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Opening extract from

A Gathering Light

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When summer comes to the North Woods, time slows down. And some days it stops altogether. The sky, gray and lowering for much of the year, becomes an ocean of blue, so vast and brilliant you can't help but stop what you're doing—pinning wet sheets to the line maybe, or shucking a bushel of corn on the back steps—to stare up at it. Locusts whir in the birches, coaxing you out of the sun and under the boughs, and the heat stills the air, heavy and sweet with the scent of balsam.

As I stand here on the porch of the Glenmore, the finest hotel on all of Big Moose Lake, I tell myself that today—Thursday, July 12, 1906—is such a day. Time has stopped, and the beauty and calm of this perfect afternoon will never end. The guests up from New York, all in their summer whites, will play croquet on the lawn forever. Old Mrs. Ellis will stay on the porch until the end of time, rapping her cane on the railing for more lemonade. The children of doctors and lawyers from Utica, Rome, and Syracuse will always run through the woods, laughing and shrieking, giddy from too much ice cream.

I believe these things. With all my heart. For I am good at telling myself lies.

Until Ada Bouchard comes out of the doorway and slips her hand into mine. And Mrs. Morrison, the manager's wife, walks right by us, pausing at the top of the steps. At any other time, she'd scorch our ears for standing idle; now she doesn't seem to even know we're here. Her arms cross over her chest. Her eyes, gray and troubled, fasten on the dock. And the steamer tied alongside it.

"That's the *Zilpha,* ain't it, Mattie?" Ada whispers. "They've been dragging the lake, ain't they?"

I squeeze her hand. "I don't think so. I think they were just looking along the shoreline. Cook says they probably got lost, that couple. Couldn't find their way back in the dark and spent the night under some pines, that's all."

"I'm scared, Mattie. Ain't you?"

I don't answer her. I'm not scared, not exactly, but I can't explain how I feel. Words fail me sometimes. I have read most every one in the *Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language,* but I still have trouble making them come when I want them to.

Right now I want a word that describes the feeling you get—a cold, sick feeling deep down inside—when you know something is happening that will change you, and you don't want it to, but you can't stop it. And you know, for the first time, for the very first time, that there will now be a *before* and an *after,* a *was* and a *will be.* And that you will never again be quite the same person you were.

I imagine it's the feeling Eve had as she bit into the

apple. Or Hamlet when he saw his father's ghost. Or Jesus as a boy, right after someone sat him down and told him his pa wasn't a carpenter after all.

What is the word for that feeling? For knowledge and fear and loss all mixed together? *Frisdom? Dreadnaciousness? Malbominance?*

Standing on that porch, under that flawless sky, with bees buzzing lazily in the roses and a cardinal calling from the pines so sweet and clear, I tell myself that Ada is a nervous little hen, always worrying when there's no cause. Nothing bad can happen at the Glenmore, not on such a day as this.

And then I see Cook running up from the dock, ashen and breathless, her skirts in her hands, and I know that I am wrong.

"Mattie, open the parlor!" she shouts, heedless of the guests. "Quick, girl!"

I barely hear her. My eyes are on Mr. Crabb, the *Zilpha*'s engineer. He is coming up the path carrying a young woman in his arms. Her head lolls against him like a broken flower. Water drips from her skirt.

"Oh, Mattie, look at her. Oh, jeezum, Mattie, look," Ada says, her hands twisting in her apron.

"*Ssh,* Ada. She got soaked, that's all. They got lost on the lake and . . . and the boat tipped and they swam to shore and she . . . she must've fainted."

"Oh, dear Lord," Mrs. Morrison says, her hands coming up to her mouth.

"Mattie! Ada! Why are you standing there like a pair

of jackasses?" Cook wheezes, heaving her bulky body up the steps. "Open the spare room, Mattie. The one off the parlor. Pull the shades and lay an old blanket on the bed. Ada, go fix a pot of coffee and some sandwiches. There's a ham and some chicken in the icebox. Shift yourselves!"

There are children in the parlor playing hide-and-seek. I chase them out and unlock the door to a small bedroom used by stage drivers or boat captains when the weather's too bad to travel. I realize I've forgotten the blanket and run back to the linen closet for it. I'm back in the room snapping it open over the bare ticking just as Mr. Crabb comes in. I've brought a pillow and a heavy quilt, too. She'll be chilled to the bone, having slept out all night in wet clothing.

Mr. Crabb lays her down on the bed. Cook stretches her legs out and tucks the pillow under her head. The Morrisons come in. Mr. Sperry, the Glenmore's owner, is right behind them. He stares at her, goes pale, and walks out again.

"I'll fetch a hot water bottle and some tea and . . . and brandy," I say, looking at Cook and then Mrs. Morrison and then a painting on the wall. Anywhere and everywhere but at the girl. "Should I do that? Should I get the brandy?"

"Hush, Mattie. It's too late for that," Cook says.

I make myself look at her then. Her eyes are dull and empty. Her skin has gone the yellow of muscatel wine. There is an ugly gash on her forehead and her lips are bruised. Yesterday she'd sat by herself on the porch, fret-

ting the hem of her skirt. I'd brought her a glass of lemonade, because it was hot outside and she looked peaked. I hadn't charged her for it. She looked like she didn't have much money.

Behind me, Cook badgers Mr. Crabb. "What about the man she was with? Carl Grahm?"

"No sign of him," he says. "Not yet, leastways. We got the boat. They'd tipped it, all right. In South Bay."

"I'll have to get hold of the family," Mrs. Morrison says. "They're in Albany."

"No, that was only the man, Grahm," Cook says. "The girl lived in South Otselic. I looked in the register."

Mrs. Morrison nods. "I'll ring the operator. See if she can connect me with a store there, or a hotel. Or someone who can get a message to the family. What on earth will I say? Oh dear! Oh, her poor, poor mother!" She presses a handkerchief to her eyes and hurries from the room.

"She'll be making a second call before the day's out," Cook says. "Ask me, people who can't swim have no business on a lake."

"Too confident, that fellow," Mr. Morrison says. "I asked him could he handle a skiff and he told me yes. Only a darn fool from the city could tip a boat on a calm day..." He says more, but I don't hear him. It *feels like* there are iron bands around my chest. I close my eyes and try to breathe deeply, but it only makes things worse. Behind my eyes I see a packet of letters tied with a pale blue ribbon. Letters that are upstairs under my

mattress. Letters that I promised to burn. I can see the address on the top one: *Chester Gillette, 17½ Main Street, Cortland, New York.*

Cook fusses me away from the body. "Mattie, pull the shades like I told you to," she says. She folds Grace Brown's hands over her chest and closes her eyes. "There's coffee in the kitchen. And sandwiches," she tells the men. "Will you eat something?"

"We'll take something with us, Mrs. Hennessey, if that's all right," Mr. Morrison says. "We're going out again. Soon as Sperry gets the sheriff on the phone. He's calling Martin's, too. To tell 'em to keep an eye out. And Higby's and the other camps. Just in case Grahm made it to shore and got lost in the woods."

"His name's not Carl Grahm. It's Chester. Chester Gillette." The words burst out of me before I can stop them.

"How do you know that, Mattie?" Cook asks. They are all looking at me now—Cook, Mr. Morrison, and Mr. Crabb.

"I...I heard her call him that, I guess," I stammer, suddenly afraid.

Cook's eyes narrow. "Did you see something, Mattie? Do you know something you should tell us?"

What had I seen? Too much. What did I know? Only that knowledge carries a damned high price. Miss Wilcox, my teacher, had taught me so much. Why had she never taught me that?

frac • tious

My youngest sister, Beth, who is five, will surely grow up to be a riverman—standing upstream on the dam, calling out warnings to the men below that the logs are coming down. She has the lungs for it.

It was a spring morning. End of March. Not quite four months ago, though it seems much longer. We were late for school and there were still chores to do before we left, but Beth didn't care. She just sat there ignoring the cornmeal mush I'd made her, bellowing like some opera singer up from Utica to perform at one of the hotels. Only no opera singer ever sang "Hurry Up, Harry." Least not as far as I know.

So it's hurry up, Harry, and Tom or Dick or Joe,
And you may take the pail, boys, and for the water go.
In the middle of the splashing, the cook will dinner cry,
And you'd ought to see them hurry up for fear they'd
lose their pie...

"Beth, hush now and eat your mush," I scolded, fumbling her hair into a braid. She didn't mind me, though, for she wasn't singing her song to me or to any of us. She was singing to the motionless rocker near the stove and the battered fishing creel hanging by the shed

door. She was singing to fill all the empty places in our house, to chase away the silence. Most mornings I didn't mind her noise, but that morning I had to talk to Pa about something, something very important, and I was all nerves. I wanted it peaceful for once. I wanted Pa to find everything in order and everyone behaving when he came in, so he would be peaceable himself and well-disposed to what I had to say.

There's blackstrap molasses, squaw buns as hard as rock,
Tea that's boiled in an old tin pail and smells just like your sock.
The beans they are sour, and the porridge thick as dough—
When we have stashed this in our craw, it's to the woods we go . . .

The kitchen door banged open and Lou, all of eleven, passed behind the table with a bucket of milk. She'd forgotten to take off her boots and was tracking manure across the floor.

"A-hitching up our braces and a-binding up our feet."

"Beth, please!" I said, tying her braid with a ribbon. "Lou, your boots! Mind your boots!"

"A-grinding up our axes for our kind is hard to beat . . ."

"What? I can't hardly hear you, Matt," Lou said. "Cripes' sake, shut up, will you?" she yelled, clapping a hand over Beth's mouth.

Beth squealed and wriggled and threw herself back against the chair. The chair went over and hit Lou's

bucket. The milk and Beth went all over the floor. Then Beth was bawling and Lou was shouting and I was wishing for my mother. As I do every day. A hundred times at least.

When Mamma was alive, she could make breakfast for seven people, hear our lessons, patch Pa's trousers, pack our dinner pails, start the milk to clabbering, and roll out a piecrust. All at the same time and without ever raising her voice. I'm lucky if I can keep the mush from burning and Lou and Beth from slaughtering each other.

Abby, fourteen, came in cradling four brown eggs in her apron. She carefully put them in a bowl inside the pie safe, then stared at the scene before her. "Pa's only got the pigs left to do. He'll be in shortly," she said.

"Pa's going to tan your ass, Beth," Lou said.

"He'll tan yours for saying *ass*," Beth replied, still sniffling.

"Now you've said it as well. You'll get a double tanning."

Beth's face crumpled. She started to wail all over again.

"That's enough! Both of you!" I shouted, dreading the thought of Pa getting his strap, and hearing the whack of it against their legs. "No one's getting a tanning. Go get Barney."

Beth and Lou ran to the stove and dragged poor Barney out from behind it. Pa's old hunting dog is lame and blind. He pees his bed. Uncle Vernon says Pa ought to take him out behind the barn and shoot him. Pa says he'd rather shoot Uncle Vernon.

Lou stood Barney by the puddle. He couldn't see the milk, but he could smell it, and he lapped it up greedily. He hadn't tasted milk for ages. Neither had we. The cows are dry over the winter. One had just freshened, though, so there was a little bit of milk for the first time in months. More were due soon. By the end of May, the barn would be full of calves and Pa would be off early every morning making deliveries of milk, cream, and butter to the hotels and camps. But this morning, that one bucket was all we'd had for a long while and he was no doubt expecting to see some of it on his mush.

Barney got most of the milk cleaned up. What little he left, Abby got with a rag. Beth looked a little soggy, and the linoleum under her chair looked cleaner than it did elsewhere, but I just hoped Pa wouldn't notice. There was an inch or two left in the bucket. I added a bit of water to it and poured it into a jug that I set by his bowl. He'd be expecting a nice milk gravy for supper, or maybe a custard, since the hens had given four eggs, but I'd worry about that later.

"Pa'll know, Matt," Lou said.

"How? Is Barney going to tell him?"

"When Barney drinks milk, he farts something wicked."

"Lou, just because you walk like a boy and dress like a boy doesn't mean you have to talk like one. Mamma wouldn't like it," I said.

"Well, Mamma's not here anymore, so I'll talk as I please."

Abby, rinsing her rag at the sink, whirled around.

"Be quiet, Lou!" she shouted, startling us, for Abby never shouts. She didn't even cry at Mamma's funeral, though I found her in Pa's bedroom a few days after, holding a tin likeness of our mother so hard that the edges had cut her hand. Our Abby is a sprigged dress that has been washed and turned wrong side out to dry, with all its color hidden. Our Lou is anything but.

As the two of them continued to snipe, we heard footsteps in the shed off the back of the kitchen. The bickering stopped. We thought it was Pa. But then we heard a knock and a shuffle, and knew it was only Tommy Hubbard, the neighbor boy, hungry again.

"You itching, Tom?" I called.

"No, Matt."

"Come get some breakfast, then. Wash your hands first."

Last time I'd let him in to eat he gave us fleas. Tommy has six brothers and sisters. They live on the Uncas Road, same as us, but farther up, in a shabby plank house. Their land divides ours from the Loomis's land on one side, notching in from the road. They have no pa or they have lots of pas, depending on who you listen to. Emmie, Tommy's mother, does the best she can cleaning rooms at the hotels, and selling the little paintings she makes to the tourists, but it isn't enough. Her kids are always hungry. Her house is cold. She can't pay her taxes.

Tommy came inside. He had one of his sisters by the hand. My eyes darted between them. Pa hadn't eaten yet and there wasn't so much left in the pot. "I just brung Jenny is all," he said quickly. "I ain't hungry myself."

Jenny had on a man's wool shirt over a thin cotton dress. The shirttails touched the floor. The dress barely made it past her knees. Tommy had no overclothes on at all.

"It's all right, Tom. There's plenty," I said.

"She can have mine. I'm sick to death of this damned slop," Lou said, pushing her bowl across the table. Her kindnesses often took a roundabout path.

"I hope Pa hears you," Abby said. "Mouth on you like a teamster."

Lou poked her tongue out, displaying her breakfast. Abby looked as if she'd like to slap her. Luckily, the table was between them.

Everyone was sick of cornmeal mush. Myself included. We'd been eating it with maple sugar for breakfast and dinner for weeks. And for supper, buckwheat pancakes with the last of fall's stewed apples. Or pea soup made with an old ham bone that had been boiled white. We would have loved some corned beef hash or chicken and biscuits, but most everything we'd put in the root cellar in September was gone. We'd eaten the last of the venison in January. The ham and bacon, too. And though we'd put up two barrels of fresh pork, one of them had spoiled. It was my fault. Pa said I hadn't put enough salt in the brine. We'd killed one of our roosters back in the fall, and four hens since. We only had ten birds left, and Pa didn't want to touch them as they provided us with a few eggs now and would make us more eggs—and chickens, too—come summer.

It wasn't like this when Mamma was alive. Somehow

she provided good meals all through the winter and still managed to have meat left in the cellar come spring. I am nowhere near as capable as my mother was, and if I ever forget it, I have Lou to remind me. Or Pa. Not that he says the sorts of things Lou does, but you can tell by the look on his face when he sits down to eat that he isn't fond of mush day in and day out.

Jenny Hubbard didn't mind it, though. She waited patiently, her eyes large and solemn, as I sprinkled maple sugar on Lou's leavings and passed the bowl to her. I gave Tom some from the pot. As much as I could spare while still leaving enough for Pa.

Abby took a swallow of her tea, then looked at me over the top of the cup. "You talk to Pa yet?"

I shook my head. I was standing behind Lou, teasing the rats out of her hair. It was too short for braids; it only just grazed her jaw. She'd cut it off with Mamma's sewing scissors after Christmas. Right after our brother, Lawton, left.

"You going to?" she asked.

"Talk about what?" Beth asked.

"Never mind. Finish your breakfast," I said.

"What, Matt? Talk about what?"

"Beth, if Mattie wanted you to know, she'd tell you," Lou said.

"You don't know, neither."

"Do, too."

"Mattie, why'd you tell Lou and not me?" Beth whined.

"Because you can't never keep quiet," Lou said.

That started another round of bickering. My nerves were grated down bald. "It's *can't ever,* Lou, not *can't never,*" I said. "Beth, stop whining."

"Matt, you pick your word of the day yet?" Abby asked. Abby, our peacemaker. Gentle and mild. More like our mother than any of the rest of us.

"Oh, Mattie! Can I pick it? Can I?" Beth begged. She scrambled out of her chair and raced into the parlor. I kept my precious dictionary there, out of harm's way, along with the books I borrowed from Charlie Eckler and Miss Wilcox, and my mother's Waverly Editions of Best Loved American Classics, and some ancient copies of *Peterson's Magazine* that my aunt Josie had given us because, as it said in its "Publisher's Corner," it was "one of the few periodicals fit for families where there are daughters."

"Beth, you carry it but let Lou pick the word," I shouted after her.

"I don't want no part of baby word games," Lou grumbled.

"*Any,* Lou. *Any* part," I snapped. Her carelessness with words made me angrier than her dirty mouth and the filthy state of her coveralls and the manure she'd tracked in, combined.

Beth returned to the kitchen table, carrying the dictionary as if it were made of gold. It might as well have been. It weighed as much. "Pick the word," I told her. "Lou doesn't want to." She carefully flipped a few pages forward, then a few back, then put her index finger on

the left-hand page. *"Fff... fraaak... fraktee... frakteeus?"* she said.

"I don't think there's any such word. Spell it," I said.

"F-r-a-c-t-i-o-u-s."

"Frakshus," I said. "Tommy, what's the meaning?"

Tommy peered at the dictionary. "'Apt to break out into a passion . . . snappish, peevish, irritable, cross,'" he read. "'P-per-verse. Pettish.'"

"Isn't that just perfect?" I said. *"Fractious,"* I repeated, relishing the bite of the *f,* teeth against lip. A new word. Bright with possibilities. A flawless pearl to turn over and over in my hand, then put away for safekeeping. "Your turn, Jenny. Can you make a sentence from the word?"

Jenny bit her bottom lip. "It means cross?" she asked.

I nodded.

She frowned, then said, "Ma was fractious when she chucked the fry pan at me 'cause I knocked her whiskey bottle over."

"She chucked a fry pan at you?" Beth asked, wide-eyed. "Why'd she do that?"

"Because she was out of sorts," Abby said.

"Because she was drinking," Jenny said, licking bits of mush off her spoon.

Jenny Hubbard is only six years old, but the growing season is short in the North Woods, and children, like the corn, have to come up fast if they are to come up at all.

"Your mamma drinks whiskey?" Beth asked. "Mammas shouldn't drink whiskey—"

"Come on, Beth, let's go. We're going to be late," Abby said, hurrying her up from the table.

"Ain't you coming, Matt?" Beth asked.

"In a few minutes."

Books were gathered. Dinner pails, too. Abby bossed Lou and Beth into their coats. Tommy and Jenny ate silently. The shed door slammed. It was quiet. For the first time that morning. And then, "Matt? Come here a minute, will you?"

"What is it, Lou? I've got my hands full."

"Just come!"

I walked into the shed. Lou was standing there, ready to go, with Lawton's fishing pole in her hand.

"Lou, what are you doing?"

"Can't eat no more mush," she said. Then she took hold of my ear, pulled my face to hers, and kissed my cheek. Hard and sharp and quick. I could smell the scent of her—woodsmoke and cows and the spruce gum she was always chewing. The door slammed again and she was gone.

My other sisters, like me, take after our mother. Brown eyes. Brown hair. Lou takes after Pa. Lawton, too. Coal black hair, blue eyes. Lou acts like Pa, too. Angry all the time now. Since Mamma died. And Lawton went away.

When I came back in, Tommy was working his spoon around his bowl so hard I thought he'd take the paint off it. I hadn't had more than a few bites of my mush. "Finish mine, will you, Tom?" I said, sliding my bowl over to him. "I'm not hungry and I don't want it

wasted." I plugged the sink, poured hot water into it from the kettle, added a bit of cold from the pump, and started washing. "Where are the rest of you kids?"

"Susie and Billy went to Weaver's. Myrton and Clara went to try at the hotel."

"Where's the baby?" I asked.

"With Susie."

"Your ma's not good today?"

"She won't come out from under the bed. Says she's scared of the wind and can't bear to hear it no more." Tommy looked at his bowl, then at me. "You think she's crazy, Mattie? You think the county'll take her?"

Emmie Hubbard certainly was crazy, and I was pretty sure the county would take her one day. They'd almost done so on two or three occasions. But I couldn't say that to Tommy. He was only twelve years old. As I tried to figure out what I could say—to find words that weren't a lie but weren't quite the truth, either—I thought that madness isn't like they tell it in books. It isn't Miss Havisham sitting in the ruins of her mansion, all vicious and majestic. And it isn't like in *Jane Eyre*, either, with Rochester's wife banging around in the attic, shrieking and carrying on and frightening the help. When your mind goes, it's not castles and cobwebs and silver candelabra. It's dirty sheets and sour milk and dog shit on the floor. It's Emmie cowering under her bed, crying and singing while her kids try to make soup from seed potatoes.

"You know, Tom," I finally said, "there are times I want to hide under the bed myself."

"When? I can't see you crawling under no bed, Matt."

"End of February. We got four feet in two days, remember? On top of the three we had. Blew onto the porch and blocked the front door. Couldn't get the shed door open, either. Pa had to go out the kitchen window. The wind was howling and wailing, and all I wanted to do was crawl under something and never come out. Most of us feel like that from time to time. Your ma, she does what she feels. That's the only difference. I'll go over to her before school. See if I can find a jar of apples to take and a bit of maple sugar. Think she'd like that?"

"She would. I know she would. Thank you, Mattie."

I packed Tommy and Jenny off to school, hoping that by the time I got to the Hubbards', Weaver's mamma would already be there. She was better at getting Emmie out from under the bed than I was. I finished the washing, looking out the window as I did, at the bare trees and the brown fields, searching for spots of yellow among the patches of snow. If you can pick adder's-tongue in April, spring will come early. I was awful tired of the cold and the snow, and now the rain and the mud.

People call that time of year—when the root cellar is nearly empty and the garden not yet planted—the six weeks' want. Years past, we always had money come March to buy meat and flour and potatoes, and anything else we might need. Pa would go off logging at the end of November up at Indian or Raquette Lake. He'd leave as soon as the hay was in and stay there all winter,

hauling logs cut the previous summer. He drove teams of horses hitched to jumpers—low flat sledges with big runners. The loads were piled as high as a man standing on another man's shoulders. He took them down off the mountains over icy roads—relying on the weight of the logs and his own skill to keep the jumper from hurtling down the hills and killing the horses and anything else in its way.

Come March, the snow would melt and the roads would soften, and it became impossible to drag the heavy loads over them. As it got toward the end of the month, we would look for Pa every day. We never knew just when he would arrive. Or how. In the back of someone's wagon if he was lucky. On foot if he wasn't. We often heard him before we saw him, singing a new song he'd learned.

We girls would all run to him. Lawton would walk. Mamma would try her best to stay on the porch, to hang back and be proper, but she never could. He would smile at her, and then she was running down the path to him, crying because she was so glad he was home with his hands and feet and arms and legs all still attached. He'd hold her face in his hands, keeping her at arm's length, and wipe her tears away with his dirty thumbs. We'd all want to touch him and hug him, but he wouldn't let us. "Don't come near me. I'm crawling," he'd say. He'd take his clothes off in back of the house, douse them with kerosene, and burn them. He'd douse his head, too, and Lawton would comb the dead lice from his hair.

Mamma would be boiling water while he did all this, and filling our big tin tub. Then Pa would have a bath in the middle of the kitchen, his first one in months. When he was clean, we would have a feast. Ham steaks with gravy. Mashed potatoes with rivers of butter running down them. The last of the corn and the beans. Hot, fleecy rolls. And for dessert, a blueberry buckle made with the last of the put-up berries. Then there were presents for each one of us. There were no stores in the woods, but peddlers knew to make their rounds of the lumber camps just as the men were paid for the season. There might be a penknife for Lawton, and ribbons and boughten candy for us girls. And for Mamma, a dozen glass buttons and a bolt of fabric for a new dress. A cotton sateen the exact shade of a robin's egg, maybe. Or a butterscotch tartan. An emerald velveteen or a crisp yellow pongee. And once he bought her a silk faille the exact color of cranberries. Mamma had held that one to her cheek, looking at my pa as she did, then put it away for months, unable to take the scissors to it. We'd all sit in the parlor that night, in the glow of the cylinder stove, eating the caramels and chocolates Pa had brought, and listen to his tales. He'd show us all the new scars he'd picked up and tell us the antics of the wild lumberjacks, and how wicked the boss was, and how bad the food was, and all the tricks they'd played on the cook and the poor chore boy. It was better than Christmas, those nights that Pa came out of the woods.

He hadn't gone into the woods this year. He didn't want us by ourselves. Without his logging money, things

had been hard indeed. He'd done some ice cutting on Fourth Lake over the winter, but the pay wasn't as good as logging money, and the yearly tax bill on our land took it all, anyway. As I stood there drying the dishes, I hoped the fact that we were flat broke and would be for some weeks yet, until Pa could sell his milk and butter again, would make him listen to what I had to say and tell me yes.

I finally heard him come into the shed, and then he was in the kitchen, a small snuffling bundle in his arms. "That devil of a sow et four of her piglets," he said. "Every one except the runt. I'm going to put him in with Barney. Heat'll do him good. Lord, this dog stinks! What's he been eating?"

"Probably got into something in the yard. Here, Pa." I put a bowl of mush on the table and stirred maple sugar into it. Then I poured the watery milk over it and hoped to God he didn't ask for more.

He sat down, looking thunderous, no doubt toting up the money he'd lost on the dead piglets. "Cost your mother a whole dollar secondhand, that book," he said, nodding at the dictionary still open on the table. "Never spent a penny on herself and then throws away a whole dollar on that thing. Put it up before it's covered in grease."

I put it back in the parlor, then poured Pa a cup of hot tea. Black and sweet, just the way he liked it. I sat down across from him and looked around the room. At the red-and-white-checked curtains that needed washing. At the faded pictures cut off calendars from Becker's

Farm and Feed Supply that Mamma had tacked on the walls. At the chipped plates and yellow mixing bowls on the shelf over the sink. At the cracked linoleum, the black stove. At Barney licking the piglet. I looked at everything there was to see and some things twice, practicing my words in my head. I'd just about worked up the nerve to open my mouth when Pa spoke first.

"I'm sugaring tomorrow. Sap's flowing like a river. Got about a hundred gallons already. Wait any longer and it'll all spoil. Weather's unseasonable warm. You're to stay home and help me boil tomorrow. Your sisters, too."

"Pa, I can't. I'll fall behind if I miss a day, and my examinations are coming up."

"Cows can't eat learning, Mattie. I need to buy hay. Used up most everything I cut last fall. Fred Becker don't take credit, so I'll need to sell some syrup to get it."

I started to argue, but Pa looked up from his bowl and I knew to stop. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "You're lucky you're going at all this year," he said. "And it's only because the notion of you getting your diploma"—it came out French-sounding, *dee-plo-MA,* as his words do when he's angry—"meant something to your mother. You won't be going next year. I can't run this place by myself."

I looked at the table. I was angry with my father for keeping me home, even for a day, but he was right: He couldn't run a sixty-acre farm alone. I wished then that it was still winter and snowing night and day and there was no plowing or planting, just long evenings of reading

and writing in my composition book, and Pa with nothing to say about it. *Fractious,* I thought. *Cross, irritable, peevish.* Fits my father to a T. It was useless to try and soften him up with sweet tea. Might as well try and soften up a boulder. I took a deep breath and plunged ahead.

"Pa, I want to ask you something," I said, hope rising in me like sap in one of our maples, though I tried not to let it.

"Mmm?" He raised an eyebrow and kept on eating.

"Can I work at one of the camps this season? Maybe the Glenmore? Abby's old enough to get the meals and look after everyone. I asked her and she said she'd be fine and I thought that if I—"

"No."

"But Pa—"

"You don't have to go looking for work. There's plenty"—there it was again, his accent, *plain-tee*—"right here."

I knew he'd say no. Why had I even asked? I stared at my hands—red, cracked, old woman's hands—and saw what was in store for me: a whole summer of drudgery and no money for it. Cooking, cleaning, washing, sewing, feeding chickens, slopping pigs, milking cows, churning cream, salting butter, making soap, plowing, planting, hoeing, weeding, harvesting, haying, threshing, canning—doing everything that fell on the eldest in a family of four girls, a dead mother, and a pissant brother who took off to drive boats on the Erie Canal

and refused to come back and work the farm like he ought to.

I was yearning, and so I had more courage than was good for me. "Pa, they pay well," I said. "I thought I could keep back some of the money for myself and give the rest to you. I know you need it."

"You can't be up at a hotel by yourself. It's not right."

"But I won't be by myself! Ada Bouchard and Frances Hill and Jane Miley are all going to the Glenmore. And the Morrisons—the ones managing the place—are decent folk. Ralph Simms is going. And Mike Bouchard. And Weaver, too."

"Weaver Smith is no recommendation."

"Please, Pa," I whispered.

"No, Mattie. And that's the end of it. There are all sorts at those tourist hotels."

"All sorts" meant men. Pa was always warning me about the woodsmen, the trappers, the guides, and the surveyors. The sports up from New York or down from Montreal. The men in the theatrical troupes from Utica, the circus men from Albany, and the Holy Rollers that followed in their wake. "Men only want one thing, Mathilda," he was always telling me. The one time I asked, "What thing?" I got a cuff and a warning not to be smart.

It wasn't the idea of strange men that bothered Pa. That was just an excuse. He knew all the hotel people, knew most of them ran respectable places. It was the idea of somebody else leaving him. I wanted to argue, to make

him see reason. But his jaw was set firm, and I saw a little muscle jumping in his cheek. Lawton used to make that muscle jump. Last time he did, Pa swung a peavey at him and he ran off, and no one heard from him for months. Until a postcard came from Albany.

I finished the dishes without a word and left for the Hubbards'. My feet were as heavy as two blocks of ice. I wanted to earn money. Desperately. I had a plan. Well, more a dream than a plan, and the Glenmore was only part of it. But I wasn't feeling very hopeful about it just then. If Pa said no to the Glenmore, which was only a few miles up the road, what on earth would he say to New York City?