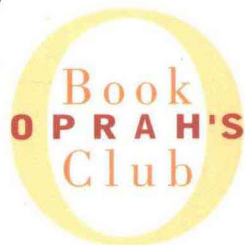


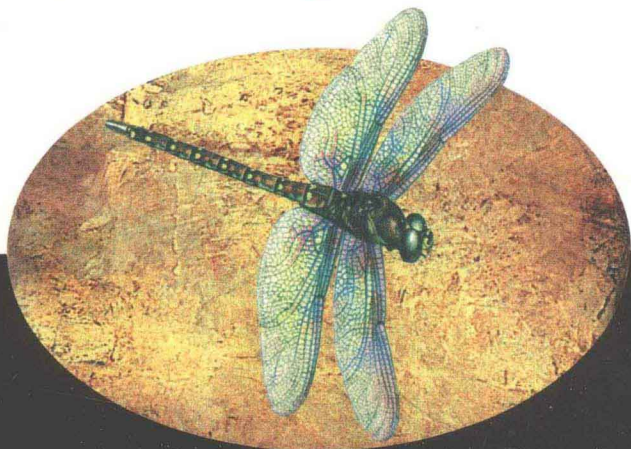
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Hoffman

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HERE  
*on*  
EARTH



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### PRINTING HISTORY

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TO E.B.

For countless kindnesses  
and twenty years of generosity and support  
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Patti Aalgaard  
1285 Estate Dr.  
Los Altos, CA 94024



# PART ONE





## O N E

T  
ONIGHT, THE HAY IN THE FIELDS IS already brittle with frost, especially to the west of Fox Hill, where the pastures shine like stars. In October, darkness begins to settle by four-thirty and although the leaves have turned scarlet and gold, in the dark everything is a shadow of itself, gray with a purple edge. At this time of year, these woods are best avoided, or so the local boys say. Even the bravest among them wouldn't dare stray from the High Road after soccer practice at Firemen's Field, and those who are old enough to stand beside the murky waters of Olive Tree Lake and pry kisses from their girlfriends still walk home quickly. If the truth be told, some of them

run. A person could get lost up here. After enough wrong turns he might find himself in the Marshes, and once he was there, a man could wander forever among the minnows and the reeds, his soul struggling to find its way long after his bones had been discovered and buried on the crest of the hill, where wild blueberries grow.

People from out of town might be tempted to laugh at boys who believed in such things; they might go so far as to call them fools. And yet there are grown men who have lived in Jenkintown all their lives, and are afraid of very little in this world, who will not cross the hill after dark. Even the fire fighters down at the station on Main Street, courageous volunteers who have twice been commended for heroism by the governor himself, are always relieved to discover that the fire bells are tolling for flames on Richdale or Seventh Street—any location that's not the hill is one worth getting to fast.

The town founder himself, Aaron Jenkins, a seventeen-year-old boy from Warwick, England, was the first to realize that some localities are accompanied by bad luck. Jenkins built his house in the Marshes in the year 1663. One October night, when the tide froze solid and refused to go back to sea, he received a message in his dreams that he must flee immediately or be trapped in the ice himself. He left what little he owned and ran over the hill, even though there was a terrible storm, with thunder just above his head and hailstones the size of apples. In his journal, exhibited in the reading room at the library, Aaron Jenkins vows that a thousand foxes followed on his heels. All the same, he didn't stop until he reached what is now the town square, where he built a new home, a neat, one-roomed house that is currently a visitors' center where tourists from New York and Boston can pick up maps.

Those foxes who chased after Aaron Jenkins are all but gone now. Still, some of the older residents in the village can recall the days when there were foxes in every inch of the woods. You'd see them slipping into the henhouses, or searching for catfish out by Olive Tree Lake. Some people insist that every time a dog was

abandoned, the foxes would befriend the stray, and a breed of odd reddish dogs with coarse coats came from these unions. Indeed, such dogs were once plentiful in these parts, back when farms lined Route 22 and so many orchards circled the village that on some crisp October afternoons the whole world smelled like pie.

Twenty-five years ago, there were still hundreds of foxes in the woods. They would gather and raise their voices every evening at twilight, at such a regular hour people in the village could set their watches by the sound. Then one dreadful season the hunting ban was lifted, and people went crazy; they'd shoot at anything that moved. Most folks still regret what went on; they truly do. For one thing, the rabbits in these parts are now so fearless you're likely to see them sitting on the steps to the library, right in the middle of the day. You'll catch them in your garden, helping themselves to your finest lettuce and beans. You'll spy them in the parking lot behind the hardware store, comfortable as can be on a hot afternoon, resting in the shadow left by your car. They're pests, there's no doubt about that, and even the most gracious ladies on the library committee find themselves setting out poison every now and then.

There are so many rabbits along the back road to Fox Hill that even cautious drivers risk running over one. This, of course, is simply one more reason to avoid the hill. March Murray, who was raised here, agrees that it's best to stay away, and she has done exactly that for nineteen years. All this time she has lived in California, where the light is so lemon-colored and clear it is almost possible to forget there are other places in the world; these woods for instance, where one could easily mistake day for night on an October afternoon, where the rain falls in such drenching sheets no birds can take flight. It is exactly such a day, when the sky is the color of stone and the rain is so cold it stings the skin, that March returns home, and although coming back was not in her plans, she is definitely here of her own free will.

The simple act of returning, however, doesn't mean she's a

local girl right off, that she would, for instance, still know every shopowner in town by name as she once did. In the time she's been away, March has certainly forgotten what rain can do to an unpaved road. She used to walk this way every day, but the ditches are much deeper than she remembers, and as they drive over branches tossed down by the storm, there is an awful sound, like the crunching of bones or a heart breaking. The rental car has begun to lurch; it strains all the way uphill and sputters each time they have to traverse a deep puddle.

"We're going to get stuck," March's daughter, Gwen, announces. Always the voice of doom.

"No, we won't," March insists.

Perhaps if March hadn't been so intent on proving her point, they wouldn't have. But she steps down hard on the gas, in a hurry as usual, and as soon as she does, the car shoots forward into the deepest ditch of all, where it sinks, then stalls out.

Gwen lets out a groan. They are hubcap-deep in muddy water and two miles from anywhere. "I can't believe you did that," she says to her mother.

Gwen is fifteen and has recently chopped off most of her hair and dyed it black. She's pretty anyway, in spite of all her sabotage. Her voice has a froggy quality from the packs of cigarettes she secretly smokes, a tone she puts to good use when complaining. "Now we'll never get out of here."

March can feel her nerves frayed down to dust. They've been traveling since dawn, from San Francisco to Logan, then up from Boston in this rental car. Their last stop, to see to the arrangements at the funeral parlor, has just about done her in. When March gets a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror, she frowns. Worse than usual. She has always had very little appreciation for what others might consider her best features—her generous mouth, her dark eyes, her thick hair, which she has colored for years to hide the white streaks which appeared when she was little more than a girl.

All March sees when she gazes at her reflection is that she's pale and drawn and nineteen years older than she was when she left.

"We'll get out of here," she tells her daughter. "Have no fear." But when she turns the key the engine grunts, then dies.

"I told you," Gwen mutters under her breath.

Without the windshield wipers switched on, it's impossible to see anything. The rain sounds like music from a distant planet. March leans her head back against the car seat and closes her eyes. She doesn't have to see to know that directly to her left are the fields of Guardian Farm and the stone walls where she used to balance, arms out, ready for anything. She truly believed that she carried her own fate in the palm of her hand, as if destiny was nothing more than a green marble or a robin's egg, a trinket any silly girl could scoop up and keep. She believed that all you wanted, you would eventually receive, and that fate was a force which worked with, not against you.

March tries the engine again. "Come on, baby," she says. This road is not a place where she wants to be stuck. She knows the nearest neighbor too well, and his is a door she doesn't plan to knock upon. She pumps the gas and gives it her all and there it is at last: the ignition catches.

Gwen throws her arms around her mother's neck, and for now they both forget all the fighting they've been doing, and the reasons why March insisted on dragging Gwen along instead of leaving her at home with Richard. So a mother doesn't trust a daughter? Is that a federal offense? Exhibit A: birth control pills at the bottom of Gwen's backpack wedged between the Kleenex and a Snickers candy bar. Exhibit B: pot and rolling papers in her night table drawer. And C of course, the most definitive evidence of all: the dreamy look on any fifteen-year-old girl's face. C for cause and effect. C for ceaseless trouble, and for cry all night, and for cool as ice to your mother no matter what or when. How could Gwen guess that March knows fifteen inside out; that she knows, for in-



stance, whatever feels most urgent and unavoidable to you at that age can follow you forever, if you turn and run.

“The sooner we get out of here, the better,” Gwen informs her mother. She’s dying for a cigarette, but she’ll simply have to control herself. Not exactly what she’s best at.

March steps on the gas, but the wheels spin them deeper and deeper into the mud. There’s no longer any hope of going forward; in fact, they won’t be going anywhere at all without the help of a tow truck.

“Damn it,” March says.

Gwen doesn’t like the way her mother sounds. She doesn’t like the whole situation. It’s easy to see why tourists don’t usually come here, and why the maps in the visitors’ center are yellow with age. In these woods, autumn brings out ghosts. You may not see them or hear them, but they’re with you all the same. You’ll know they’re present when your heart begins to beat too fast. You’ll know when you look over your shoulder and the fact that there’s no one directly behind you doesn’t convince you that someone’s not there.

Gwen reaches over and locks her door. There aren’t even any streetlights out here, not for miles. If you didn’t know where you were going, you’d be lost. But, of course, Gwen’s mother knows the way. She grew up here. She must know.

“Now what do we do?” Gwen asks.

March takes the keys from the ignition. “Now,” she tells her daughter, “we walk.”

“Through the woods?” Gwen’s froggy voice cracks in two.

Paying her daughter no mind, March gets out of the car and finds herself shin-deep in water. Sloshing through the puddle, she goes around to the trunk for her suitcase and Gwen’s backpack. She’d forgotten how cold and sweet the air is in October. She’d forgotten how disturbing real darkness can be. It’s impossible to see more than a foot in front of your own face and the rain is the kind that smacks at you, as if you’d been a bad girl and hadn’t yet been punished enough.