

Water Under Paper

a novella

Annie Moulson

I

High Water

The spring came up out of the hill the way it always had, at the foot of the ledge where the ferns started, and Cécile stood over it with the jug already tilted to the flow and counted under her breath, though she had not needed to count in fifty years. She counted because the girl was beside her and the girl liked the numbers, and because her son had liked the numbers too, once, at this same lip, before he had stopped coming up the hill. That was a thing she did not say at the water. She had found there were more and more things she did not say at the water, and that the water did not seem to mind carrying them, and she brought them up here now the way another woman might carry them to a church.

"Twenty-six," the girl said. "It filled at twenty-six."

"It filled at about that."

"It was twenty-six. I counted with you."

"Then it was twenty-six," Cécile said, because the girl was right, the girl was nearly always right about the count, having a child's clean ear for it. "In August you'll count past fifty and think the spring has quit on you. It won't have. That's only it showing you the bottom of what it does. You want to know a water, you learn the top of it and the bottom both, and you don't get scared at the bottom."

"Papa says it has to be tested."

Cécile brought the jug up off the flow and set it on the flat stone and did not answer at once. The water ran on off the ledge into the sound it made, which was the only sound up here besides the two of them, and she let it have the moment.

"Did he," she said.

"He says you can't just drink water. He says you have to know what's in it."

"We know what's in it. Water's in it." She said it lightly, to make the girl laugh, and the girl did laugh, but Cécile heard the thing under her own voice and did not care for it, the thin wire of it, and she smoothed it out before she went on. "Your papa has a job that's about knowing things a certain way. It's a good job and it's an honest one. There's more than one way to know a thing, is all. Fill the small one for me. Count."

The girl filled the small jug and counted and it came to twenty-four this time, the water higher yet from a rain in the night, and she said twenty-four and Cécile said then it was twenty-four, and for a while they only worked, the two of them, the old woman and the child, dipping and filling and setting the vessels in a row on the stone, and it was good, and Cécile let herself have that too, because she had learned you took the good hours when the water gave them and did not spend them worrying about the ones that hadn't come yet.

When the jugs were full the girl did what she always did, which was to cup both hands under the ledge and drink, noisily, and come up with her chin streaming and pronounce on it the way the men pronounced on the coffee down at the store, too cold, no body to it, wouldn't serve it to a dog. Cécile told her it had been good enough for better people than her for a hundred

years. The girl said she was only saying, and drank again, grinning into her hands. It was a joke they had worn smooth between them over a good many mornings, and it was not funny, and they laughed at it anyway, the way you laugh at the worn things with the people you keep, and the laugh went out over the water and the water took it the same as it took everything, without seeming to keep any of it, and came up cold.

The path to the spring was hers and her mother's before her and worn further back than she troubled to reckon, a single line coming down off the shoulder of the hill through the fern and the wet moss to the lip of the seep, and it stayed worn because it was walked and it was walked because the water was there. Nobody had ever built anything at the spring. There was the flat stone, which was only a stone that happened to be flat and near. There was the mended lip of the ledge. There was the fern, and that was the whole of it, and she had always thought it was the better for wanting nothing, this water that asked for no house and no cover and no man to tend it, that had outlasted every hand that ever dipped from it and would outlast hers. You left a water alone. You went to it. You did not make it come to you, and you did not, she thought and did not say, put it in a bottle and send it away in a truck to be told by strangers whether it was fit to do what it had done without fail since before the strangers' grandfathers were born.

The girl had gone down on her heels at the edge of the seep, where the sand turned over on itself in a slow boil, one center to it and then, if you watched longer, a second a little off to the side, fainter, so that you could never quite say whether the spring was one spring or two come up close together into the same run. Cécile had looked into that all her life and never settled it. The

girl would look into it too, this year and the next, and not settle it either, and that was one of the things the water gave a person, a thing you could look at your whole life and never use up. She reached down without seeming to and took the girl's collar and drew her back off the wet give of the bank, gently, so the girl would carry the caution in her body and not in a warning.

"There's two today," the girl said.

"Some days there's two. Tomorrow you'll come and there'll be one, and you'll be just as sure of the one."

"Papa's coming up today," the girl said. "He's bringing the kit."

So that was it, then. That was why the girl had the testing in her mouth. Cécile straightened and looked down the hill, though there was nothing to see from here but the tops of the trees going down toward the road, and she felt the day change under her, the way you feel a cloud come across the sun before you have looked up to find it.

"Is he," she said.

Perras had told himself, driving up, that he was not going to make anything of it.

He came down the meadow road first, which was out of his way, because he wanted to see the water high, a thing he had done in April every year of his life the way another man goes to a ball-game, and because he was, if he was honest, putting off the hill a little longer. He came around the last bend and there it was, and it stopped him: not the water, the flagging. Fluorescent orange along the low ground, knotted to fresh stakes driven into the flood-wet sedge where the two channels shouldered together,

a line of them going up the meadow, each with its numbers in carpenter's pencil not yet run by any rain, each with its tail of orange telling you where to look for the next.

He got out and stood with the water loud in front of him and did not touch the stakes. He knew what they were as anyone raised in the valley knew, which was well enough to feel the weather of them without reading the figures. Somebody had walked this ground with a transit and set it down in numbers. Somebody meant to know the low meadow as it had not been known before, and a man did not spend money learning a piece of wet ground in stations and bearings for the love of it. There was a word going around the store, and the word was development, and half of what wore that word came to nothing, and he had watched the other half not come to nothing. He had heard, when he was a boy, the old men talk about the low water down the far end of the valley, the piece they had piped and filled and run a road across, and how it was supposed to be that you did not lose a water like that, that it only went under and ran the same where you could not see it. He had believed that when he was a boy. He was not a boy.

And the stakes in the meadow were not the only paper on the ground that spring. There was a man named Bushey going over the hill above the spring with a forester's tapes, cruising the standing timber for whoever meant to buy the parcel or sell it, and Bushey did not walk a woodlot counting board feet for his health any more than a man ran a survey line for the love of it. Perras knew him a little. Bushey had marked his father's firewood lot the better part of thirty years back and been square about every stick of it, and that was the trouble of it, because a stranger measuring the trees over the ground the spring rose out of you could

put out of your mind, and a square man you could not. If it came to it, Perras thought, Bushey was a man you could call and get a straight answer from, and he kept that without deciding to use it, the way you keep a number against a day you hope will not come.

He thought about the spring the whole way up the hill after that, and he thought about the girl, and under both, where he did not look at it straight, he thought about the girl's mother, who had gone from being a person who was tired to a person who was sick to a person who was not there in less than a year, and whom no amount of anyone knowing anything a certain way had saved. He did not let that thought come all the way up. He had gotten good, in three years, at not letting it come all the way up. But it was there under everything the way the warmth was said to be under the water, and it worked back toward the surface when he was tired, and he was tired.

He wanted the water tested. He could not have said the want cleanly even to himself, but it ran something like this: that his mother trusted the spring because it had never once failed her, and that he had learned, the hard way and for good, that a thing not having failed you yet was not the same as a thing that would not fail you, and that he had a daughter who drank from that water eight months of the year, and that he could not any longer stand in front of a thing his child put in her body and simply believe it good because it had always been good. He wanted a paper. He wanted a box stamped by a lab that said the count, the number, the fact, so that when he lay awake he could put his hand on a certainty instead of a faith. He knew what his mother would say. His mother would say that was no way to love a water or a child either, from behind a piece of paper, at arm's length, afraid. And

his mother would not be entirely wrong, and that was the part he could not stand.

She was at the shed when he came up, setting the last of the filled jugs in the cool of it, and the girl ran to him and he caught her up and the ordinary gladness of that got them past the first minute, which was a mercy, because he did not know how to say hello to his mother anymore in a way that did not have the whole of it in it.

"You brought your kit," Cécile said. She had seen the case in his other hand.

"I did."

"You're going to test my spring."

"I'm going to test the spring, yeah." He set the girl down. "It's not yours to test or mine to leave alone, that's the thing of it. Half the valley's going to be somebody's lots inside two years, the way it's going. If it's going on somebody's paper it ought to go on the right paper, ours, the town's, with the numbers on it, before it goes on the developer's. A tested spring on record is a thing you can hold onto when a man with a plan shows up. An untested one is just water to him. He'll pipe it and never know what he covered."

It was a good argument. He had built it carefully on the drive so that it would be a good argument, so that it would be about the survey and the development and the town and not about the other thing, and he watched his mother take it in and he watched her decline to be fooled by it, and he loved her and could have wept at her for how she saw straight through the good argument to the frightened man holding it.

"You never used to be afraid of this water," she said.

"I was never afraid of any water," he said. "That was the trouble."

The girl stood between them at about the height of their two hands, looking up from the one to the other as a child does when the words the grown people are using are small and calm and the thing underneath them is large, and Cécile saw her looking and put an end to it, because whatever this was it was not going to be done over the child's head at the mouth of the shed.

"Test it, then," she said. "It'll tell you what I could have told you and saved the lab the trouble. But you'll take her up with you and you'll let her hold the bottle. If you're going to teach my granddaughter that the water she drinks is a thing to be doubted until a stranger signs off on it, you'll at least let her doubt it with her own hands in it, and not learn it off a piece of mail."

Perras opened his mouth and shut it. It was, he understood, the most his mother was going to give him, and it was more than he had any right to, and it had a hook in it the size of his whole life, and he took it.

So the three of them went up the worn path in the last of the light, the man and the old woman and the child, to put a water that had never needed asking into a bottle and ask it. The girl carried the sample jar because she had been told to, and held it out under the flow where it came off the ledge exactly as she had held the drinking jug an hour before, so that the gathering-to-doubt and the gathering-to-drink were the same motion in her small hands and she could not yet feel the difference the grown people felt, and the spring came up cold and certain out of the dark of the hill, one center to it and maybe two, and filled the jar before she had counted very far at all.

Perras capped it and labeled it in the fading light, the collector's name and the date and the place, and drew a small careful thumbnail of the seep in the corner of the form as the instructions said, a map so a stranger could find the spot, as though the spot were a thing that could be lost. Behind him his mother watched the water and said nothing, and the girl watched her father's pencil, and none of the three of them said the thing each of them was thinking, which was a different thing in each of them, and the water ran on off the ledge into the sound it made and did not care, or did, in the way that Cécile had come to believe over a long life that it cared, which was by staying, by coming up cold out of the far-down dark night after night whether anyone was there to count it or not, and by keeping, against all the paper in the world, its own counsel about what it was.

II

The Slip and the Stakes

The sample sat on the kitchen table three days before he sent it. It stood in its bottle in the cardboard mailer the state had provided, the mailer already addressed and the postage already on it, and every time Perras passed the table he was aware of the bottle the way a man is aware of a letter he has written and not yet decided to send. There was nothing to decide. The thing was done. He had drawn the water and capped it and filled out the form, and the form said the water would go to the lab and the lab would tell him what was in it, and all that remained was to carry the mailer down to the post office, which was a thing he did every day of his life without thinking, and which he had now not done for three days.

The program was a real one and an ordinary one. The state had money that year, not much, for a survey of the small water sources that served households off the town mains, the dug wells and the driven points and the hillside springs that half the back roads still drank from, because somewhere a study had found what studies find and somebody with a title had decided the state ought to know what its people were drinking where the pipe did not reach. The town got a letter. The letter came to Perras, because Perras was the man who tended the town's own supply and knew,

better than any map, where the water came out of the ground in that valley and who went to it. Pull what samples you can, the letter said, of the sources in regular domestic use, and there was a list of what the lab would test for, coliform and nitrate and the hardness and a handful of the others, and a form for each source, and a date by which the samples had to be in.

He had made the list himself, of the springs still drunk from, and there were not many left, and at the head of the list, because it was the truest of them and because it was his mother's and because he could not have left it off without the leaving-off meaning something, he had written the headwater spring. He had drawn the little thumbnail map in the corner of the form as the instructions asked, a sketch so that a stranger could find the sample point, the ledge and the seep and the run, a map of a place that had never once in its life needed finding, that was found new by every child who was ever taken up the path and would go on being found that way after every map of it had gone to dust. He had looked at his own small drawing a long time. It was a poor thing beside the place. It was accurate, and it was nothing, and he understood standing over it that the whole apparatus he served was that drawing, accurate and nothing, a set of true marks that left out the only thing that mattered, which was that the water was good and had always been good and that men had bet their bodies on it being good for longer than the state had been a state.

And still he wanted the number. That was the thing he could not reason himself out of. He could see the poverty of the form and want what the form would give him at the same time and with the same strength, and he had stopped being surprised at himself for it.

The list was short and getting shorter, and going down it that week he came to understand that he was keeping the record of an ending.

There had been a time, and his mother could remember the tail of it, when half the valley drank from the ground direct, from springs and dug wells and driven points, every back road with its own water and every family knowing its own source the way it knew its own name. The knowing had been a whole body of knowledge, which spring went sweet in a dry year and which went hard, whose water kept a week in the cellar and whose you drank the day you drew it, where the cress grew and where the frogs spawned so you drew above them in April. It had not been quaint. It had been how you stayed alive in a place the pipe did not reach, and the pipe had been reaching a long time now, up one road and then the next, and where the pipe went the springs went quiet, not because the water failed but because a tap in the kitchen beat a pail up a path every morning of your life, and no one could say it did not. So the drinking from the ground had been dying by the tap for forty years and was nearly dead, and the state, having helped kill it with its grants for the mains, had sent its last thin dollars to survey the little that was left, and given the surveying to him.

He went to the springs that were still drunk from, and on the whole valley's list there were six.

He pulled a sample at the Ouellette place off the north road, where old Alcide Ouellette, past ninety and stone deaf, still went out twice a day to a spring his grandfather had boxed in fieldstone, and would not hear of the town water though the main ran past

his door. The old man stood over Perras while he filled the bottle, with a look that made plain he thought the whole business foolish, the water having been good since before there were forms to doubt it on, and he signed the slip with an X because his hand would no longer make the letters, and Perras drove off from there feeling he had taken the census of a thing the way you take the census of a thing that is going.

He pulled one at the Colby widow's, off a driven point in her dooryard, she being the last on that road not on the main, unable to afford the hookup and too proud to say so. She gave him coffee and asked him twice whether the state was going to find something wrong and make her stop, and twice he told her it was only a survey, and saw that she did not believe him, that to her the man from the town with the bottle and the form was the front edge of the day they came and told you the water your family had drunk for a hundred years was against some rule now. He could not entirely tell her she was wrong.

And one man, off the east road, would not let him sample at all. He told Perras through the screen door that nobody was putting his water in a bottle to be carried off and written up in a book in the capital, that his water was his business and his father's before him, and that if the state wanted to know what he drank it could come up the hill and drink it. Then he shut the door. Perras stood on the step and found he understood the man entirely and half envied him, the clean refusal of it, the water kept whole by the plain act of never letting the paper near it, which was, he thought, driving away, what his own mother had done her whole life without having to slam a single door. She had simply, quietly, never handed her water to anyone, and it had stayed hers, and now here was her own son coming up her own path with the bottle, the pa-

per come for the last free water in the valley in the person of the family that kept it.

He did not sleep the night before he finally mailed it.

He lay in the dark and the bottle was in the next room on the table and he was as aware of it through the wall as if it gave off a light, and after a while he stopped pretending he was going to sleep and lay with his hands behind his head and let the thing come up that he did not let come up in the daytime. It came up as it always came, not as a picture but as a set of facts in an order, the way a form comes, and he could not stop the order once it started. She had been tired in the spring. She had been tired in a way that a busy woman is tired and then in a way that a busy woman is not. There had been a doctor and then a different doctor and then a drive to the city that they made too many times, and there had been, at the end of all of it, a great deal of paper, more paper than he had known a life could generate, results and readings and counts and the names of things set down in boxes, every one of them accurate, and not one of them able to do the single thing he had wanted the whole apparatus to do, which was to keep her. He had learned that year that you could know a thing to the last decimal and lose it anyway. He had come out the far side of that year certain of only one lesson, and the lesson was worthless and he could not put it down: that a thing being good so far told you nothing, nothing at all, about whether it would go on being good, and that the only answer to that was to check, and to check again, and to have it in writing, and even then.

He knew, lying there, that his mother was right about him. He was trying to love a thing from behind a piece of paper because

the last thing he had loved with his whole open hand had been taken out of it. He knew it and he mailed the water anyway, in the morning, first thing, before the fear could argue itself into something that looked like sense.

Up the hill his mother kept the water and did not think about the lab at all, or thought about it only as she thought about weather in another county, a real thing happening to someone, no business of hers or the spring's. She filled the jug. She counted, and it was down to the low twenties now with the flood easing, and she set the count in her head where she kept it and went back down when the shed ran dry. She had done this through her mother's dying and her husband's and would do it through her own if it came to her up here, which she half hoped it would, and the water had never asked her to explain it or prove it or write it down, and she thought a person could learn something from a water that asked for nothing, if the person were of a mind to be taught, and she did not say that to her son, because her son was not, that spring, of a mind to be taught anything, and grief made its own weather in a man and you did not stand out in it lecturing.

The child was up with her most afternoons that spring, her father being busy with the town's water and glad, Cécile suspected, to have somewhere warm and watched to leave her, and Cécile was glad of her too, though she would have died before making a production of saying so. They did the small work together, the seeds started along the south window, the bread, the everlasting mending, and the girl talked the whole time, a running account of everything and nothing that asked no answer and got none and

would have stopped dead if it had, and Cécile let it run over her the way the spring ran, a sound the day was the better for. A house goes quiet in a particular way when the children are gone out of it. She had lived in that quiet a long time, her own boy grown and then his wife in the ground and the boy gone strange and far with his grief, and she had not looked to have a child underfoot again at her age, talking her ear off over the bread, and she found she was in no hurry at all to give it back.

She heard the sale talk the way she heard everything, at the store, sideways. It had firmed since April. It was not just the meadow now. It was the hill, the whole east face above the spring, timber and all, and there was a buyer, or the shape of a buyer, somebody from away who liked a view and had the money to sit on ground until it ripened, and they were cruising the standing wood to know what the trees alone would fetch, so that a man could carry the cost of the ground while the ground made up its mind to become lots. She carried this home as she carried the mail and it did not touch the spring in her mind, because the spring was up the hill and off any road and on nobody's deed that concerned her, and a thing that had stayed itself the whole of her life did not present itself to her as a thing that could be bought. She was not yet wrong. She was only not yet right.

Perras met Bushey on the hill on a Tuesday, which he had not planned, or had planned in the way a man plans a thing by driving where he knows it is.

He had told himself he was checking the far spring on the list, the little one on the Gagnon side that nobody drank from anymore, and the woods road he took to it ran up under the east face,

and Bushey's truck was pulled off in the old landing with the tailgate down, and so it was not a thing Perras could drive past. He pulled in behind it. Bushey came down off the slope a few minutes later with his tapes and his diameter stick and a paint gun on his hip, an older man than Perras by a dozen years, moving careful on the steep the way a man does who means to keep his knees, and when he saw whose truck it was he lifted a hand, and there was in the lift of it a small wariness that told Perras the older man knew exactly how this looked and did not much like being found at it.

"Perras," Bushey said.

"Carl."

"You're a ways up for the town water."

"Checking the Gagnon seep. Nobody's on it, but it's on the list." Perras let that sit a second. "State's having me sample the springs this year. The ones still drunk from."

"Is that right." Bushey set the diameter stick against the truck and did not quite look at him. "Well. There's fewer of those than there used to be."

"There are." Perras looked up the slope, at the trees, some of them marked now with the wet dab of Bushey's paint, a blue nobody in nature ever wore. "You're cruising the whole east face."

"I'm cruising what I was hired to cruise." It came out flatter than the man meant it, Perras thought, and Bushey seemed to hear that himself, because he softened it, or told the truth, which in a square man is the same motion. "It's the whole parcel. Meadow up over the top of the hill. I put a number on the wood, that's all I do, I put a number on the wood. What they do with the ground under it is above my pay and none of my say."

"Whose is it. If a man can ask."

"A man can ask." Bushey took his cap off and put it back on, which was a thing Perras had watched his own father do when a question had landed square and the answer was going to cost something to give. "I don't rightly know, and that's the truth of it, not a name I could hand you. It comes through a firm. There's a firm doing the buying and the firm's got a name and the name doesn't tell you a thing. You know how it goes now. It's all firms." He looked at Perras then, straight, for the first time. "Why. What's it to the town water."

And there it was, the question, the real one, laid down plain between them in the old landing with the marked trees standing over it, and Perras found he could not answer it plainly, because the plain answer was that the ground Bushey was pricing was the ground the spring came out of, that the hill was not just a hill but the thing that gathered the rain and the snowmelt and held it and let it down slow and cold through the whole dry summer into the seep his mother filled her jug at, and that if you brought a grade up over the top of that hill and ran a road across it and roofed the low ground with houses, you did not just take a view and some timber, you changed what the hill did with water, and a man who had spent his life on the town's supply knew that the way he knew his own hands, and could not prove a word of it, and had no paper for it at all.

"The spring's up under there," Perras said finally. "The one my mother goes to. It drinks off that hill."

Bushey was quiet a moment. He looked up the slope where his own paint marked the wood, and something went across his face that Perras could not name but recognized, the look of a man who has been asked to measure one thing and has just been shown that his measuring reaches further than he was told.

"I put a number on the wood," Bushey said again, but slower now, as if the sentence had stopped being a wall he could stand behind. Then he said a thing he did not have to say, and Perras understood it for the gift and the warning it was. "There's a figure in the cruise I don't like. One of the volumes. It reads high to me for what's standing, higher than the ground'll bear, and a high number on the wood makes the whole parcel pencil out where a true number might not. I flagged it. I put it in the margin with a question on it and my number to call. Nobody's called." He picked up the diameter stick. "You want to know who's buying your mother's hill, Perras, you'd do better asking who wanted that volume to come in high. I've said more than I ought. I liked your father."

He went back up the slope to his marking, and Perras stood in the landing a while longer with the sample list on the seat of his truck and the mailed bottle already forty miles gone toward the lab, and above him in the trees the blue paint dabs led up the face of the hill toward the top of the water his mother had never once thought to worry about, and the water down under the hill went on gathering itself in the dark of the ground and letting itself down cold and did not know that anywhere a number was being made to come in high, or a bottle of it was riding a mail truck to be told what it was.

III

Drought-Proof

By the second week of August the valley had gone dry as it did perhaps one summer in five, the small rains sliding off to the north all through July and the ground opening its cracks in the gardens and the leaves on the birches going early and papery, and the springs down along the road began to do what they did in such a year, which was to fail. Not all at once. A spring goes thin the way a person goes tired, a little each day and then more than a little, and the families that drank from the shallow ones learned again what their grandmothers had known, to draw early in the morning and to let the pail settle and to watch the sky through the end of the month with the particular attention of people whose water was a question. The Gagnon seep, the one nobody drank from now, went to a wet stain on the moss and then to nothing. The dug well behind the old Charette place, that a family still used, dropped until the bucket came up with silt in it, and there was talk of hauling.

The headwater spring did not fail. It dropped, and Cécile counted the dropping, and that was the whole of what it did.

She took Manon up in the early morning while the air still held the night's cool, and she made the girl do the count herself now, the full count, the one that mattered, because August was when

the count meant something and she wanted the girl to learn it in a dry year and not a wet one. Manon knelt at the lip with the drinking jug and put the neck of it under the flow and counted, and the water came slower than it had in April, you could see it come slower, a steady braid off the ledge instead of the April rope of it, and the girl counted past thirty, and past forty, and her face began to change.

"It's not filling," she said. "Grandma, it's slow."

"Keep counting."

"Fifty-one. Fifty-two." The jug was near full now but the girl's voice had gone up at the edge. "It's so slow. Is it quitting?"

"It is not quitting," Cécile said, and she put her hand flat on the girl's back, not to hurry her, only to be there against the small fear she could hear coming. "Finish it. What did it come to."

"Fifty-five. It filled at fifty-five." The girl looked at the full jug as if it had tricked her. "That's twice April. More than twice."

"That's August. That's the bottom of it, like I told you in the spring you'd see. Fifty-five in the worst dry we've had in years, and the Gagnon's gone and the Charette well's got silt in it and half the road's hauling from town, and this one gave you your jug at fifty-five and cold as it was in April." Cécile took the jug and set it on the flat stone and made the girl put her hand in the flow. "Feel that. August. It doesn't know it's August. Now you know the top and the bottom both, and you'll never be afraid of this water in a dry year again, because you'll know fifty-five isn't quitting, fifty-five is just the far end of what it does, and the far end of what it does is still enough. That's the whole thing, child. That's the thing I'm giving you. Some waters you have to fear. Not this one. This one you can trust down to the bottom, because I've seen the bottom, and my mother saw a bottom lower than this

and it held, and that's a thing worth more than money and you can't put it on a paper."

Manon held her hand in the cold a long moment. "Papa put it on a paper," she said.

Cécile did not answer that at the water.

The drought did to the last of the valley's springs what forty years of the pipe had not quite finished.

Perras went back around the list in August, not to sample, the sampling was mailed and done, but because he was the town's water man and a dry year was when the town's water man earned his keep, and because he could no more stay away from the springs that summer than a man can stay away from a sick relation. The Colby widow called him first. Her driven point had begun to suck air on the down-stroke, the pump catching and losing and catching, and she stood in her dooryard while he primed it and would not say what she was afraid of, which was not that her water had gone bad but that it was leaving, that the water her husband had driven that point down to find in 1951 was pulling back into the ground away from her in her old age. There was nothing in it bad enough for the state to care and nothing good enough to spare her from taking the main at last, at a cost she could not meet, or hauling, which at her age she could not do, and Perras primed her pump and won her a week more of it and drove off knowing he had bought a week against a thing no week would fix.

Old Ouellette's fieldstone spring dropped and held, as the deep old ones did, and the old man stood over it deaf and satisfied and made a gesture at the low water that plainly meant it had

done this before and would do it again. Perras envied him the certainty and could not share it, because he had spent the summer learning exactly how thin the margin ran between a spring that drops and holds and a spring that drops and goes, and that the difference lay in the ground, in how deep the water came from, and that you could not see it from the surface and could not test for it and found out which kind you had only in the driest year, when it was too late to do anything but watch.

And the man on the east road, who had shut the door on the bottle in the spring, took the town water in August. Perras heard it at the store. The man's spring had failed him in the heat, the first time in his life or his father's, and he had stood it three weeks and then called the town and asked, in a voice Poulin said you would not have known, to be put on the main, and they had run the pipe up his road, and that was the end of the last clean refusal in the valley, broken by no survey and no paper at all but by a dry August, by the ground pulling its own water back, so that what Perras had been sent to record was ending even as he recorded it, not because anyone made it end but because the water went, and a way of living that leans on water does not outlast the water by a season.

Only his mother's spring did not drop and go. It dropped and gave the child her jug at fifty-five and cold while the Gagnon went to a stain and the Charette well pulled silt, and it was the single water he had mailed away to be told about and could not now get one further word on. That sat in him all August like a stone, the bottle forty miles gone and unanswerable, the dry year going about its business on every other spring in the valley, and hers running the way it ran.

The paper had come back the first week of the month, or part of it had.

Perras had opened the state's envelope at the kitchen table and unfolded the report and read down it with the particular held breath of a man who has told himself he already knows the answer and does not, in his body, believe that he knows it. And the boxes that were filled were good. Coliform, absent. The count they run for that, the one that would have told him the water carried something that could reach up into his daughter and turn a summer bad, came back with the little stamped word that meant none, none found, safe, and he sat with that word a while and let it do to him what he had mailed the bottle forty miles to have it do, which was to let him set his hand on a certainty. Nitrate, low, lower than the town's own supply. The hardness, the pH, the plain chemistry of it, all of it in the range the accompanying sheet called normal, unremarkable, good.

The stamped boxes said what his mother had always said, on nothing but a lifetime of drinking it, and he sat with that a while. A lesser part of him had half hoped they would not, had wanted the paper to find some small thing, some trace, so that his fear would have been justified and her trust shown up as the luck it half was, and he was ashamed of that part of him and did not look at it long.

But the report was not finished. He saw that on the second reading. Down at the bottom, past the stamped boxes, there were lines that were not stamped and not blank either but marked with a small printed code he had to find the key for, and the key at the foot of the page said the code meant the test for that constituent

was pending, or not performed, or the result held, the language shifting from line to line in a way that told him the lab itself was not entirely sure which it meant. Three or four of the boxes. Not the ones that frightened him, or not the ones he had known to be frightened of. He told himself that. The water was safe on everything that had come back and the things still open were the further things, the trace metals, the deeper chemistry, the tests a lab runs second because they cost more or take longer or wait on a machine, and there was no reason on earth to read anything into a pending line except that a state program with not much money was slow.

He told himself that, and he set the report on the table, and it sat there the rest of the week the way the bottle had sat there in the spring, a thing not finished, a thing he was aware of through the wall, and he found that a form that was mostly stamped and partly open did not comfort him as he had expected the stamps to comfort him, that in fact an almost-complete certainty was worse than none, because none you could meet with faith and an almost you could only meet by waiting for the rest, and he had never in his life been any good at waiting for the rest.

Manon brought the water home in her a different way that August, and Perras watched her do it and did not know whether to be glad.

She came off the school bus one afternoon with a worksheet folded in her book and spread it on the table to show him, proud, a mimeographed sheet with a hill drawn on it and arrows, the rain coming down and the sun pulling it back up and the little labeled blanks she had filled in a careful hand, evaporation, condensation,

the whole clean circle of it, and where the teacher had told them to bring something from a real water she had taped a fern frond from the seep into the corner and written the date. It was a good worksheet. She had done it well. And it was the water taught as the state taught it, the water as a diagram, a system with named parts and arrows that closed on itself and could be graded and put up on a refrigerator, and it sat on the same table where his own half-stamped report sat, the schooled water and the tested water, and up the hill his mother was teaching the same child the same water as a thing you knelt to and counted and trusted down to fifty-five, and Perras stood between the two sheets on his table and felt the whole shape of what he was caught in narrow to the size of his daughter.

"Which one's right," Manon asked him, because she had heard something at the spring that morning and something at school and she was a child who wanted the world to line up. "Grandma's way or the worksheet way."

He looked at the arrows on the hill, coming down and going up, and he thought that the worksheet was accurate and left out everything, the same as his thumbnail map had, the same as the report on the table, that all his paper was accurate and left out the water, and he thought that his mother's count was the water and could not be graded or filed or held against the day a stranger came, and that a man wanted both and could not have both cleanly, and that he was not going to lay any of that on a nine-year-old at the kitchen table.

"They're both right," he said. "The worksheet tells you how the water works. Grandma tells you this water. You want to know a thing, you learn it both ways." He heard, saying it, that he had given her almost his mother's own words from the spring in April,

the top and the bottom both, and it unsettled him to find the two of them, him and his mother, teaching the child the same lesson from opposite ends of their long quarrel, as if the lesson were larger than the quarrel and did not care which of them carried it.

The listing went around the valley in the third week of the month, and after it went around, the hill was a different hill.

It came as a photocopy, the way things came, one sheet passed and copied and passed, and by the time it reached Perras it had been through enough machines to go grey and streaked, but you could read it: the parcel, the acreage, the road access, a rough sketch-map with the old orchard and the stone walls marked, a paragraph of standing timber by species, and a figure. An asking figure. It was the figure that changed the hill. It was not a wild figure, that was the thing of it, it was a figure a person from away could say out loud without flinching, and when it was said out loud at the store the store went quiet, because it was more than the hill had ever been worth as a hill and it told everyone at once that the hill was not going to go on being a hill.

And in the margin of the sheet, in a hand Perras knew now, there was a small penciled question against one of the timber volumes, and beside it a phone number, faint under the copier's grey. Bushey's flag. Bushey's doubted number, the high one, the one that made the parcel pencil out, and his number to call, riding around the valley on the very sheet the number's being high had helped to make, and nobody, as far as Perras could learn, asking about it, everybody's eye going straight past the small true doubt in the margin to the large clean figure in the body, which was the whole way of it, he thought, the whole way paper worked, that the

doubt got set down small and honest at the edge and the number that might be wrong got set down large and certain in the middle and the eye went where the print was biggest.

He carried the sheet home and put it on the table beside the school worksheet and his own half-stamped report, and there they were, the three papers of that summer, the water as a diagram, the water as a set of stamped and pending boxes, and the hill the water drank from priced at a figure that made the store go quiet, with a square man's doubt penciled small in the corner and his number under it, unanswered. Perras looked at the number a long time. He had said to himself in the spring that Bushey was a man you could call and get a straight answer from, a number you kept against a day you hoped would not come, and he stood in his kitchen in the dry heart of August and understood that the day was closer than he had let himself think, and that the water down under the hill was giving his daughter her jug at fifty-five and cold, the same as it had given her people their water back further than any paper on his table could reach, and did not know it had been priced, or diagrammed, or half-certified, or doubted in a margin, and would go on not knowing, and going on, which was either the great comfort of it or what should have frightened him most, and he could not that afternoon have told you which.

IV

The Blank Boxes

The rest of the report never came, and then a letter came that told him it never would.

It was a form letter, a single mimeographed page with his name typed into a blank at the top in a different ribbon, and it thanked the town for its participation and regretted to inform him that the survey of private and community water sources would not continue into the coming fiscal year, funding for the program having not been renewed by the legislature, and that samples not yet fully analyzed would be held or discarded according to the laboratory's regular schedule. That was the whole of it. He read it twice. He called the number at the bottom and got a woman who was kind and tired and had said the same sentences to a good many people that week, and she told him what the letter had told him in words that were sorrier and no different: the metals, the deeper chemistry, the three or four lines that had come back pending on his mother's spring, those tests would not be run now, there was no money to run them, the sample was past its holding time in any case and would have to be pulled fresh to mean anything, and there was no program left to pull it under. She was sorry. She hoped it was nothing. She was sure it was nothing, springs like that were almost always nothing, and she

said that the way a person says a thing she has no way of knowing and offers because it is the only kindness left in her hand.

So the boxes stayed blank. They would stay blank now for good. He had the report in the drawer with its stamped lines and its pending lines and its little printed codes, and the codes no longer meant pending, they meant nothing would ever be written here, and a form with a permanent blank in it was a worse thing to own than no form at all, because no form you could meet with your mother's kind of faith and a form with a hole in it you could only meet by looking at the hole. He had gone to the paper to be told, once and completely, that the water his daughter drank was safe, and the paper had told him most of it and then run out of money in the middle of the sentence, and left him exactly where he had started except that now he had it in writing that he did not know.

The anniversary came in the middle of it, in the second week of October, as it did, and he had learned not to say the word to anyone, least of all to himself, and least of all to Manon, who was old enough now to count and would work it out on her own one of these years and did not need her father handing it to her.

Marie had been a Fournier from the flat land east of the notch, one of a big loud family of them, and she had come into the valley at twenty-two the way weather comes into it, all at once and changing everything. She had taken to the place with a completeness that had half embarrassed him, him being at the time a young man with one foot already pointed out of the valley toward a town with a stoplight in it. She had not wanted the stoplight. She had wanted the orchard and the cider and the deer camp and the

whole muddy business of it, and above all she had wanted his mother, or wanted whatever his mother was, and the two of them had gone thick as thieves inside a year, Cécile who did not warm to people and Marie who warmed to everyone. He had watched his wife learn his mother's water and his mother's garden and his mother's whole close-mouthed religion of keeping, and had felt, God help him, a little left out of it, a little jealous of the ease between them, and would have given, now, every year he had left to be a little left out of it again.

She had loved the water without a scrap of the doubt he carried. She had learned the count and the forty-two and the March greens inside two winters, not because anyone asked her to but because they were things his mother did and Marie had wanted every thing his mother did, and he had assumed, the way a man assumes the sun, that she would go on doing them for fifty years, that the water and the two women and the whole close keeping of it would simply continue. It had not occurred to him to stand and treasure the sight of his wife on her knees at the seep with a pail, because a man does not treasure the thing he is sure of. He was not sure of anything now. That was the whole of what the year of her dying had taught him, and it had taught him too late to be any use to him with her, and just in time to ruin him for everything after, and he carried the lesson now like a stone he could not set down, into the water, into his daughter, into every good evening that came sideways at him out of the dark.

He did not take it well, and the not-taking-it-well showed up first as a good evening, which he only understood afterward.

Marie had been dead three years that fall, and in three years he had learned that the grief did not come when you braced for it, it came sideways, on the good evenings, and this was a good evening. It had rained at last, the dry broken by a soft two-day rain that greened the lawns and filled the wells back up and took the fear out of the whole valley's water at a stroke, and Manon had talked him into the card game she liked, the loud one with the slapping, and they played it at the kitchen table with the rain on the window and she cheated the way she always cheated, badly and with enormous conviction, announcing her own rules as she went, and he let her, and then he stopped letting her and caught her hand coming down on the pile and she shrieked and they were both laughing, really laughing, the two of them, and for a minute the kitchen was only a kitchen with a father and a girl in it and no blank box in any drawer and no price on any hill. She had Marie's laugh. She did not know it and he would never tell her, but when she really went the laugh was her mother's, the same broken-up helpless run of it, and it came across the table at him out of the child like a thing sent, and he had to get up and put the kettle on so she would not see his face, and he stood at the stove with his back to her while she shuffled and cheated and hummed, and he thought that he would burn the whole world's paper, every stamp and box and figure of it, for one more of these, and that no one had ever offered him that trade and no one ever would.

That was the good evening. He should have known what was under it.

He called Bushey's number on a Thursday, the one off the grey margin of the listing, because the deal had a date on it now.

The date was what finally moved his hand. It had gone around the store that the sale would close by the end of the month, that the firm had come up to the asking figure or near it, and that the surveyors would be back in the spring to lay the roads out proper across the top of the hill, and Perras had stood in the store and heard it and known that whatever he was going to do about the ground the spring drank from he had until the end of the month to do, which was no time, which was a way of saying nothing. And so he called Bushey, because Bushey was the one voice in the whole business that had ever said a true doubting word, and he half believed, dialing, that a square man with a doubt in his margin was a thing you could stand on.

Bushey answered on the fourth ring and knew his voice before he gave his name.

"I wondered if you'd call," Bushey said.

"The number in your margin. On the cruise. You said one of the volumes read high."

"I said that to you in a landing where I shouldn't have, and I've thought since I oughtn't to have." A pause, and Perras could hear the man deciding to be honest anyway, as he had decided it on the hill. "I flagged it. I sent it up with the flag on it and a note to have it checked. Word came back to leave it. Not to fix it, mind, not that they'd looked and found me wrong. To leave it. The high number's what makes the parcel work, Perras, and the parcel working is the job, and a forester who wants the next job learns which numbers the client wants left alone." He said it flat, without much bitterness, a man reporting the weather of his trade. "They took me off it after. Brought their own man for the final. So I couldn't tell you now what's on the sheet that's closing, only that mine's not on it, and the doubt's not on it, and there's

nobody left in it that I know of who's minded to make a number tell the truth against the money. That's the answer to what you called to ask. I'm sorry it's the answer."

"The hill's what the spring drinks off," Perras said, and heard how thin it sounded, said out loud to a man forty miles away who priced trees for a living.

"I know it is," Bushey said, and that was worse than if he hadn't. "I've cruised that ground. I know what's up there and I know what's under it. I put a number on the wood because that's the only thing they'll let me put a number on. Nobody's got a box on any form for what a hill does with water, Perras. There's no line for it. You can't sell it and you can't buy it and you can't test for it, so as far as the paper goes it isn't there." He let that sit. "You want my honest word, off the job now and owing nobody: the water'll likely be fine. Hills hold more than a man thinks. But nobody's going to prove it to you either way, because there's no paper that measures it, and you strike me as a man who wants it proved."

Perras did not say anything for a moment.

"You strike me as that kind of man," Bushey said again, gentler, "and I'll tell you for nothing, it's a hard way to go through a thing you can't get proved. My father was that way. It didn't buy him a single quiet night." And then, because he was square to the end, "I liked yours. I'm sorry about your wife. I never said, and I should have."

Perras put the phone down and stood in his kitchen with both papers dead in his hands at once, the test that would never finish and the doubt that would never be heard, and the fear came up in him then all the way, the whole cold height of it that he had held down for three years, because he had done the thing you

were supposed to do, he had checked and checked and put it in writing, and the checking had run out of money and the writing had a hole in it and the one honest man in the whole business had just told him kindly that there was no paper on earth that would ever tell him his daughter's water was safe, and that he would have to do the thing he could not do, which was not know, and live.

He took it up the hill to his mother, which was the worst thing he could have done, and he knew it was and did it anyway, because a frightened man does not go looking for the person who will ease him, he goes looking for the person who will finally admit he was right to be afraid.

She was at the shed with the evening jugs when he came up, and Manon was with her, and he should have waited, he saw afterward that he should have waited until the child was not there, but the fear had him and it came out of him in the yard with the girl ten feet away.

"It's closing," he said. "End of the month. The hill, the whole east face, and they're bringing the roads up over the top in the spring. And the state's quit the testing, they've no money, the spring's report's got holes in it that'll never fill now. So there it is. Nobody knows what's in your water and nobody's going to, and the ground it comes off of is sold, and you're up here counting seconds into a jug like it's 1940."

Cécile set the jug down on the stone. "The water gave the child fifty-five in the worst August in nine years," she said. "That's what's in it. I could have told the state that and saved them the postage."

"You can't tell me that." His voice cracked on it. "You keep telling me that and you can't know it, you've never known it, you've just been lucky, you've drunk it your whole life and been lucky and you've decided luck is wisdom because deciding that lets you sleep. It's not wisdom. It's a coin that keeps coming up heads and you standing there telling everybody you can call the toss."

"And your paper called it better?" She did not raise her voice and that was worse. "Where's your paper now?"

"My paper ran out of money. That's not the same as being wrong."

"It's exactly the same as being wrong, to the one who needed the answer." She looked at him and something in her had gone hard, protecting itself. "You've been afraid of this water for three years and it was never the water, Willem. You know it wasn't the water."

"Don't."

"You test the spring because you can't test the thing you want tested. You'd have the whole world in a bottle if they'd let you, sending it off, getting it stamped, so that nothing could ever again be taken out of your hand without you having a paper that said it was coming. It doesn't work. I could have told you that too. I buried your father and I buried her right alongside you and there's no form in the world I could have filled out that would have"

"You buried them and went to the water," he said, and it came out of him low and it went in like a knife because it was true. "That's what you do. Someone dies and you go up the hill to your spring and you count your seconds and you come down healed and you call it faith. It's not faith. You'd rather love a hole in the

ground that can't die than sit in a house with people who can. You've been grieving nobody up here for forty years because the water's the one thing that lets you not."

The yard was very quiet.

Cécile did not answer him. That was what he would remember, in the weeks after, when he was trying to find the bottom of what he had done. She always had an answer at the water, she had an answer for everything up here, this was her ground and her element and she had never once in his life been without the last word on it, and now she stood at the mouth of the shed with the filled jug at her feet and looked at him and had nothing, because he had reached into the one place she kept whole and named what was in it, and named it right, and taken it from her the way you take a thing from a person, and for the first time in his life he watched his mother be unable to go to her own water, because he had stood between her and it and told her what it was for.

Manon was crying. Neither of them had remembered the child.

Cécile bent, after a long moment, and picked up the jug, and her hands were not steady, and she carried it into the cool of the shed and set it with the others, keeping the water the way she had kept it through every other thing, except that this time Perras could see that it was not comforting her, that she was doing the motions of it into a silence where the comfort used to be, and he understood that he had broken something that no lab and no faith either was going to tell him how to mend, and he took his crying daughter's hand and went down the hill in the dark.

The Never-Freezing Seep

The sale closed the last day of the month, quietly, in an office in the county seat that none of them saw, and the hill went on standing over the valley exactly as it had, which was the strange thing about paper, that it could change what a hill was without touching a stick of it, so that the trees Perras looked at from his kitchen window in December were the same trees and belonged now to somebody he would never meet, and the ground the spring drank from was owned, and looked no different owned than it had looked free, and would not look different until spring when the machines came up to make the paper true.

It was a hard winter, the kind that comes down early and means it. By the middle of December the snow stood deep and dry and squeaked underfoot, and the cold settled into the valley and did not lift, week on week, the mornings starting at fifteen below and the days barely climbing, the sort of cold that stops being weather and becomes a fact you live inside, that closes the road twice and freezes the Charette well solid and puts a skin of ice even on the moving water at the crossing that the winter usually could not touch. The old men at the store said it was the coldest stretch in years and then said, as they always said, that they had seen worse, and told about the worse, and it was in one of those

tellings, Perras standing at the counter not meaning to listen, that the low water down the far end came up again, the piece they had covered a generation back, and one old man said you know they were told it would just go under and come up somewhere else, and another said and did it, and the first one said nobody ever went and looked, which Perras carried out to the truck with him and could not put down, that nobody ever went and looked, that the whole comfort of it, the water only goes under, rested on nobody ever going to see whether it came back up.

He heard about Bushey in December, from Poulin at the store, who had it from someone at the county.

Bushey had not let it go. That was the sum of it. Taken off the job, owing nobody, an old forester with a pension coming and no reason on earth to make trouble, he had gone and finished what his margin note had only started. He had put his doubt about the timber volume in writing, properly, on his own letter-head, and sent it not to the firm that had brushed it aside but to the bank lending against the parcel, on the plain reasoning that a bank about to lend real money against a number a cruiser knew to be false would want to know it was false. He had signed it and mailed it and told no one, and it had reached the valley at all only because these things travel, and Poulin told it across the counter with the particular relish of a man reporting that somebody had finally done a decent thing.

Perras carried it out to the truck and sat with it a while. He had spent a year believing that paper was the enemy of the water, the survey and the slip and the listing and the figure, the whole machinery closing on the thing his family kept, and here was a

man turning the same machinery the other way, one square letter on one sheet aimed at the single place a false number could not survive being looked at. It came to him, sitting there, that paper was not the enemy and not the friend either, that it was only a tool, and that the whole of it turned on whose hand was on it and whether that hand would tell the truth against the money, and that this letter, from a man taken off the job and paid for the telling in nothing but trouble, was the first piece of paper in the whole business that had been on the water's side. He did not know if it would come to anything. Bushey himself had said the water would likely be fine and that no one would ever prove it either way. But a man had signed his name to a true number when it cost him to and bought him nothing, and Perras, who had lost his faith that year in a good many things, found he had not lost it in that, and it was a small warmth to carry into a cold month.

He and his mother had not spoken since the yard.

It was not a decided thing, not a thing either of them had announced, only that the words had been said and could not be unsaid and neither of them knew the way back across them, and so the winter went by with the two houses a quarter mile apart and the silence strung between them, and the one who carried anything across it was the child. Manon went up the hill to her grandmother as she always had, and came back down to her father, and after a while Perras understood that she had taken to carrying news between them, small news, deliberately, the way a child will try to knit a torn thing back with whatever thread she has. Grandma says the cold'll break by the full moon. Grandma's got a chilblain on her hand. Grandma took me up for the water

and we broke the ice and it was forty-two, Papa, the same as summer, she wrote it down on my mitten in pen so I'd remember. And Perras would say that was good, that was fine, tell Grandma good, and hate himself, and send the child back up with nothing in her hands to carry the other way, because he did not know what to send.

What the child carried that neither of them saw was her own settled certainty that she had caused it. She had been in the yard. She had heard her father shout and her grandmother go quiet, and the terrible thing about being nine was that the world still arranged itself around you, so that a fight the grown people had was a fight you had brought on by being there to see it. She had worked it out in the wordless arithmetic of a child: that if she was very good, and carried the messages very faithfully, and never once let either of them catch her crying about her mother, whose name nobody in either house would say, then the torn thing might knit, and it would be her that knit it. She told no one this. She was the only one of the three of them carrying the whole of the break at once, up the hill and down it, and she was the youngest and she carried it best, because she still believed it could be mended, which neither of the grown people any longer quite did.

Manon was doing the thing at the water now that Marie used to do, and it was that, more than the sale and more than the silence, that Perras could not get through the winter around.

He had not thought about it in years, had put it where he put the rest of it, but Marie had gone up the hill with his mother in the winters, in the early winters when they were first married and he was working two towns over and glad to have his wife and his

mother thick as thieves. Marie had not been raised to any of it, she was a Fournier off the flat land who had never kept a spring in her life, but she had taken to Cécile's water the way she took to everything of the valley's that he had half wanted to leave behind, with both hands and no irony, and the two of them had gone up in the cold with the pail and broken the ice and gathered the winter watercress that grew at the seep where the ground never froze, and Marie had come home pink-faced and pleased with a thing she had learned to do, and he had thought it was sweet and paid it no more mind than that, because you do not know which of the ordinary evenings are the ones you will be trying to hold thirty years on.

He could call one of them up whole if he let himself, and at the window that winter he let himself. A February, early on, the two women coming down the hill at dusk with the pail slung between them and the cress in a sack, Marie ahead of his mother on the path and calling back something that had made Cécile laugh, actually laugh, out loud, in the cold, a thing he had heard his mother do maybe twice in his grown life. Marie had come into the kitchen with her cheeks scoured red and ice in the ends of her hair and set the pail down and announced that she could read the water now, that she could tell the forty-two with her hand and did not need the thermometer anymore, and his mother coming in behind her had not corrected her, had let the girl be proud of a thing she had only half learned, which was not like his mother at all. He had understood, watching them, that his wife had gotten inside a door of his mother's that he had spent his whole life on the wrong side of, and that instead of resenting it he ought to be glad, and that night, for once, he had been glad and not jealous, and had thought there

would be a thousand more such nights. There had been perhaps a hundred. Then there had been none.

And now it was Manon up there in her mother's place at the pail, in a coat that had been her mother's cut down, and Cécile was teaching the granddaughter the winter water as she had taught the daughter-in-law, and Perras could not decide if it was the cruelest thing he had ever been asked to watch or the only mercy in the whole cold winter, that the thing Marie had loved had not died with Marie, that it had gone on up the hill without him into the next small pair of hands, that his mother had kept it, kept it, the way she kept everything, so that the child had a thing of her mother's to stand inside of that was not a photograph and not a grave. He hated the water for it and he was grateful to it for it and he could not hold both of those and so he held neither and just stood at the window in the short light watching the hill he did not own and could not testify for, with his wife three years gone and his daughter up in her coat learning the cold from the one person left he was not speaking to.

Cécile was not sleeping, and had told no one, because there was no one now to tell.

It had started the night of the yard and it had not stopped. She would lie in the dark and the thing her son had thrown at her would come back, not the anger of it but the truth of it, the aim of it, how it had gone straight into the one room she did not go into on purpose, and she would find herself doing a thing she had not done in forty years, which was to lie awake and be afraid. She had told the child fifty-five was not quitting. She had told the child you could trust this water down to the bottom. She had believed

it her whole life and she believed it still and yet since the yard she could not go up to the seep without hearing him standing behind her saying you go to the water so you don't have to grieve, and the terrible part, the part that kept her from sleep, was not that it was cruel. It was that she did not know if it was wrong. She had buried a great many people and gone to the water after each one and come down able to go on, and she had called that faith, and she was not sure now, in the dark, at seventy-odd, that it had not also been the other thing, that she had not spent a life keeping a water partly because a water was the one thing you could love with your whole strength and never have to lose, and she lay in the cold and could not tell any longer where her faith stopped and her hiding began, and it was the first time the water had ever failed to give her an answer, and it was because her son had reached in and taken the answer out, and she did not know how to hate him for it because he was, she was afraid, right.

She kept going up anyway. That was the one thing she had. She took the child and went up in the killing cold and kept the water, because if she stopped now it would be admitting he had won the whole argument and not just the piece of it that was true, and because a keeping does not ask you to be at peace to keep it, only to go.

The cold snapped hardest the third week of January, and it was then, on the worst morning of it, that Perras went up the hill.

He told himself it was because the cold was dangerous and his mother was old and stubborn and would go up to that seep in twenty-five below with a nine-year-old rather than miss a day, which was true, and it was the truest thing he had let himself feel

in a month, that he was not afraid for a bottle or a box or a hill anymore but for the actual living people up the actual hill in the actual cold, and the fear moved his legs in a way that no fear for the water ever had, and he went, and he was ashamed all the way up the path that it had taken him until the worst morning to go.

He came up over the shoulder and they were there at the seep, the two of them, small and dark against the snow, his mother and his daughter, and the seep was doing what it did that he had forgotten a person could stand and see, keeping its one dark open eye in all that white, the steam standing off the water into the iron air, the ice built up in ribbed grey columns around the rim where the trickle froze and refroze, and in the middle of the ice the water still ran, black and moving, a channel the winter could not close. Manon had her mother's coat on and her face down close to the ice formations, delighted, a child in front of a made thing, saying look, look how it built up, and Cécile was down on one knee with the thermometer in the black channel and did not hear him come.

He stood a moment. Then he came and knelt on the other side of the little open water from his mother, across it, the steam between them, and he put his bare hand into the seep the way he had not done since he was younger than Manon, and the cold of it was not the killing cold of the air, it was the other cold, the deep steady forty-two of it, the same it had been at his own daughter's jug in August and the same it had been when his own boy's hand had steadied a jug there thirty years gone, warm almost against the murdering white of everything around it, a warmth come up from so far down that the worst winter the valley could throw had no reach to it. He kept his hand in it a long time.

He said none of it aloud, whatever it was. It was not the kind of thing his family said. He took the thermometer from his mother's

stiff fingers, gently, and read it himself, and said the number out loud, forty-two, so that the child would hear her father say it, and his mother looked at him across the steam with her sleepless face and did not say anything either, and they were not mended, a number read over a spring did not mend a thing like the yard, but he was there, on his knees in the snow on the far side of her water with his hand in it, and she let him be there, and let him read the count, and after a while she said, not to him quite, to the water or to the child or to the cold, "It held. It always holds," and it was not an argument this time and not a lesson, it was just a frightened old woman saying the one thing she still had, and her son, for once, did not tell her she could not know it.

They came down the hill together in the low blue light, the three of them, the man carrying the pail he had not carried in thirty years, the old woman with her hand on the child's shoulder for the ice, and behind them the seep kept its black eye open in the snow and let its warmth up out of the deep ground into the killing air and ran on under the ribbing of its own ice, forty-two, the way it ran every winter, whether anyone came up the frozen path to kneel and read the number or no one came again.

VI

March Again

The ice went off the low ground in the third week of March, as it does, all at once after doing nothing for a month, the snow going grey and then going to water and the water finding the old channels and the meadow at the confluence coming up brown and loud overnight, and the greens started at the seep before they started anywhere else, because the ground there never froze and the water came up warm out of the deep and the watercress and the first bitter shoots were up in the wet margin a full two weeks ahead of the gardens. That was the tonic time. It had always been the tonic time. You gathered the greens at the seep before they flowered, when the bitter was still in them and the bitter was the point, and you made the spring tonic the way Cécile's mother had made it and her mother before that, and you drank it against the long winter still in your blood, and whether it did anything the doctors would sign their names to nobody had ever cared, because it was March and you were alive and you were tired of winter and the green thing tasted like the end of it.

Cécile had the card out on the table when Perras came up, the old index card gone soft and brown at the corners with the recipe in her own looping hand, the watercress and the rest of it, the note about gathering before the flower, the quantities her mother

had set and she had doubled in the margin years ago in a younger version of her own writing. She had it out because it was time, and because she meant to make the tonic whether her son had unmade the water for her or not, and she looked up when he came in the door and neither of them said anything about the winter, and that was how they began to come back, not with words about it, there were never going to be words about it, but with the card on the table between them and the season asking to be kept.

"I brought her up," Perras said. Manon was behind him, shedding her coat. "She wanted to gather."

"Then she'll gather," Cécile said. "Go get the basket, the flat one, it's on the nail."

They went up in the afternoon, the three of them, and it was the first warm day, the snow gone off the south slopes and hanging on grey in the woods, the path soft and running with meltwater, and the seep when they came to it was ringed with green, the cress thick and dark in the water and the shoots coming up the bank, and Manon went at it the way she went at everything, both hands, announcing her finds, and Cécile got down slow beside her and showed her which to take and which to leave, take the young, leave the flowering, leave enough that it comes again, always leave enough that it comes again, and the girl gathered and the old woman guided her hands and Perras stood back and let them and did not, for once, need to be doing anything, measuring anything, sending anything away.

He had a thing to say and he was working himself up to it in the way of his family, which was slowly and while looking at something else, and he said it finally to the water and not to her.

"I could send it now if I wanted," he said. "There's a lab does private samples. I called them. I could drive a bottle down myself, pay for the whole panel, get every box on it filled, the metals and all the rest, get the thing finished that the state left half done." He watched the water come up. "I'm not going to."

Cécile did not look up from the child's hands. "No?"

"No." He crouched down then, on his heels, near them but not reaching for anything. "I've thought about it every day since the fall. I could have it in writing by Easter. And I stood in the kitchen last week with their number wrote down and I thought, and if it comes back clean, then what. Then I've got a paper says it was clean in March. And I test it again in a year because a thing being clean in March doesn't tell me about next March, and I test it the year after that, and I'm still doing it when Manon's grown and I'm the crazy old man tests his mother's spring twice a year, and I've spent my whole life proving a thing that was never going to stay proved, and none of it, not one box of it, is going to be the paper I actually wanted, which was never about the water." He stopped. That was as near as he was going to come to the yard, and she heard it, and let it be near enough. "So I'm going to drink it. That's all. I'm going to drink it scared, if I have to be scared, and let it be a thing I don't know for sure, because you can't know it for sure, nobody can, and I'd rather not know it with you than know it alone."

It was a long speech for him and it cost him and he looked at the water the whole way through it.

Cécile was quiet a while. Then she said, "You were right, in the yard. That's the thing I couldn't sleep on. I do go to the water so I don't have to grieve. I've done it my whole life." She kept

her hands moving in the greens. "I couldn't tell, after you said it, whether that made the whole thing a lie."

"It's not a lie." He said it fast, surer of this than he had been of anything in a year. "That's the thing I came up to say and I've said it backwards. You kept it. Whatever else it was, hiding or faith or both, you kept the water going the whole time you were using it to get through, and because you kept it there was a thing of Marie's for the child to stand in that wasn't a grave. You didn't hide from us up here. You hid up here and kept the one thing going that any of us could hold onto after. That's not a lie. That's the only thing that worked." He put his hand in the seep, the deep cold of it, the forty-two, and left it there. "I took your water off you in the yard and I had no right. I'm giving it back. It's good water. You always said so. You were right about that too."

His mother's hands had stopped in the greens. She did not look at him and he did not look at her and the child between them went on gathering, humming, not understanding and not needing to, and after a moment Cécile went back to showing the small hands which to take and which to leave, and that was the mending, done the only way they were ever going to do it, over a spring, with a child's hands in the water and the both of them looking at anything but each other.

They made the tonic that evening in Cécile's kitchen, the three of them, and it was as bitter as it had ever been and Manon made a face at it as every child had always made a face at it and drank it because the drinking was the thing. Marie had made this same tonic in this same kitchen, more than one March of it, and Perras, watching his mother measure the bitter greens into the pot, found

himself ambushed, not cruelly for once but almost gently, the way a kitchen keeps the people who have worked in it, so that for a moment his wife was near in the room in the smell of the cress and the steam, and it did not knock him down. It stood with him a moment and went. It was, he thought, the first time in three years the missing of her had come and gone and left him on his feet. And afterward Cécile got the card out again to put it away, and Manon said, "It should say you still do it. The card says how but it doesn't say who."

"Then you write it," Cécile said, and gave the girl the pen.

And the child bent over the soft old card in its two generations of one family's hand and added, at the bottom, in a nine-year-old's careful ballpoint, a third hand now, that her grandmother still did this every March, and the year, and she signed it the way children sign things, with her whole name, and neither of the grown people told her she had put herself onto the paper that mattered without any lab or any state or any figure, that she had certified the one thing about that water that was true and that no box on any form had ever had a line for, which was that it was kept, that it went on being kept, in one hand and then another, and that the keeping was the water's real record and always had been.

Something loosened in the house that spring that had been clenched three years.

It was Manon who showed it first. She had never asked much about her mother, having learned early that the asking made the grown people go careful and quiet, and a child stops knocking at a door that only ever makes the house go still. But with her father and her grandmother speaking again, with the tonic made

and the card written and the water gone back to being a thing the family did together instead of a thing they fought over the top of, some pressure came off the child, and one evening, drying the supper dishes beside him, she asked, not carefully, just asked, whether her mother had liked the tonic.

Perras kept his hands in the water a moment.

"She loved it," he said. "She made it better than Grandma, and don't you tell Grandma I said so. She put a little maple in it, at the end, just a little, so the bitter had something to land on." He had not thought of that in years, and it came up clear and did not cut him as it would have a year before. "You do things like her, some ways. Whole self, both hands. She was like that."

"I don't remember her much," Manon said, and her voice did what a child's voice does when it has held something a long while. "I try to and it's mostly the pictures. I don't know if I remember her or the pictures of her."

He dried his hands and sat down at the table so he was level with her, and did what he had not been able to do in three years, which was to talk about Marie to their daughter without the talk being a wound he was steering the child around. He told her small true things, not the big ones and not the ending, the small ones, the maple in the tonic and how her mother had sung wrong on purpose to make her laugh as a baby and how she had learned to tell the forty-two with her hand, and the child listened, and cried a little, and was not afraid of it, and it came to Perras watching her that his mother had known all along what his whole ruined year had only just taught him, that you keep a thing by handling it and not by sealing it away, and that he had been trying to store his wife safe and untouched the same wrong way he had

wanted to store the water, when the way to keep her was to let the child have her too.

The surveyors came back up the hill that spring, the way they had said they would.

They staked the roads across the top of the east face over a week in April, and the trucks came and went on the woods road, and by the middle of summer there was a rough grade cut where the listing had promised the lots with a view, up above the bench, up above the ground the spring drank from. Perras watched it go in and could not tell, watching, whether he was watching the end of anything. Bushey had said the water would likely be fine, that a hill held more than a man thought, and that no one would ever prove it either way, and no one did. The grade went in and the spring ran. It gave the child her jug that summer no slower than it ever had and did not go cloudy after the rains any worse than it ever had, and whether the danger his family had carried for the water all that year had been a real danger or only the shape he had given to a fear that had somewhere else to be, he could not say, and there was no paper that would tell him, and no dry year or hard winter coming that would settle it either. He was going to have to not know that one too.

He called Bushey in April, not about the hill and not about the water, or not exactly. He got him on the fourth ring again and said he had heard what Bushey had done, the letter to the bank, and that he thought it a decent thing and wanted to say so.

There was the silence on the line of a man who did not take thanks easily.

"I didn't do it for your spring," Bushey said at last. "I want that clear. I don't know your spring from any other and I told you the water would likely be fine. I did it because the number was wrong and my name was on the cruise it came off of, and a man's name on a wrong number is a wrong number with a man's name on it. That's all it was. Bookkeeping."

"All the same," Perras said.

"All the same," Bushey allowed, which was as much as he would give. He would not be drawn on the sale or on what would come of the parcel, saying only that he had put a wrong number right because his name had been on it, and that what a buyer did with the ground after was the buyer's lookout and had never been his. Then, because he was square to the last: "I liked your father. I'm glad I got to tell you so this time and not at a graveside. Go drink your water, Perras."

He hung up the way men of that kind hang up, without ceremony, and left Perras holding a warm phone and a thing he had not had in a year, which was the feeling of having been talked to plainly by a man with nothing to sell him.

He did not test the spring. He drank from it that summer, with his mother and his daughter, and some nights he lay awake and was afraid the way he was going to go on being afraid, because you do not get cured of a thing like his, you only decide what to do with it, and what he had decided was to be afraid and drink the water anyway, and to drink it scared was the only offering he had, and he made it every day.

And the water came up out of the hill the way it always had, at the foot of the ledge where the ferns started, one center to it and maybe two, and gave the jug at twenty-six in the high water and fifty-five in the drought and forty-two under the ice, and held what it held and told no one what was in it, and went down into the dark of the ground where the ground was covered and came up cold somewhere it was not, and it was kept now in a new small hand that had written itself onto the card, and it would go on being kept, or it would not, and either way it would go on coming up out of the far-down dark, forty-two, long after the last hand that ever cupped it had let it run back through its fingers into the run and gone down the worn path for the last time and not come up again.