still is. But now I think maybe she also wanted something else. She wanted proof that we had been there. That we had done things. That it all mattered, even the small stuff, even Tree Number Two in a sixth grade play. She would never

say it like that, but the drawer full of folders said it for her. She didn't need to say she was there. She had the paper to prove it, and she kept it in order, like a record of us.

She says she doesn't like sentimental objects. She'll tell you that straight-faced, like it's a fact about herself. But she keeps every single program, every stub, every clipping. So I think she lied about that. Not in a mean way. In the way that let her keep being the person who didn't cry at school plays while also having a drawer full of proof that she was there. She was there for all of it, and she kept the paper to prove it to herself, maybe, or to whoever came after.

I don't know if that's too much to say out loud. But it's what I'd want her to know. That I know about the folders. I know she kept my name on a tab and my Tree Number Two program in a drawer. And that I'm Tree Number Two forever. Not in a small way. In the way that meant she noticed, and she saved it, and that was enough.

CHAPTER 8

Noah Shaw

her grandson

The Loons on the Dock



Most of what I remember of her is pretty quiet, and this is one of the quiet ones.

She woke me once when I was twelve or thirteen, before it was light, and told me to put on shoes and a sweater. I don't remember being confused, just doing it. We walked down to the water and sat on the dock. The fog was still lifting off the surface, and she had this old wool blanket she'd brought. The edge of it scratched my neck the whole time.

The light was that gray-blue before the sun actually shows. You could just start to see the line where the water ended and the trees began. The dock was damp and a little cold through my jeans, and it had that old wood smell. She put the blanket over both our shoulders, but she was smaller than me by then, so it kept slipping off her side. I remember the water slapping the posts and a mosquito or two already. She'd put repellent on us at the door, and I could smell it on my own wrists. We sat there a long time, long enough that I got bored and then stopped being bored. Neither of us said anything.

Then the loons started up somewhere out past the point. That sound. I'd heard it before, but never like that, never when I was the only other person there. She didn't explain anything. She just let it happen. I don't think she looked at me. She tilted her head a little, like she was locating them, and her hands stayed still in her lap. Her breathing changed. Slower. Like she'd been waiting for it and now she could relax. She didn't point or smile or anything. After a while, when the sound had moved farther off, she said, "They'll do it again in a minute." And they did. That was the only thing she said on the dock. When we stood up, she folded the

blanket and walked back to the house ahead of me. She didn't say anything when she stood up either.

I didn't know until much later that she knew exactly where they nested, and almost every time they came back to the lake. I thought we'd just gotten lucky. It stuck with me, that she had known the whole time and never said. Once or twice after that I'd be up early on my own and she'd already be on the dock in that yellow rain jacket, and I'd sit with her. She never made me leave, but she also never woke me again. I think that one time was the lesson, or the gift, or whatever you want to call it. After that I was supposed to find my own way down. I remember one morning I got there too late and she just shook her head, like, you missed it, and went inside to make coffee. She didn't make a thing of it.

But I started paying more attention after that. To when the light changed, or when the birds got quiet. Small stuff. Maybe she planned it from the start, or maybe she just thought I was old enough to see it once. I don't know if that was intentional on her part. Probably.

NOAH SHAW

Cribbage on the Porch



I'd wake up early sometimes just because the room was bright, and instead of lying there I'd go down to the porch. She'd be reading one of her mystery novels or doing the crossword. She wouldn't ask why I was up. She'd just pour me a cup of coffee, even when I was too young for it, mostly milk with a splash of coffee. And we'd sit there while the lake woke up.

That's where she taught me cribbage, actually. On the porch. She had this old wooden board where the pegs clicked when you moved them. I can still hear that sound. She never let me win. Not once. But she'd say, "If you're going to sulk, at least set the table." Which was her way of telling me to get over it.

If I skipped a point, she'd wait until I thought I'd won the hand and then say, "Count it again." And I'd be off by two. She made me count out loud, every single time, even when I got older and didn't want to. She'd sit there with her coffee going cold and just watch my hands. She didn't talk much during the game. It was almost like the loons, the same kind of quiet, except there was something with us, a whole little world in the cards. I remember her fingers were always a little rough from the garden, and she'd smooth the cards on the arm of the chair before she cut. Like she was setting the table for the next thing.

The board just always there. It had a worn spot where her thumb sat when she pegged. I don't think she ever told me where it came from, and I never asked. It stayed in the same drawer by the porch door, wrapped in an old dish towel. She was like that. Things didn't need a story to be important. They just needed to be used. The board was heavy, I remember, heavier than it looked. Dark wood. The pegs were maybe three colors, and one of the blue ones was chewed a little, probably by a dog before my

time. She always took the red pegs. I never thought to wonder why until just now.

Always. Even the last time we played, a few summers ago. I was in college by then, and I said something stupid like, "You know, I'd like the red pegs for once." And she just looked at me over her glasses and said, "No." Not mean. Just final. Then she cut the cards and I lost by four. She could have let it go, but she didn't. I think that's why I kept asking to play. There was no softness in it, no performance. Just her, and the pegs, and the count.

The only time she ever relaxed around me more was the morning with the loons. But that was a different kind of thing entirely. That wasn't a game. Cribbage was its own quiet, the sound of the pegs clicking and her coffee going cold, and underneath it, the lake waking up. She didn't need to tell me where the board came from. She just used it. That was enough, and I think that's why I keep hearing the click.

NOAH SHAW

Pantry Duty

The pantry light was a bare bulb on a string, and the air smelled like dust and old newspapers, with something almost sweet underneath from a jar of preserves that had leaked at some point. The shelves were lined with old newspapers, and when I reached up for the high ones my arms came down gray. Grandma wore an apron with a torn pocket, and she wiped her hands on it before she took a jar from me.

"What's the date on that," she'd say.

I'd read it out, and she'd either keep the jar or set it aside for the dump. We did that for hours. The floor was old green linoleum with cracks that looked like veins, and it was always cool in there, even on the hottest days. The rest of the house would be loud and full, but the pantry felt like a separate country. Just the two of us, and the dates on jars.

I was thirteen that summer. My mother had this idea I should learn to sail, but I had no interest, and Grandma didn't push. She put me on pantry duty instead. I don't know exactly how it happened. I think I volunteered once when everyone else was down at the water, and after that she just expected me. It was dusty and hot and nobody wanted to do it, but with her it was

almost peaceful. She didn't fill the silence. She let it sit. And I found I didn't mind.

That was the summer I started to think maybe I wasn't just another grandchild in the crowd. Even if I was. I don't know. It was a long time ago. But being chosen for that quiet work made me notice things about her I might have missed.

Grandma wasn't someone who explained why a place mattered. She'd tell you what to notice, and then leave you alone with it. She'd point out where the marsh grass had grown in thicker than last year, or how the big oak by the shed had lost a limb in a storm. She knew the land the way I know my apartment now, every cracked tile and weird smell. But she didn't give speeches about it. If you asked her why she loved it, she'd say, "Because it's mine." Not in a greedy way. More like, this is the place where I know what's true.

I remember her standing at the kitchen window once, watching the rain come across the lake, and she said, "See how it changes the color of the water." That was it. But I went and looked, and she was right. The water had gone almost black under the rain, with this strange light on the far shore. I still think about that. Not what she said, exactly. That she knew I'd go look. She'd point out fog too, how it sat in the low spots and left the high ground clear, so the hills looked like islands. And ice in winter, when we'd go up for a day. She'd show me where the ice was safe and where it wasn't, just by reading the color and the cracks. She always knew.

Once she told me the loons wouldn't come back if the lake got too loud, and I think that was the real reason she hated the

speedboats. Not that she'd say it. She'd just stand on the dock with her coffee and watch them tear up the water, and then she'd go inside and shut the door harder than she needed to. Small things. If you were paying attention, you knew what she meant. If you weren't, you missed it. Most people missed it. I tried not to.

That summer in the pantry, with dust on my arms and the cool floor under me, I started to understand that being one of the people who noticed was a kind of belonging. Grandma never spelled it out. She just handed me jars and let the silence do its work. I think that was her way of saying I could be trusted to see what she saw. Most people missed it. I tried not to.

NOAH SHAW

The Flood

A few years ago, a storm came through and the lake came up fast. The water had climbed up the dock and the lake was churning under the rain. I remember the dock half under water, the waves slapping over the boards, and everyone on the shore arguing about what to do. The canoe was still down near the water. My mother was trying to make a plan. My uncles were talking over each other about whose car was parked too close to the shore and whether the furniture would wash out. It was raining so hard you could barely see the far side of the lake.

Then Grandma walked outside in her rain boots, no coat, and just started moving things herself. She didn't ask. She didn't explain. She went straight for the canoe, dragged it up past the boathouse, and flipped it over. Then she carried the chairs up the hill one at a time. The rain was so heavy you could barely see her, but you could still make out that steady walk, no hurry, no stopping.

I grabbed one end of the cooler and she took the other without looking at me. The handle was wet and my hands kept slipping. She said, "Lift with your legs, not your back," like we were just doing chores. I almost lost my grip a couple times, but she never slowed down, and I wasn't going to be the one to stop. Halfway

up the hill, the rain got so heavy I couldn't see my feet, but she kept walking at the same pace. I remember her boots squelching in the mud. When we set the cooler down by the porch, she said, "Good." Not thank you. Just good. Then she went back for another chair.

I stood there for a second, soaked through, watching her. She was seventy-something then, and she was moving like the storm was just another thing to be managed. The canoe came first, then the chairs, then the cooler, and she never once stopped to point or give orders. After a minute, the arguing behind me stopped. People just followed her, like she'd turned on a light. Nobody needed to say anything. She was already doing exactly what had to be done, so the rest of us fell in line.

Later, she went inside, dried off, made coffee, and never mentioned it again. I don't think she even took credit. She just fixed it. That's how I remember her best, maybe. Not in the quiet moments, but in the ones where everyone else was flailing and she already knew exactly what had to be done and was doing it. She doesn't need to be in charge. She just is, when it matters.

NOAH SHAW

The Hidden Folders

A couple years ago, after I'd started publishing little pieces here and there, nothing big, we were cleaning out a closet at the house in Worcester. I pulled open a drawer and found file folders, one for each of us grandkids. It took me a second to understand what I was looking at. Mine was full of things I'd written. Not just the articles. Book reviews, a letter to the editor I'd forgotten about, even a poem from a college journal. She had cut them out or printed them and put them in plastic sleeves. She never told me. Never said a word about it. I had always assumed she didn't read my work, because she never mentioned it. But there it all was, in order by date, with little notes in her handwriting on the margins of a few. "Noah, spring 2021." "Noah, on wetlands." "Noah, keep going." I just stood there holding it. I didn't know what to say. I still don't, really. She paid attention the whole time. I just didn't see it. All those bylines, all those deadlines, and I had no idea she was collecting them.

I kept turning the pages, reading her notes. On a piece about salt marsh restoration, where I had gone on too long about the methodology, she had underlined a sentence near the end and written, "This is the part that matters." She was right. It was the only good sentence in the whole thing. On another one, about old mill dams, she had written, "Your grandfather would have

argued with you.” That made me laugh, because I never knew him, not really, but I had heard enough stories to know exactly what she meant.

There was one folder just for the loons. Not mine. A separate one. Clippings about loon populations, lake health, threats to nesting sites. She had been following them for years. The clippings were yellowed around the edges, some of them older than I am. I had assumed the loons were something she had taken up for me. But she had been keeping that file long before I was born. Maybe it was for her. Maybe it was for all of us. I don’t know. She never said. That’s the thing about Grandma. You would find these whole hidden systems in her house, and she would never once let on they existed.

She wasn’t loud about loving people. She was loud about things that needed doing, and quiet about everything else. If you wanted the words, you were out of luck. If you watched what she saved, what she noticed, what she got up early for, then you knew. I didn’t always watch. I missed a lot. But I found the folder, and I found the loon file, and I think I can say now that I knew her. Not all of her. Maybe not even most of her. But enough to know I mattered to her. I didn’t always believe that when I was younger. I do now.

CHAPTER 9

Eddie Ramos

the caretaker who has looked after the lake house for 24 years

Pantry Door Pencil Marks



The flashlight kept drifting down to the floor. Ruth was standing right there while I rebuilt that wall in 2016, and I had to keep asking her to lift it. She'd raise it a little, then it would drift right back down. She didn't want the pantry door touched. "Don't touch the door," she told me. "Not the frame, not the hinges, not even the paint." So I framed around the door and left every pencil mark exactly where it had always been. I worked around it, because that door wasn't moving. She didn't want the door touched, and that was that.

Most people walk past that door a hundred times a summer and never look at it. I've been on the property twenty-four years now, so I've seen it plenty. The marks are all the kids' heights going back to the eighties. The earliest ones are from about 1984, and the handwriting gives them away. Whoever made those first marks pressed hard enough to dent the wood. You can still feel the groove if you run your thumb over it. I've run my thumb over that groove more than once when I'm in there, just to remind myself it's still there. I always figured that was Ruth, but I never asked. It seems like the sort of thing she would do, press down hard enough to leave a groove, then let it be.

There's a cluster around the late eighties and early nineties. Different pencils, some in blue pen. A few of them are dated. One says "L, 1991," and another just has a question mark next to it, no name. I noticed that one when I was running the sander near there. I stopped and taped plastic over the whole doorway so the dust wouldn't get into the grooves. I didn't want to be the one who sanded over somebody's height. The kids don't mark it anymore, far as I know. The last one I saw was maybe 2015. Small and shaky, like a kid trying to write on a door while somebody's telling them to hurry up. I don't know who that was.

Ruth watched the whole time. The light kept sinking and I kept asking her to lift it, but she wasn't going anywhere. I think she would have stood there all day if that's what it took. She'll let you fix everything else, but there's always one thing she won't let anybody change. That door is one of them.

But the door's still there, and the marks are still there, from 1984 on, and that's the way it's going to stay as long as the house stands. Nothing's going to change that. I know that.

EDDIE RAMOS

Protecting the House After David

Ruth brings a coffee and stands in the doorway like she is checking the weather. I have looked after Pinewater for twenty-four years, and I know that look. Most of the time she leaves me to it, but she finds reasons to wander through. She'll ask one question about what I'm doing and listen to the whole answer. The first day I did the pantry wall, she stayed close the entire first day. Not hovering, exactly, but present. She'd pick up a scrap of trim and turn it over in her hands, or push the plastic back an inch to check the marks were still there. I told her, "Ruth, I'm not going to touch the door." She said, "I know, but I like to watch things stay the same."

But she also trusts me. After twenty years, if I said a board was rotted, she didn't argue. She'd just say, "Fine, do what it needs." Then she'd ask if it had to look new, or if I could make it match. She never wanted anything to look new. New things at Pinewater make her suspicious.

I think she is protecting the idea that the house hasn't really changed. That if you walked in barefoot from the lake, the porch boards felt the same, the screen door still caught in the same spot, the kitchen drawer still stuck unless you lifted it

just right. She doesn't mind repairs. She just doesn't want them announced.

Some of that is David. After he passed, she got more particular. Not sentimental in a showy way, but there are things she won't let go of. The canoe. The shed. The pantry door. She never said it outright, but I think the house is where she still argues with him. You keep a place the way he liked it, or the way you both fought about it, and he is still there in the disagreement. I don't think she is protecting furniture. I think she is protecting a version of that house where he is still walking up from the shed with sawdust on his sleeves, complaining about the ladder. That is what I think. But I could be wrong. She wouldn't tell me that. She'd tell me the hinge squeaks.

I didn't know David well. He was around when I first started, and he was the one who showed me where the shutoff valves were and which breakers fed which rooms. He had a way of explaining things like you'd already half-understood them, which I appreciated. But he wasn't a big talker. He'd nod at me from the shed and go back to whatever he was doing. Mostly I knew him through the house, if that makes sense. The way he built the workbench in the basement, which is overbuilt by about three times what it needed to be. The notes he left inside the fuse box, in pencil, like "pump house, don't touch unless frozen." I still follow those notes. Some of them are wrong now, after all the electrical updates, but I can't bring myself to change them. That pencil handwriting is one of the ways the house still holds him.

I think Ruth likes having someone around who worked with him, even just around the edges. She never said so. But she'd ask me

sometimes what I thought he'd have done about a repair, and I'd give her an answer, and she'd nod like it settled something.

EDDIE RAMOS

The Summer of 2021

Ruth opened the porch door six times that morning, closed it six times, listening. The old latch snapped when it shut, and she didn't want it to scare the boy. She said, "He's not used to the noises yet, let him learn the lake without the door banging." So I had put one on that closed soft, and now she was testing it, opening and shutting, opening and shutting, like she could hear something in the hinge I couldn't. I just leaned on the railing and let her do it. When she finished she nodded once and went inside, and that door closed soft as a drawer after that. I never heard the old snap again.

I've looked after the lake house at Pinewater for twenty-four years, and I've seen plenty of summers come and go. But 2021, that was the quiet one. There was a grandson up there, the one from Seattle, twelve or so, staying with Ruth on his own. I'd be there doing odds and ends, and most days I'd hear them before I saw them. Ruth had him out on the dock every morning at seven, checking the cleats. She'd give me a list of jobs she said were his, and I was supposed to inspect them like he was my sub.

He was shy at first. Wouldn't look at me, just stand there while Ruth talked. But by August his hands were always moving. He'd be tightening something, fetching tools, asking what a board was

for. The kid changed that summer. I don't know what was going on before he got there, and I didn't ask.

I saw the porch setup in the mornings. Ruth had put a cot out there with a wool blanket that looked older than I am, and there was a stack of paperbacks on the floor, and a glass of water with a piece of screen over it to keep the bugs out, set right where he could reach it from the cot. She'd thought it through, like she always does. I never heard what he thought about sleeping out there.

Thursdays they'd drive off after lunch and come back late. She never said where. Not my business. I knew better than to ask. But that was a good summer at the lake, a real good one. The place felt used again, in the right way.

But one morning I found a flashlight on the porch railing, still on, drained. I brought it up to the house. I didn't ask what that meant. I figured it meant he was staying up late, watching the water, the way kids do when they're getting comfortable somewhere. Ruth just smiled and said, he's learning. And that was enough for me.

EDDIE RAMOS

Repainting the Canoe

I was on a ladder resealing the boathouse window when I looked out and saw her. It was the end of the summer, the sun was on the water, and there was Ruth in the middle of the lake, alone in that canoe. Not the old red, either. The old red had been David's. This red was brighter, a little too loud. She wasn't paddling and she wasn't fishing. She had stopped the canoe out in the middle and was just sitting there, facing the house. I let the caulk gun ease down against my leg and stayed still on the ladder. She stayed out there maybe twenty minutes. Then she turned the canoe, paddled back in, pulled it up on the rack, and walked inside without looking back at it.

That canoe had sat under the deck for a year after David died. The paint was peeling bad. I'd mentioned to David the year before that it needed work, and I'd been planning to do it myself. But after he passed, Ruth told me not to touch it. The next June she carried it out onto two sawhorses by herself, which I don't recommend at her age, and she bought the wrong paint. Marine enamel, but the wrong red. Too bright. She held the brush like a screwdriver and went at it. I offered to take over. She said, "It only needs to look intentional." So I let her. She was going to do it whether I agreed or not, and I had known her long enough to get out of the way.

I'd walk by and she'd be down there with her sleeves rolled up, humming, painting in these long uneven strokes. Up close it looked terrible. The brush marks ran every which way, and the paint pooled a little at the edges where she had stopped to reload. The smell of the marine enamel hung around the sawhorses. But from the dock, with the sun on it, you'd never know. She wasn't trying to restore David's canoe. She was trying to make it hers, and she had made up her mind about it long before she ever picked up that brush. She knew exactly what she was doing. Not the canoe. The idea of the canoe. That was hers to fix, and nobody was going to talk her out of it.

That's Ruth. She's good at deciding something and then just doing it, no committee.

That summer, toward the end of it, she had somebody help her carry it down, I think one of the kids or a neighbor, and she took it out alone. I only saw the one trip. She paddled straight out to the middle and sat there facing the house. From the ladder I could see how still she was. The bright red sat on the water with

Ruth Kaplan

the sun across it, and for a little while the only thing moving was her hands on the paddle. Then she turned around, paddled back in, pulled the canoe up, and went inside. She didn't look back at it.

I don't know if she ever took it out again after that. I'd see it there every summer, that bright red that wasn't quite the old red, and I'd think, well, she got it back on the water. That counts for something. I never told her I watched that trip. Figured it wasn't mine to mention. But I'm glad I saw it. It told me more about how she was doing than anything she ever said to me.

EDDIE RAMOS

The Crooked Hook

The screw went in crooked. Not a little off, but leaning hard to one side, and Ruth didn't flinch. She looked at the screw, then she looked at me. "It only needs to look intentional," she said.

I've looked after the lake house for twenty-four years, so I've been around for plenty of Ruth's projects. This one started when she was about seventy and decided she wanted to learn to use a cordless drill. I set up a little project for her down at the boathouse, nothing fancy, just putting a hook on the wall. She wanted to do it herself. That was the whole point. She didn't want me standing over her shoulder.

She stood there with the drill in both hands, holding it too tight, like it was going to jump out of her grip and rattle across the floor. Her knuckles were white around the handle. The bit skated off the line the first time, and the second time, leaving a little silver scratch on the wood. I finally said, "Ruth, let the tool do the work." She said, "I don't trust it." And she meant it. The drill wasn't going to get away from her, but she didn't know that yet.

She didn't want me to take the drill out of her hands. So I just stood back and let her have at it. That's what she wanted from the start.

She tried again, pushed too hard, and the screw went in crooked. I didn't reach over to fix it. Ruth would have told me to get out of the way anyway. She looked at that crooked screw, looked at me, and said the line about looking intentional. Then she picked up a coil of rope, hung it on the hook, and stepped back. She stood there looking at it like she'd built the whole boathouse, not just hung a piece of rope on a crooked hook. That was that. The project was finished.

That is who Ruth is. She'll do the thing herself, wrong or right, and then live with it. If it's crooked, she'll hang a rope on it and call it finished. She won't stand around worrying about whether the angle is perfect or whether somebody will notice. She has never minded a crooked line as long as it does its job. I've always respected that. Most people want everything perfect. They'd pull that screw out and do it again. Ruth just wants it to hold. The hook doesn't have to be pretty. It has to hold the rope.

I checked that hook last week. It's still holding. If you see her, tell her the boathouse hook is still holding. That is who Ruth is.