A Wedding in December

Anita Shreve

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Extract

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Friday



The glaciers are receding," she said. Nora peered through the window as if she could see the progress of said glaciers some ten thousand miles north. "I read it in the paper. This morning."

The view, Harrison had noted before he'd sat down, was of still-green lawns and dormant rosebushes, of a wrought iron fence and a garden bench, of ornamental grasses and white pines. Beyond the considerable acreage was a steel ribbon of river and beyond that a range of mountains, blue-gray in the morning light.

"The birds must be confused," he said.

"They are. I . . . I see them flying north all the time."

"Is it bad for business?"

"No. Not really. No one's canceled. Though the ski areas are suffering."

Nora left the window and moved to the chair opposite. He watched her cross her legs, a cuff riding just above the edge of a black leather boot and making a slim bracelet of smooth white skin. Harrison superimposed the woman he saw now over the memory of the seventeen-year-old girl he'd once known, a girl with a soft face and large almond-shaped eyes, a girl who had been graceful in her movements. The woman before him was forty-four, and some of the softness had left her face. Her hair was different, too. She wore it short, swept behind her ears, a cut that looked more European than American.

When they'd met just moments earlier at the foot of the stairs in

the front hallway, Nora had been standing at a small reception desk. She'd glanced up and seen Harrison, and for a moment she'd examined him as an innkeeper might a guest one had not yet attended to. *Harrison,* she'd said then, advancing, and his own smile had begun. As Nora had embraced him, Harrison had felt both unnerved and buoyant — a cork floating in uncharted waters.

"Your . . . your room is comfortable?" she asked.

He remembered this about her. The slight stutter, as if hesitant to speak. No, not a stutter; more a stutter step.

"Very," he said. "Great views."

"Can I get you something? Tea? Coffee?"

"Coffee would be fine. That's quite a machine there."

"It makes espresso with a lot of crema," she said, standing. "It's a draw, actually. Some of the guests have said they've come back for the coffee in the library. Well, for that and for the dumbwaiter. I put the dining room upstairs. To take advantage of the views."

On either side of the bookshelves were half columns, and below those shelves were cabinets. On one wall, there was a built-in bench upholstered in lichen stripes. The windows — a set of three facing west — had panes in the tops only, so that from the leather couch on which Harrison was seated he had an unobstructed view of the mountains.

"How long has this been an inn?" he asked.

"Two years."

"I was sorry to hear about your husband."

"You sent a card."

He nodded, surprised that Nora remembered. There must have been hundreds, perhaps thousands, of cards for such a distinguished man.

"Renovations," she said, making a gesture so as to take in the entire building. "Renovations had to be made."

"You've done a terrific job," he replied, slightly jarred by the non sequitur.

Harrison had followed signs from the center of town to the inn and then had taken the long drive up the hill to the top. When he'd reached the parking lot, the view of the Berkshire Mountains had opened up and stopped his heart in the same way that, as a boy at Cinerama, his heart had always paused as the camera had soared up and over a cliff edge to reveal the Grand Canyon or the Rift Valley or the ice fields of Antarctica.

He'd walked with his suitcase to the front steps, noting along the way the pruned bushes, the raked lawns, and, in a maze that had perhaps lost its challenge, the expertly trimmed hedges. The inn was sheathed in white clapboards and shingles and sported a chimney that tilted slightly forward. The windows, unadorned, shone in the morning light. Like many houses built at the turn of the century, it had gables of differing widths and porches sprouting unconventionally at odd angles. The outline of the roof, Harrison thought, would be almost impossible to draw from memory.

Inside, the inn had a crisp edge that had been accomplished in part, Harrison thought, with a great deal of white paint and chrome. Much as he admired the inn, however, he wondered if visitors ever lamented the lost house, the one Carl Laski had inhabited.

"This used to be an inn. Years ago," Nora said. "After World War II, it became a private home. There's an early photograph. Behind you on the wall."

Harrison stood and leaned in toward the wall, balancing himself with his hand on the back of the couch. The photograph, framed in dark walnut, was remarkably detailed and clear, every blade of grass and twig made distinct with a kind of vision denied the naked eye. The picture was of a white shingled building with a

cupola on its roof. It looked to be November or early March, to judge from the light dusting of snow that outlined the furrows of a garden. At the river's edge, there was a trail of mist, but he saw, on closer inspection, that it was really smoke from a moving train, the train itself a blur, merely a shadow.

"The photograph dates from 1912," Nora said. "It was made from a glass negative. There's a rose garden there. And a racetrack."

Harrison sat again on the couch and wondered if anyone else had arrived yet. He had wanted to be the first, to see Nora without the noise of the others. "It was an inn, then a house, and then an inn again?" he asked.

She smiled at his confusion. "When Carl and I moved here, it was a private house. We lived here for fifteen years. After he died . . . after he died, I had the idea of reconverting it to an inn. It had always wanted to be an inn. Even when it was a house."

"How many rooms are there?"

"There used to be twenty-two."

"How did you manage?"

"We closed most of the rooms off. Would you like more coffee?"

"No thanks. I'm fine. Any of the others here yet?"

"Agnes said she'd be here by lunch. Bill and Bridget, too. Rob . . . Rob won't be here until later."

"Rob's coming?" Harrison asked with pleasure. He hadn't seen Rob Zoar in . . . well, in twenty-seven years. Harrison was startled by the number and recalculated. Yes, twenty-seven. "He's in Boston now, isn't he? I think I read that."

"He performs all over the world. He gets wonderful reviews."

"I was surprised to hear he was a pianist. He kept it quiet at Kidd, didn't he?"

"I think he tried to resist it."

"It seems like this wedding came together very fast," he said.

"It did."

Too fast for Harrison's wife, Evelyn, to rearrange her schedule. Bill had sent Harrison an e-mail saying that he and Bridget were getting married — at the inn — and he wanted Harrison and Evelyn to come. Harrison and Bill had for a time kept in touch (their families had gone skiing together twice), but Harrison had had no idea at all about Bill and Bridget.

"Bridget's sick," Nora added. "It's why Bill wants to do it now."

"How sick?" Harrison asked.

"Very," Nora said, her face tight. "Do you remember them together?"

"At school? Of course." Bill had been a muscular catcher, a consistent hitter with power who had routinely sent the baseball over the fence. Bridget, a serious girl, was pretty in a slightly plump way. In another era, she'd have been a beauty. The couple used to cross the campus so entwined it was as if they were one creature. Harrison recalled how disillusioned he had been when he'd heard that each had married someone else.

"How did they reconnect?" he asked now.

"Our twenty-fifth. Did you ever go to any of the reunions?"

He shook his head. He'd told himself that he hadn't gone for Evelyn's sake. She was Canadian, she wouldn't have known anyone, the journey would have consumed too many of her precious days off. But Harrison couldn't satisfactorily explain why he hadn't gone by himself. The simple answer, he supposed, was that he hadn't wanted to. The sight of the invitations had produced in him an anxiety he had no intention of exploring. Even this small reunion — this hasty wedding — had made him hesitate.

"You?" he asked.

Nora shook her head, and Harrison was not surprised. He could not imagine Carl Laski at a Kidd reunion.

"Have you seen any of the others?" Nora asked. "Since school, I mean?"

"Well, Bill," he said. "And I met Jerry in New York about five years ago. We had drinks."

"He's coming with his wife, Julie," Nora said. "What was it like, meeting Jerry?"

"He mostly wanted me to know how successful he'd become," Harrison said and then shrugged to take the edge off the unkind comment.

"You're staying until Sunday?" Nora asked.

"I think that's the plan."

Harrison had flown from Toronto to Hartford, rented a car, and driven to the Massachusetts Turnpike, which he had followed west. He'd realized, as he'd driven, that he'd never been to western Massachusetts. When he had visited New England before, it had always been to Boston and then straight on to Kidd in Maine. Never inland. He'd known of the Berkshires, of course. Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was world famous. Edith Wharton had summered in Lenox. Melville had written *Moby Dick* in Pittsfield.

"There are some good walks," Nora said, gesturing toward the windows. "The weather . . . the weather is amazing."

"It's been unseasonable in Toronto as well. Very mild."

"Each day has been more beautiful than the last," she said. "I think Nature means to mock us."

"How so?"

"9/11."

Harrison nodded slowly.

"All that horror. All that grief." She paused. "People . . . people are stopping one another on the streets and saying, *Can you imagine?* and *Isn't this extraordinary?* and *Enjoy it while you can.*"

"They say the temperature is breaking all records."

"I think it will reach seventy-two today," she said.

"Surely a record for the first week in December."

"I wonder . . . I wonder if the idea is that the sins of man, more terrible than anyone's ability to imagine them, are nothing in the face of Nature's bounty and serenity," Nora said.

"Nature a supreme being?" Harrison asked, puzzled.

"Entity?"

"A terrible one at times."

"Not today."

"No, not today," Harrison said.

"Or . . . or are we meant to be reminded of a reason to stay alive? To savor each day as if it might be the last?"

"Nature capable of grace?" Harrison asked. "I like that."

Nora laughed, reached forward, and touched him lightly at the tip of his knee. "Listen to us," she said. "We're so pretentious. We used to do this all the time in Mr. Mitchell's class, didn't we?"

"We did," he said, glad that she remembered, more gladdened by her sudden touch.

"It's great to see you," she said with seemingly genuine pleasure.

"Where were you when it happened?" he asked.

"Here. In the kitchen. I turned on the TV just before the second plane hit. Judy, my assistant — you're bound to meet her — came in and told me. What about you?"

"I was in Toronto," he said. "I was eating breakfast. I had a cup of coffee and the newspaper. On the television, the announcer's voice changed in pitch, and I looked up in time to see a plane hit the second tower."

The images of that day had played and replayed for hours, Canadian television more willing to air the most horrific images — those falling bodies — than American stations had been.

"Were you frightened?" he asked.

"Here? No. Not really. Upset. Very upset. But not frightened. I thought of Carl. I was glad he wasn't alive. To see it."

Nora began to nibble at the skin at the top of her index finger.

Abruptly she stopped, putting her hands in her lap with a decisive gesture. From behind the shut door of the library, Harrison could hear a vacuum cleaner.

"They say it's the death of literature," she added.

"I think that's a little extreme," he said, shifting his position on the couch. In the days following the tragedy, he'd been greatly annoyed by such dramatic remarks. "I admired your husband's work very much," he added, feeling remiss that he hadn't mentioned this earlier.

"He . . . he was a wonderful man," Nora said. "A wonderful poet and a wonderful man."

"Yes."

"I was the helpmeet," Nora said, surprising Harrison with the archaic word. "I've . . . I've never understood what that means exactly. Helpmeet. *Help. Meet.*"

"I'll look it up for you," he offered.

"I could do it myself. I must have a dictionary. Somewhere . . ." She gazed at the spines of the books that lined the shelves.

For Harrison, the brilliance of Carl Laski's work lay in its oblique nature, the way the point of a poem was often a glancing blow: a glimpsed headline across the breakfast table while a woman tells her husband she has a lover, or a man berating his wife on a cell phone in an airport lounge as he passes a small child sitting alone with a bright red suitcase. Later it will be the memory of the child with the suitcase that will bring the man to his knees in his hotel room.

Harrison, of course, knew of Laski's reputation. The poet had won numerous international prizes, had been the recipient of honorary degrees, had been — when he'd died — professor emeritus at St. Martin's College, at which he had founded the celebrated St. Martin's Writers School and from which he had sent out into

the world a disproportionate share of poets. Laski, Harrison had read, regarded the writing of poetry as man's highest calling and therefore worth the inevitable squandering of happy marriages and good health, to say nothing of sound finances. Largely due to his efforts, poetry had been enjoying something of a renaissance when he'd died, though one so mild as to barely register on the North American consciousness. Not one man in forty could today name a living poet, Harrison thought. Not one in a hundred could say who Carl Laski had been.

Harrison had also read the Roscoff biography, a book that purported to be literary but showed almost no interest in the work itself. Rather, Roscoff had focused on the more lurid aspects of Laski's life: his abusive father, his early drinking problem, his nearly obsessive womanizing while a professor at New York University, his disastrous first marriage, the loss of his sons in a bitter custody battle, and his subsequent self-imposed (and somewhat misanthropic) exile to the backwater college of St. Martin's in western Massachusetts. "Your husband should have won the Nobel Prize," Harrison said.

Nora laughed. "If he were here, he'd agree with you."

"Was it difficult for him, being passed up year after year?"

"It . . . it was an *event* each time it was awarded. I mean that it would register. Like a small seismic shudder. He'd hear the news or read it in the newspaper, or someone would call and tell him, and his face, for just a moment, would cave in. Even as he was ranting about the winner or reading another part of the paper. The only time . . . the only time he didn't mind personally was when Seamus Heaney won. He loved Seamus."

Harrison set down his cup. Laski had been thirty years older than Nora. The two had met when Nora was nineteen; Laski, forty-nine. "Was it ever an issue between you — the age difference?" he asked.

"Only that he had to die before me."

Harrison listened for a note of bitterness or grief.

"We always knew it would happen," she added.

Harrison nodded.

"We just didn't know it would be so awful. One night . . . one night when it was really bad, Carl said, 'It's so easy.' I thought he meant the pain. That somehow the pain had eased up. But he meant dying. That he'd found an easy way to die."

Laski had filled his bathtub, plugged in the hair dryer, and let it drop. Harrison remembered precisely where he'd been when he learned the startling news. An editor Harrison had once worked with in Toronto had walked by his table in a New York City restaurant, bent down, and murmured, *Have you heard about Carl Laski?*

"A terrible end to a magnificent life," Harrison said now.

Nora was silent.

"The courage to do that," he added.

"Carl . . . Carl would have said 'cowardice.'"

"He had throat cancer?"

"He kept saying that he could never have described the pain. Not even at the height of his powers. That it defied words."

"It's hard for the healthy to imagine pain like that."

"But what was truly horrible, Carl always said, was the knowing. Knowing he was going to die."

Harrison agreed. He could think of few things in life worse than knowing when one was going to die, for it seemed to him that all the days in between — between the *now* and the *then* — would be tainted, poisoned by that bitter knowledge. "In the end, he picked his own time," he said.

Nora stood, smoothing the hem of her blouse across the flat of her stomach. She had the body of a woman who had not had children, and Harrison thought briefly of his wife's body: muscular and elongated from swimming, yet still there was the small curve of

her belly, a swelling he loved to touch. "Want to sit outside?" Nora asked, opening the double doors.

Harrison expected a sudden chill, but the air that came in from the small veranda outside the library was warm. "You and Agnes have stayed friends, I take it," he said as he stood.

"Yes. We . . . we don't see each other much, but we write. She's kind of old-fashioned. Our Agnes. She stayed on at Kidd. She teaches there."

Harrison remembered Agnes's sturdy body, her dreamy nature, her fascination with history.

"She finally bought a computer when the school put a gun to her head," Nora said. "She hides it under the bed and takes it out only to post her grades."

Harrison laughed.

"Bridget's mother and sister will come for the wedding. Bill's family won't come. They're angry with him for . . . well, for leaving his wife and daughter for Bridget. Bridget's son is bringing a friend to keep him company. They're fifteen. It'll be a small wedding. More a wedding supper than a wedding. Though Bill is intent upon the details. I've helped him plan the flowers and the menu. He wants it to be . . . perfect. For Bridget."

"What's wrong with her?" Harrison asked.

"Breast cancer."

Harrison sucked in his breath. The mother of a fifteen-year-old boy. He didn't want to think about it.

He shaded his eyes with his hand. "What's that over there?" he asked.

"It's the top of a roller coaster," Nora said cheerfully. "In the summer, with binoculars, you can see the people in the cars. You can watch them make the long, slow climb to the top and then hurtle out of sight below the trees. Then, as if by magic, you can see them emerge again. They seem to spin off into the air."

"I've never been on a roller coaster," Harrison confessed. "The closest I've ever come is when my mother used to take me to Cinerama when I was a kid."

"I don't think I ever went to Cinerama."

"It was the first of the wide-screen movies. It made you feel as though you were right there — sitting in the car of a roller coaster, or climbing a mountain. It was meant to give you the thrill and sensation of movement."

"I can't do it anymore," she said. "The roller coaster. Carl did though. He'd snatch at any excuse to go. He'd borrow children if necessary." She looked at her watch, and Harrison thought about the notion of borrowing children. "Tell me about yourself," she said.

"Not much to tell."

"You're married."

"Yes. My wife and I live in Toronto with our two boys, Charlie and Tom. Evelyn, my wife, is an estate lawyer."

"How did you end up there? In Toronto?"

"Evelyn is from Toronto."

"You're . . . in publishing?"

"Yes."

Nora rocked herself in a chair. "Tell me more about your wife."

"Evelyn? Well, let's see. She's French Canadian. She's tall and has short blond hair. I think her hair might actually be gray now, but she never lets anyone see it. She's a very good mother."

Harrison had then a quick image of Evelyn and the boys at home. He could see the interior of their town house, particularly the small, cluttered kitchen. A jumble of laundry, including his boys' slippery red hockey shirts, would have spilled out onto the floor from the alcove where the washer and dryer were stowed. He could see the breakfast table with its boxes of American cereal that the boys favored, a tea bag rolled and hardened on a saucer. Evelyn would be in a pink cashmere robe Harrison had given her for her

birthday, and her hair would be askew from sleep. In the background would be the steady patter of an early morning news show. And Harrison realized, as he saw and heard this scene, that he did not wish himself there. With that realization came an emptiness he was all too familiar with, an emptiness that opened up whenever he found himself alone in a foreign place — a sense of floating, of not being anchored in the way that chores and hockey games and engagements will do. "My older son, Charlie, who's eleven, has Evelyn's looks but my disposition," Harrison said, "while Tom, who's nine, is the spitting image of me, but has Evelyn's disposition." He paused. "It's occasionally deeply unsettling," he added, smiling.

"And what disposition would that be?" Nora asked.

"Evelyn's?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I think most people would say she tends to be somewhat more dramatic than I am," Harrison answered, feeling mildly disloyal.

"And so you would be . . ."

"More even tempered," he said.

"Yes. I can see that," Nora said.

Sometimes Evelyn seemed closer to Harrison the farther away he was from her in a strict physical sense. When they were separated, he tended to think of her with more fondness than when he was with her, and he wondered if she felt the same. He sometimes thought that he had disappointed her in marriage — or, rather, that marriage, with its promise of constant love and physical intimacy, had disappointed them both. In her most dramatic and, paradoxically, romantic moments, Evelyn reproached herself for not having loved Harrison enough; but he couldn't ease her mind on this point without admitting to the death of hope. Together, they cared for the boys, attended to their jobs, and had made, he thought, a good family. And occasionally there were moments of

true joy, as when one or the other of the boys would say something winsome at the dinner table, and Harrison would catch Evelyn's eye, or as when, lying together in the bed, having made love in the forgiving half-light of an early Sunday morning, a kind of weekly hurdle crossed, Evelyn would put her head on his chest and he would stroke her shoulder, and a brief contentment would envelop them before they drifted off to sleep.

"Tell me a story," Nora said.

Harrison laughed. "You used to do this all the time."

"So I did."

He let his mind go blank. He sat in a rocker opposite and let some seconds pass.

"Once I was staying at Le Concorde in Quebec City," he said. "I had a view toward the Frontenac, down the Grande-Allée. Between my hotel and the Frontenac, there were a dozen rooftops. All shapes and sizes. And on one of these rooftops, there were four teenage boys. They had brooms, and I thought at first they'd been sent to the roof by maintenance to sweep off the snow. But it soon became apparent to me that they were making a hockey rink. The prospect of that was horrible, you see, because there was no guardrail, no barrier, and if one of the boys bodychecked the other, say, or if one simply lost his footing, he'd have slipped right off the roof. And died, presumably. The building was at least seven stories up."

Nora tilted her head, waiting for more.

"I couldn't take my eyes off them," Harrison said. "And yet, strangely, I didn't *do* anything. I didn't know what the name of the building was, and I thought that if I went out onto the street, I wouldn't be able to see which rooftop it was. So I did nothing."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

Nora rested her chin on the back of her hand. "What else?"

Harrison thought a minute. "Before I left to come here," he said, "I watched my wife get dressed for work. She had on two different socks. One long and one short. She hadn't shaved her legs."

"How did you feel about that?"

"I was faintly repulsed," he admitted. "I love my wife, by the way."

"But you see," Nora said, "you didn't include these facts. You edited. You would have omitted those details. If you'd been asked to give an account of yourself. And then I would have . . . I would have a very different picture of you."

"How so?"

"I now know that you're willing to share small secrets. You might be a closet coward. You probably don't like to get too involved. You're capable of being faintly repulsed by someone you love."

"Didn't you know these things already?"

"We were children then," Nora said. "We're . . . we're entirely different now."

Are we? Harrison wondered.

"What's that over there?" he asked, pointing. "That plume of smoke? It looks lethal."

"A paper bag factory. They say it's perfectly safe. But I don't believe it."

"Quite a forest," he said.

"It's deceptive. You can see only the tops of the trees from here. Below them, there are houses and roads and power lines. Even a McDonald's."

"Say it isn't so," Harrison said with mock horror.

"Afraid it is. There's a real forest behind the inn, though."

He craned his neck, but the roof blocked any view of the woods behind the inn. "The inn does well?" he asked.

"Surprisingly. It works the way I hoped it would work. There are . . . there are always problems — the too-low toilet seats being the most frequent complaint."

"I hadn't noticed."

"But many of our guests have returned. And they've told their friends about it. This year we're booked through to the end of February."

"Well done."

"I hadn't meant to compete. It hadn't ever really crossed my mind. I just wanted something of my own. But I am. Competing. With a whole string of B and Bs throughout the Berkshires."

"Who makes up your clientele?" he asked.

"Mostly people from Boston and New York. Looking to escape the cities. They profess to come for the charm — a sort of New England charm I find hokey. So I don't offer it. Apart from these L.L.Bean rockers we're sitting on. Or they come with an ideal of family togetherness that invariably unravels as the weekend progresses."

"You sound a bit cynical."

"What people really come for is the promise of sex and food and material goods. Not necessarily in that order. The outlets are just ten minutes away."

"Under all those trees."

Nora nodded.

"I'm actually hot sitting here," Harrison said with some surprise.

"Take off your sweater."

"I think I will. If we were primitive people, we'd be frightened by this, wouldn't we? This freakish weather."

"The inn was reviewed last year in *New York Magazine,*" Nora said. "The reviewer wrote that one could sit on the porch in December. He meant sit on the porch *in a parka,* but this year you can do it in shirtsleeves. The sun bakes the clapboards."

"The lawn is still green," he said.

"By this time of year, there's usually snow on the ground. Men who haven't been on sleds in years like to show off to their wives and children before their knees give out." She glanced at her watch. "I really have to go," she said, standing. "I have a rehearsal lunch. There's another wedding tomorrow. Agnes and Rob should be here by one. We'll have a private room for the dinner tonight. And of course one for tomorrow evening."

"Is that usual?" Harrison asked. "To have more than one wedding a weekend?"

"Oh, yes," Nora said. "I've sometimes had four in a weekend, all with rehearsal dinners. The trick . . . the trick is to keep the brides from running into one another. Each wants to think herself unique."

"Don't we all?" he said.

Nora smiled.

"I thought I might go for a walk," he said, standing as well. "I had breakfast on the way here."

"Good. So you're all set."

"I am."

Nora took a step away from him but then glanced back. "I suppose someone will mention Stephen?" she asked.

The name produced in Harrison, as it always did, a clench in his gut along with a slight oil slick of shame. He stood still and waited.

"I've been thinking about him a lot," Nora added.

Harrison was silent.

"Do you remember the funeral?"

"Of course," he said quietly.

"Grief, seen up close like that, is unbearable. It was so much worse than ours. So much more intense. It made me realize how shallowly we'd loved him."

"Perhaps," Harrison said, though at the time his love for his friend had felt intense enough.

"You and I haven't spoken to each other since the night of the party," Nora said.

"No, we haven't."

Nora looked at him for a moment, and he felt her scrutiny. "I wonder if this wasn't a mistake, agreeing to have the wedding here," she said. "Having you come is a little bit like taking a stick and poking it into a clear pond and watching the mud eddy up into the water."

"Was the pond so clear before I came?" he asked.

"It was," Nora said. "Yes, I think it was."

She turned, and Harrison watched her walk away along a narrow gravel path that circled around to the front of the inn. She moved briskly, head down, though she must have known he was looking at her. And doing so, he had a sudden and sharp memory of Nora as she had been when he'd seen her walking along a side street in Maine. He'd always remembered where and when he'd met Nora, but it had been years since he'd actually been able to *see* it as he could now. The clarity of the image took his breath away, and he thought, as he picked up his sweater from the rocker, that other such sharp pictures might reveal themselves during the weekend to come. For a moment, he stood with his hands on his hips and braced himself, even as he admired the spectacular view.