

Pale sunlight reached its fingers under the window shade and into the room, touching the floor, moving across the rug. It lingered on a pile of clothes held by an old blanket chest and reached around stacks of magazines and mail on its way to the bed. When it reached his eyes, Ben rolled over and buried his head in the pillow. But it was too late. His mind was alert and already cataloguing his concerns, reminding him of things he didn't want to think about. Like a repetitive form of torture, it brought up the same painful litany of thoughts that came to him every morning since his wife, June, had died. She was gone. That was number one. As if he needed that reminder. He unconsciously reached his arm across the bed. Cold sheets. He rolled onto his back with a sigh. You'd think after nearly seventy years,

you might have the upper hand over something as familiar as your brain. But apparently, that was not the case. He knew the only way to trick his mind into not dwelling on the things he didn't want to dwell on, or to make it think about nothing in particular, was to get busy.

Ben had always been a morning person, never one to sit idle, so getting busy wasn't normally a problem. Lately, however, it was just a little harder to get out of bed and get at the business of living. His brain, which had definitely turned on him, was again the culprit, reminding him of the many reasons why it made no difference if he got up or not. He threw back the covers, irritated, and sat up. Sliding into work clothes that sat shucked and nearly standing by the bed from the night before, he shuffled into the bathroom and then downstairs to the kitchen for coffee. Stay busy, he thought. Don't let the bastard win! The bastard—he guessed that was just himself after all.

He stood at the window by the sink. The wind had picked up and clouds trailed across the morning sky. Days like this, June might convince him to stay in bed a little longer. She could convince him to do just about anything. But now it was all up to him. There was plenty to do, though. The old house with its property turned out to be a blessing these days with all the upkeep. He could start repairing shutters after breakfast and find chores to do right up until evening. One thing led to another. If it wasn't the house, it was some piece of furniture. If he went into the basement, he'd find himself puttering for hours.

He turned from the window and took in the familiar sight of his kitchen, no longer the hub of warmth and comfort it had once been. He missed being drawn to this room by the aromas of food, the promise of gustatory delights made more enjoyable because they were shared with June. His own half-hearted attempts at cooking had resulted in odors to be aired out rather than savored.

He thought, again, that he should probably consider having someone come in to clean. Housework was not his strong suit. And if he noticed a need for it, then it must be getting pretty bad. He opened the refrigerator's double doors, revealing nearly empty shelves. Except for a couple of mystery dishes in the freezer, most of what neighbors had dropped off after June passed was finally gone—eaten, picked at or thrown out. Was he supposed to give the dishes back? He appreciated the ones that came in throwaway containers: they required nothing of him, which was what he had to give. He'd never been a fan of people in general, and having meaningless chitchat with those he didn't know well was not something he wanted to think about, especially now. People—they were June's department. She would give the dishes back and they'd probably have something in them, too. She couldn't help it. She was a giving, thoughtful soul. With no children of their own, it seemed she was filling that void by caring for practically everyone

else she met. That was not Ben's way. He was glad the dishes were gone, along with the social responsibilities. He could take care of himself. He grabbed a package of frozen hamburger and closed the doors.

Later that day, Ben found himself prying rotten boards from an old picket fence that ran behind the house. The fence was no doubt erected to define a yard at some point, though it had served little purpose since he and June had bought the place. They'd had no need to keep anything in, or out, for that matter, so there was no reason not to let the property run in an unbroken line from the house clear back to the woods. He paused and surveyed the length of the fence, which ran about a hundred feet to his right, took a 90 degree turn toward the front of the property, ran another 50 feet or so and then joined up to the corner of the house at a hinged gate. He didn't know if he liked the fence or not but thought he might prefer a more open look. June had planted wild roses at intervals, but he could move those, too. His

thoughts were broken by a flock of Canada geese and he turned to watch them fly in formation overhead, honking all the while. He smiled, remembering how Barney had always gone wild at the sight of them. You'd have thought he was an old bird dog the way he carried on, barking and running along as if he could catch them. The geese were a sure sign of the cold months ahead, and Ben decided to stick with repairing the fence for now; he had more important things to do before the snow fell than taking down a fence for purely aesthetic reasons.

Thinking of Barney brought to surface another idea that Ben had been contemplating lately, which was that he should have a dog. He was used to a dog's quiet company while he worked—the kind of companionship a dog offered took the edge off of being alone. As he worked, the idea took on the weight of a plan. Dan Berry from Freeland Farm down the road had mentioned just recently that he had a litter due any day. But Ben wasn't looking for a

puppy, necessarily. He knew there were plenty of older dogs needing homes, already housebroken and just waiting for someone to attach themselves to. He felt for those poor, disillusioned creatures, given up for reasons both frivolous and necessary, none of which helped them understand their current predicament. He planned to go to the shelter in Brunswick and find one. He and those dogs had something in common in a way; maybe the partnership could be mutually beneficial—they could help each other find joy again in the simple things life had to offer. Of course, a dog didn't expect much, but Ben had learned to expect less these days, too.

Barney had been with them for thirteen years when they'd had to put him down shortly before June got sick. Then, with everything else going on, adding a new family member just hadn't been a priority. But if there was ever a time to have a dog, Ben thought, this was it. It would be a welcome distraction and a relief to have someone—something—to talk to.

The fence could wait, he decided, stowing the crowbar and stacking the pickets he'd removed into a pile. He would visit the shelter immediately.

As he navigated his pickup along the leaf-strewn road to the shelter, Ben couldn't help smiling, remembering how June used to tease him, saying if he wouldn't try to be nicer to people, he'd be a lonely old man with no one to keep him company but a dog. Well, she might be right. But why not? There were worse ways to spend your days. And there was a lot to be said for a dog—they'd forgive you anything. More than he could say for most of the women he knew. Ben felt immediately contrite just for the thought. They didn't always agree, but there was never a day with June he would have traded.

His thoughts wandered to the day they met; June was fifteen and he was seventeen, visiting a friend at a beach house in Maine, and there was June—in a bikini, no less—he could picture her still. The two were smitten with



each other, and Ben soon learned that she was as beautiful to him inside as out. Like most of his friends, he'd enlisted the next year, but he followed through on his plan to marry June as soon as he had served his time and he'd never looked back. June wasn't perfect; hell, their marriage wasn't perfect, but Ben supposed it had been about as good as marriage gets. He'd heard enough to know that their relationship had been held together by stronger stuff than many. They'd loved and supported each other; what more could a person ask from a partner? But now he was on his own again, after so many years. How did others cope? He wasn't sure, but he felt his decision to get a dog was a step in the right direction. A dog could keep him from getting too wrapped up in his own world, from becoming overly isolated, which he could imagine happening quite easily. A dog would give him someone else to worry about. His spirits lifted just thinking about it.

Ben pulled into the shelter's drive at three o'clock and found its doors closed. Still, he

walked up to the door to satisfy himself. The sign said Wednesdays, 7:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Well, everyone needs a break, I guess, he thought. But why did it have to be today? Disheartened, he walked back to the truck and headed home. He was irritated with himself for not calling first, but who would think they'd have closed early on a Wednesday? Imagining the dog he might find when he returned the next day, he drove without much purpose until he saw the QuickMart. Thinking he'd better get something to go with the burger he'd defrosted, he went in and picked up some buns, chips and a six-pack of beer.

The petite girl at the checkout was very pregnant. Ben immediately decided she was too young to have planned her pregnancy and a glance at her finger told him she was most likely not married. What were girls thinking to have their young lives derailed by pregnancy these days when it should be so easy to avoid? Also he hated to see pregnant women, especially near-term pregnant women,

working. It didn't seem right somehow. Suddenly she looked up and smiled so sweetly at him he felt disconcerted.

"Did you find everything you needed today?" she asked.

Did he know this girl? Ben laughed a little. "Didn't need much," he answered, "but yes."

She rewarded him with another dazzling smile and handed him his receipt and bag. "Have a great day!"

"You too," Ben replied. She certainly didn't seem to be upset with her condition. He wasn't sure what it was he expected, exactly. Was she supposed to look pitiful or constantly on the verge of tears? He supposed not, but it still surprised him to see her so happy, toiling away behind the register at Jardine's QuickMart.

Back on the road, he felt unsettled by the encounter. He couldn't shake the feeling that the girl had wanted to say something more. She'd held his gaze a beat too long as she handed him his receipt; long enough so that

he'd raised his eyebrows as if to ask, "Yes?" But she suddenly dropped her eyes and moved on to the next in line. Had they met? Was he supposed to remember her? She seemed familiar somehow, as if they had met outside of Jardine's, but he couldn't imagine where that might have been. He just couldn't put it together. That's the way it was sometimes when you saw someone in a different context. This was an example of when he would have turned to June, who would know exactly who the girl was and where they'd met, and who would fill him in with just a slightly admonishing tone. He shook his head as if to clear it and pulled into his long dirt drive. As he parked behind June's vehicle, he was reminded again of how many things he had yet to take care of and a wave of fatigue washed over him. He pulled off his cap and raked his finger through his close-cropped hair, took a deep breath, then resettled the hat on his head, staring through the windshield at June's Subaru, proof that ignoring things certainly

didn't make them go away. Between the closed shelter, the pregnant girl and his deceased wife's car, his buoyant mood of the afternoon had completely disappeared. Grabbing the grocery bag, he climbed from the truck and headed for his door, feeling defeated.