

ONE

Angel & Karen

"I'm just saying, someone ought to go out there and check on her. It's not right for a woman to be on her own in the woods like that. Anything could happen!"

"Like what, Angel?"

"Like some crazy homeless man could come by, or kids looking for trouble—who knows? Aren't you even the slightest bit worried about her?"

Karen looked at her middle daughter with an expression that let her know there was such a thing as a dumb question. "Of course I am. I worry about all of my children every single day and have since you were born. But I'm not any more worried about her now than I was before she went out there. She needs space, honey, and I think we should give it to her. She's a smart, resourceful girl and she'll be fine."

"What is she even doing out there?" Angel asked. "Weaving baskets out of grass? Making wreaths?"

"Angel, for heaven's sake," Karen admonished. "She told you what she was doing. She thought she might start a writing project. When's the last time your sister made a basket or a wreath?"

"Right. She's writing. And on that typewriter! I don't know, Mom. She's always been so normal, you know? This is so...not Nora. How can I rely on her if she's going to be so—" Angel searched for a word, "unpredictable?"

"What's wrong with being unpredictable? And this really has nothing to do with you, you know."

"I know," Angel said, slumping in her chair and settling her chin in her hand. "But I don't like her being gone like this. And it isn't like her, you have to admit."

"She just wants a break, Angel. She wants to do something different and be someplace where she can sort herself out. She'll come home when she's ready. In the meantime, it's kind of nice having someone up there looking over the place. It could use a little love."

Momentarily out of steam, Angel looked up at the ceiling and noticed fine lines across the plaster. Speaking of a little love, she thought. How long had those cracks been there? Would the ceiling need painting or replastering? How long before that happened? The thought of the amount of work and money required to keep up a house, especially an old house like this one, momentarily overwhelmed her. How did her parents find the time and energy, let alone the money, to do it? It made her think about how long the house had been here, how long her parents had been in the house and how many conversations she'd had in this kitchen with her mother. Some of them had gone better than others.

She watched her mother set a ball of dough on the pastry cloth and roll it flat with her pin using smooth,

practiced motions. She deftly folded the thin, flattened crust in half, picked it up, slid it in to the waiting pie plate, unfolded it and centered it there. A fragrant bowl of blueberries covered in sugar, a couple tablespoons of flour, cinnamon and a touch of lemon was tipped into the crust, distributed, then dotted with butter. Her mother gathered the rest of the dough into a ball, rolled that flat and quickly covered the filling. She trimmed the edges to even the dough, rolled the entire edge under and used her knuckles to form a tight seal that would contain the hot juices as the pie baked. Three diagonal slices in the top to let out steam, a patting of milk and a sifting of sugar and the pie was ready for the oven. The whole process took about five minutes and it never failed to fascinate Angel. She could make a pie, but it took her hours. How did her mother make it look so easy?

“How many pies do you think you’ve made in your life?” she asked.

Her mother laughed. “I supposed we could figure it out if we really wanted to know.”

“Do you think you’ve made one every single week since you got married?” Angel persisted.

“I guess it’s possible, though there have certainly been weeks where I have not, and some weeks where I’ve made several.”

“Let’s say you have made one a week. And we won’t even count the ones you made before you got married.” Angel pulled up the calculator on her phone and punched in the numbers. “Fifty-two pies a year for twenty-seven years makes one thousand, four hundred and four. Well, that’s a lot, but not as impressive as I thought it would be.”

“Not impressive, huh? I thought the total would be closer to a million,” Karen joked as she slid the pie into the oven, the heat momentarily fogging her glasses.

She straightened, put her glasses on her head and studied her second daughter, her middle child, who had become absorbed in a conversation or posting on her phone. Angel had never been able to relax if one of her siblings seemed out of place. She liked order, and in this case, that meant Nora at home with her husband, Rob, not alone in the woods in the family’s rundown cabin, which none of them had visited for years. It did disturb Karen to think that Nora could be happier there than at home right now. Karen knew Nora hadn’t told her everything, but she understood the girl’s need for space. What a luxury it would have been, Karen thought, to have had a place to go over the years, where a person could hear themselves think and remember who they were. It was not something she had ever thought to do, but she could feel the exquisite pleasure of that type of solitude, especially when you knew there was an end to it and people who loved you waiting for your return. Now that the kids were grown, she got plenty of solitude but she didn’t necessarily feel the need for it anymore—another of life’s little ironies. In Nora’s case, who was waiting for her? Karen and Nora’s father, Jesse, were, of course, and Angel. And Rob was at home but was he waiting for Nora’s return with open arms? Apparently not, and Karen didn’t really know why. Her children’s unhappiness, at any age, traveled with Karen like a little black cloud, so that no matter what was happening in her own life, the shadow remained and tinted everything a slightly grayer hue.

Angel felt her mother's gaze and looked up. "What?"

"I know you're worried about Nora. And yes, I am, too," Karen admitted. "But not enough to intrude on her wishes right now."

"We—"

"Hold on, now," Karen said, holding up a floury palm. "I will go with you, or let you go or go myself to check on her, but not right now. We must respect her privacy. I'd do the same for you."

"She doesn't even have her phone!"

"And that's her choice, too. She needed to disconnect. I know it's hard for you to imagine, but we used to live that way all the time."

"I know, Mom," Angel sighed. "But we don't live that way anymore. She could at least have an hour a day for check-ins or something. What about us?"

"Maybe you should try disconnecting a little bit," Karen said, shaking the flour off her pastry cloth into the sink and ignoring the question.

"Right," said Angel. "That would be exactly when Nora called me, too, and needed something. Besides, if I disconnect, I'll just have to spend more time reconnecting once I plug back in. This way, I keep it all at a manageable pace."

Karen smiled. Her own cell phone was upstairs in her bedroom and she hadn't checked it for the last hour or so. It was a social sin these days, she knew, to let it go so long, but she refused to be tied to it. If a land line rang in a house and no one was there, would anyone answer? No. Cell phones were certainly convenient, but when they started controlling your time rather than helping you save it, that was a problem.

"Who's the pie for?" Angel asked, standing and stretching her long body. Karen noted the flat stomach under the girl's rising T-shirt and the belly-button ring that adorned her perfect "inny." Angel was still so young in so many ways, but she was out in the world, making her way. Karen had no idea what this child's romantic life entailed these days; she'd been in between boyfriends for a few months. Talk about worry, Karen thought; that was something to worry about. Nora alone in a cabin or Angel—her sometimes naïve, always friendly and forgiving Angel—out on her own. She worried about them both in equal measure. Boone, their younger brother, gave Karen different, and perhaps even more pressing, reasons to worry.

"The Perry's are coming for dinner," Karen answered. "You're welcome to stay," she added, meaning it, but knowing both that the Perry's weren't Angel's favorite people and that Angel would have other plans.

“Thanks Mom,” she said, hugging Karen tight. “It smells good already but Denise and I are going to get something to eat tonight. And I’ve got laundry. Talk to you soon.”

“Bye honey. Be safe.” Karen returned the embrace, then stepped back and followed her daughter to the door. She put her hand out reflexively to keep the screen frame from slamming.

“I’m going to hold you to that checking on Nora thing,” Angel called from the front walk.

Karen waved, knowing Angel would, and that it wouldn’t be long before they were having this conversation again.

Nora

I’m glad I let Dad come out and hook up the gas for the stove and refrigerator, and so on. I had the big idea that I would do everything on my own, but I don’t want to be stupid about it. Besides, I’m not sure Mom was even going to let it happen unless he came with me. He even put the pump hose in the lake, which is not something I was looking forward to doing at all. Without the pump hooked up, I would have no practical way to get water for cooking or baths.

Speaking of baths, I washed my hair in water pumped straight from the lake this morning. It was so cold it gave me brain freeze from the outside—as opposed to brain freeze from the inside, like when you eat ice cream too fast. I was literally shaking, but had to stay there with my head in the big porcelain sink, hair going all down the drain, pumping the old water pump’s red handle up and down, up and down and using my free hand to try to get all the soap and conditioner out. It took my breath away! I was so relieved to wrap my head in a dry towel when I was done. I suppose that’s how it’s going to go until the river warms up a bit. Since it’s only May, that could take a couple of months.

It’s so cool being out here. Cool; I suppose if I want to be a writer, I should come up with better words than “cool.” But it is cool—and strange. Everything is so familiar and (almost) just as we left it last time we were here, but everything is different, too. I guess it’s because I’m older, but also because I’m alone.

This place was always where we came together as a family. We all helped Dad build it; that is, as much as we could, being little kids and all. We helped carry the boards and shingles down the winding path from the road. That’s different now, too. The road comes all the way to the cabin. It’s an overgrown road, with a dirt path for each tire and grass in between, but it’s a road. And it’s a lot easier than having to carry everything down from the main road.

We used to snowshoe and toboggan everything in during the winter months. And during summer, the horseflies, deerflies and, worst of all, moose flies, would dive at our heads and pester us the whole way. If our hands were full, which they usually were, carrying food, clothes, books, or whatever else we wanted to bring for the time we were here, we couldn’t do much about it but run, shake our heads or drop everything and slap! I used to hate that part of the trip. But I can feel it like it was yesterday: the heat of the sun in my hair, the smell of the hot, muddy road that sucked at my boots if I chose the wrong path; the buzz of the flies, the songs of the birds overhead in the trees and the odor the tamarack trees

gave off—like pine with a touch of cat pee. I'm not sure anyone else agrees with me on that last bit, but it's how I know I'm near a tamarack—or hackmatack, which we also called them. I think hackmatack is the name the local native Americans gave that tree, but I'd have to look it up to be sure.

Maybe I'm digressing, but can I digress if don't really have a point? I want to record my impressions of this experience because it might help people like my sister, Angel, who thinks I've lost my mind, understand why I'm out here. To be honest, I'm hoping it will help me understand. I suppose that would be a good segue into why I'm out here in the first place, but I don't want to think about that right now.

In short, I guess I want to see how I feel living away from my husband, Rob. But I've thrown in so many other variables that it's probably not a good experiment at all. Still, it was the only thing I could think of, short of getting divorced, to give myself some space. Rob thinks this idea, like all my other ideas, is stupid, but he didn't have a better one, either, so that's that. It'll be interesting to see if he really notices the difference with me gone. It doesn't sound good, and it's not. I'll try to explain more, but like I said, I don't have the energy for it right now. I've been out here for only two days so far, so I've got time. Besides, I'm supposed to be writing. That's my other reason for being here. I want to see if I can write something worth reading. Today was supposed to be all about writing, but so far, all my writing has been in this—what—diary? Writing, by the way, is another one of my stupid ideas, according to Rob. He seems to think that if I wanted to be a writer, or was going to be one, I'd be one already. Thanks for your support, Rob! Sigh...

Okay. That's clearly the end of this entry. I'm going to try my hand at the "real" writing. Which, since I am doing this all on my old typewriter, could prove to be interesting—another test with too many variables! I'm obviously not cut out to be a scientist.

David

He woke feeling disoriented and stiff. When he lifted his head, pine needles stuck to his face. He pried them off and they left temporary impressions across his cheekbone and forehead. The sky was gray, and as he lay there in his sleeping bag, the woods around him began to take form. Birds called loudly to one another, particularly a group of ravens or crows—a murder? How many crows did it take to make a murder? He didn't know. But you needed just one to make a hell of a racket. With all their cawing, cackling, chortling and clucking—they seemed, more than other birds David was familiar with, to be having actual conversations. The crows had probably woken him, though he rarely slept past sunrise these days. His old man would be proud—of that one thing, at least. The rest of the situation, well, it was probably just as well he would never know.

His mother was already beside herself. He could hear her as if she were standing right there in the gray dawn. "What's going on? Where are you? Your lawn hasn't been mowed for weeks—your neighbors will start to complain! What's the matter with you, walking away from a perfectly good job? Why are you doing this to me? I wish your father were here; he'd talk some sense into you! But no, he's gone off and left me here to deal with it on my own."

Talk, beat—whatever. David had been far past the age when his father could scare him for some time

now, even if he were alive. Still, he could make things pretty damn miserable for a person if he wanted to. And David was sure his father would want to now. But would David even be here if his father hadn't "died"? Offered himself, more like. Heard his death sentence—cancer—and took matters into his own hands. He left a note for David's mother: "Sorry, but I'm not going to spend my days in a hospital with everyone mooning around feeling bad for me. I'm going while the getting is good. Better for all of us, trust me. You were a good wife. Don't come to the barn. Send David."

David thought his father had forgotten something, such as, "Tell David I love him." He chuckled to himself there in the gray woods just thinking about it. Even if his dad had loved him, which David supposed he had, he would never have said so. Couldn't even tell his wife, for crying out loud. But "Send David?" That was a nice touch.

So, David had gone to the barn. What was his mother thinking, letting him go? She must have hoped David would find something different—that the old man wasn't really gone. Or maybe she was just so used to doing what she was told that she didn't think it through. Either way, there was David, fourteen years old, walking toward the barn with a cocktail of emotions clouding his head and knotting his bowels. Leaves crunched underfoot and the crisp air permeated his flannel shirt, raising goose bumps on David's torso. He'd opened the door slowly; fear, anger, uncertainty and hope coursing through his veins. He remembered thinking he might throw up.

Life changes in a second, thought David, looking up through branches as they emerged in the dawning light, hugging his down bag around his shoulders. One second, you're a kid; the next, you open a door. A rectangle of dusty light slanted through an upper window, falling across David's father's legs, which dangled several feet from the floor. David closed his eyes in the still and silent barn, opened them again to the same scene. He found a saw, righted and climbed the ladder his father must have used and hacked roughly through the thick, hairy rope his old man had hung from the rafters. The body jerked as the saw worked its way through the fibers and sweat broke out across David's face and back as he focused on the effort.

The sound of the body hitting the floor was indelibly printed on David's mind. He probably could have done it better, could have gotten help, or maybe he should have left the body hanging for the authorities. He climbed back down the ladder and stared at what remained of his father. He felt strangely unaffected. He remembered thinking he should be crying or at least sad, but he wasn't sure he felt sad at all. He supposed now that he had been in shock. Later, he grieved, but not without anger. Eventually, he tried to straighten the body out and covered his father's face with his shirt. There wasn't much he could do about the smell, but he supposed his old man was beyond caring.

They sent the medical examiner over in case there was foul play, and he determined the incident a suicide to no one's surprise. His mother was strangely quiet. She showed them the note, which clearly embarrassed her. David figured she was putting up a brave front and would break down later. He was right. David had never seen her so angry! And hurt, of course. She wanted to haul her husband "that bastard" back from the dead and slap him in the head for making a decision of that magnitude without consulting her first. She just couldn't believe it had happened—that he'd actually had the nerve to end his life on his own. Well, of course the old man couldn't have consulted her, David thought. She'd never

have gone for it. And David wasn't sure he disagreed with the decision, but the note sure could have used some work.

He did feel for his mother, though. She'd pretty much built her life around the man and now he was gone. David wondered what she'd do. Maybe, he thought, she would surprise him. Like that time when the family had gone to Cracker Barrel for dinner—a rare enough occasion. David's father didn't understand why anyone would ever go out to eat when they could get a perfectly good meal at home. It never occurred to him to think about how it got to the table, or more precisely, to consider it something his mother might like a break from. Once they were seated at the restaurant, his dad had started in on David about something. He tried to remember what it had been. Was it his paper route? He wasn't being aggressive enough? Getting new customers? Who knew? Who cared? You could just feel it starting. His father got that look in his eye. Maybe he saw some other kid that he thought had it all together, some other kid he thought David should be more like. Then he'd start saying things to which he expected, and wanted, no response; rhetorical, David supposed, but they weren't questions. They were comments; his father talked and his wife and son were meant to listen. And the comments just kept on coming, mean and indefensible. There was nothing David could say. David's mother tried to talk around it and get the man off the subject. She talked about the menu and asked David about his day. She smiled kindly and hopelessly at her son and he remembered how her lipstick had stuck to one of her front teeth and he had nearly cried for the unfairness of it: that she couldn't just go out and relax like other women, that going to dinner at Cracker Barrel was such a big deal she put on a dress and lipstick in the first place, that whenever his mother had a chance to be happy, his father found a way to spoil it.

But this time, rather than suffer through it, listening to the remarks from his father escalate until he found a reason to reach over and cuff David's ear, his mother said, quietly, "That's enough."

"Did you say something?" his father asked, eyebrows raised.

"I said, that's enough," his mother replied. "And if you're going to continue picking on David, we are leaving. Right now."

"Picking on David!? Is that what I'm doing?" his dad sneered, a dangerous edge to his voice. A few of the diners at nearby tables turned to look. David felt the red creeping up his neck. "Just leave it mom," he thought. "Just let him go." Anything was better than a scene!

Then, suddenly, miraculously, his father dropped it. Just like that. Later that night, David heard raised voices coming from their room. He assumed his mother was getting an earful of what a good wife should do to support her husband. No doubt she would pay for speaking up in David's defense. But he was just guessing. It could have been anything.

Wow, David thought, the things that come to mind when you've got nothing but time. And speaking of time, what time was it? He pulled his arm out of the sleeping bag and looked at his watch: 6:05 a.m. Jesus. And Joseph. And Mary. What was he going to do today? The hours spilled out in front of him like a well-laid path to nowhere. He was compelled to fill them. Not that it would be that difficult. Now that he had to forage for food (his stomach growled agreeably with the thought of it) it took him most of the

day just to feed himself. And there were also the homely chores of brushing his teeth, getting reasonably clean and “doing his business,” which took on a whole new meaning out here in the woods. And he had to do all that while keeping his cover. Why was he keeping cover? Was he breaking the law? He wasn’t even sure. These woods had to be owned by someone, though, and no doubt, they wouldn’t want anyone freeloading in them; using their ground, eating their berries, making fires. David hadn’t actually done any research to find out who owned the land. A paper company most likely.

Which made him think of his father again, because the man had worked at the Rumford mill nearly his entire life. There was a guy who would never quit his job; never quit anything, you’d have thought—until that last final act, of course. And now that David thought more about it, maybe his dad wouldn’t have disagreed with what his son had done. At least David took a stand—stood up for what he believed in. Although his actions had affected only him, as far as he knew. Maybe a man who would take his own life while he could rather than suffer through cancer’s plan would see why David couldn’t work at his job anymore. Maybe he would have supported David’s decision to quit and to tell his superiors what he thought of their so-called science and bureaucracy. Maybe. But probably not, David concluded; probably not.

Suddenly irritated, he climbed from his bag and stretched. It was a cool morning; probably not quite forty degrees, David guessed. He huffed into the air to see his breath and shivered as he slipped into his cold jeans, flannel shirt and down vest, sniffing each item’s fabric as he pulled it on. He probably had a couple more days before he absolutely had to go into town to hit a laundromat. His river washings were passable, but not for the long haul. Once in a while, you needed some good strong chemicals to get the kind of clean people were used to these days. Possibly it was his methods that needed work, but either way, he did make periodic treks into town. It was risky, but necessary. He should probably move again, too, so as not to spend too long in any one spot. He’d been in this one for three nights; his maximum.

He needed a plan, he knew, that would help him move forward. It was not his intention to live out his days in these woods. Sometimes he couldn’t believe he was even in the woods, living this way. He wondered, occasionally, if he might be somewhat crazy or unbalanced. But his thoughts seemed clear to him. They would, he supposed. What crazy person thought they were crazy? Still, what sane, straight-thinking person ended up like this? His mother had a point, but he wasn’t about to agree with her. And for now, here he was, and he needed something to eat. More specifically, he needed protein.

David stuffed his bag into its sack, attached it to his pack and shouldered the whole bundle. He looked around and saw the same pine-and-leaf covered forest floor, the same mix of hardwoods and evergreens, the same rolling hills, the same faint blue sky dawning in every direction. Patches of snow still clung to a few shaded areas. He cinched his pack up higher on his back and walked.