

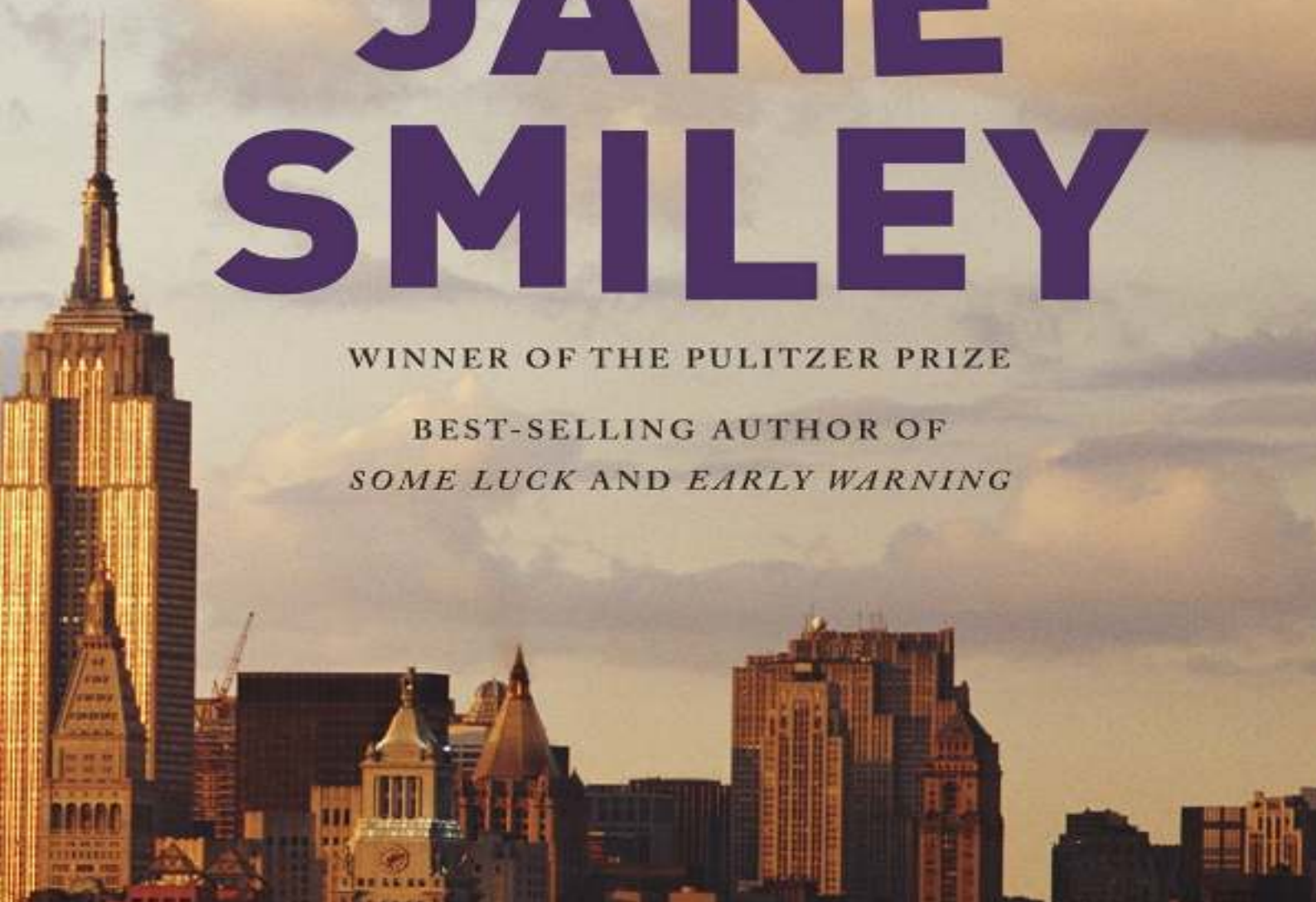
GOLDEN AGE

A novel

JANE SMILEY

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF
SOME LUCK AND EARLY WARNING





Fiction

Early Warning

Some Luck

Private Life

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Good Faith

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The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton

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Charles Dickens

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For Young Adults

Gee Whiz

Pie in the Sky

True Blue

A Good Horse

The Georges and the Jewels

Golden Age



JANE SMILEY



ALFRED A. KNOPF

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This trilogy is dedicated to John Whiston, Bill Silag, Steve Mortensen, and Jack Canning, with many thanks for decades of patience, laughter, insight, information, and assistance.

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Also by Jane Smiley

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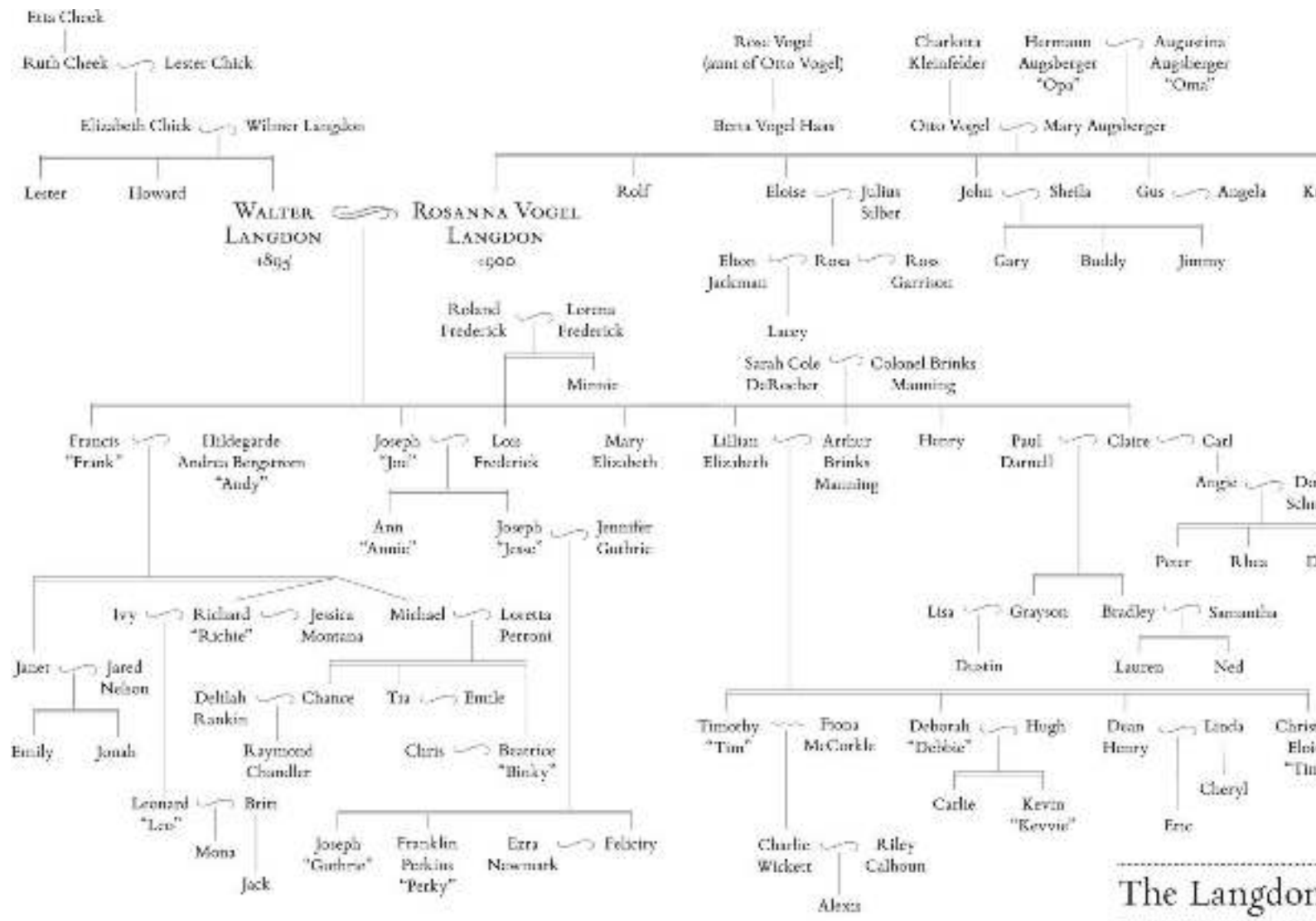
2017

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2019

Acknowledgments

A Note About the Author



The Langdon

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The Langdons

Walter Langdon (1895)

Wilmer Langdon—Walter’s father

Elizabeth Chick—Walter’s mother

Ruth Cheek and Lester Chick—Walter’s maternal grandparents

Etta Cheek—mother of Ruth Cheek

Lester and Howard—Walter’s brothers

Rosanna Vogel Langdon (1900)—Walter’s wife

Otto Vogel—Rosanna’s father

Mary Augsburg—Rosanna’s mother

Charlotta Kleinfelder—Otto’s mother

Herman and Augustina Augsburg (“Opa” and “Oma”)—Rosanna’s maternal grandparents

Rolf, Eloise, John, Gus, and Kurt—Rosanna’s siblings

Julius Silber—Eloise’s husband

Rosa—Eloise and Julius’s daughter

Elton Jackman—Rosa’s first husband, Lacey’s father

Lacey—Rosa and Elton’s daughter

Ross—Eloise’s second husband

Shelia—John’s wife

Gary, Buddy, Jimmy—John and Sheila’s sons

Angela—Gus’s wife

Francis “Frank” Langdon—first child of Walter and Rosanna

Hildegard Andrea Bergstrom “Andy”—Frank’s wife

Janet—Frank and Andy’s eldest daughter

Jared Nelson—Janet’s husband

Emily and Jared—Janet and Jared’s children

Richard “Richie” & Michael—Frank and Andy’s twin sons

Ivy—Richie’s wife

Leonard “Leo”—Richie and Ivy’s son

Britt—Leo’s wife

Mona—Leo and Britt’s daughter

Jack—Britt’s son

Loretta Perroni—Michael’s wife

Chance, Tia, Beatrice “Binky”—Michael and Loretta’s children

Delilah Rankin—Chance’s wife

Raymond Chandler—Chance and Delilah’s son

Emile—Tia’s husband

Chris—Binky’s husband

Joseph “Joe” Langdon—second child of Walter and Rosanna

Lois Frederick—Joe’s wife

Roland and Lorena Frederick—Lois’s parents

Minnie—Lois’s sister

Ann “Annie” and Joseph “Jesse”—Joe and Lois’s children

Jennifer Guthrie—Jesse’s wife

Joseph “Guthrie,” Franklin Perkins “Perky,” and Felicity—Jesse and Jennifer’s children

Ezra Newmark—Felicity’s husband

Mary Elizabeth Langdon—third child of Walter and Rosanna

Lillian Elizabeth Langdon—fourth child of Walter and Rosanna

Arthur Brinks Manning—Lillian’s husband

Sarah Cole DeRocher and Colonel Brinks Manning—Arthur’s parents

Timothy “Tim,” Deborah “Debbie,” Dean Henry, and Christina Eloise “Tina”—Lillian and Arthur’s children

Charlie Wickett—Tim’s son

Fiona McCorkle—Charlie’s mother

Riley Calhoun—Charlie’s wife

Alexis—Tim and Riley’s daughter

Hugh—Debbie’s husband

Carlie and Kevin “Kevvie”—Debbie and Hugh’s children

Linda—Dean’s wife

Eric—Dean and Linda’s son

Cheryl—Linda’s daughter

Henry—fifth child of Walter and Rosanna

Claire—sixth child of Walter and Rosanna

Paul Darnell—Claire’s first husband

Grayson and Bradley—Claire and Paul’s sons

Lisa—Grayson’s wife

Dustin—Grayson and Lisa’s son

Samantha—Bradley’s wife

Laure and Ned—Bradley and Samantha’s children

Carl—Claire’s second husband

Angie—Carl's daughter

Doug Schmidt—Angie's husband

Peter, Rhea, and Dash—Angie and Doug's children



IT WAS FRIDAY. Everyone was somewhere else, doing last-minute chores. The tall young man got out of his little green station wagon, stretched, looked around, took off his sunglasses, and started up the walk. Minnie Frederick, who saw him through her bedroom window, dropped the stack of sheets she was carrying and ran down the stairs. But he was not at the door, and when she went out onto the porch, he was nowhere to be seen. Back in the house, through the kitchen, out onto the stoop. Still nothing, apart from Jesse, her nephew, a noisy dot, cultivating the bean field east of the Osage-orange hedge. She walked around the house to the front porch. The car was still there. She crossed to it and looked in the window. A pair of fancy boots in the foot well of the passenger's seat, two wadded-up pieces of waxed paper, a soda can. She stood beside the green car for a long moment, then touched the hood. It was warm. It was real. She was not imagining things, sixty-seven years old, she who came from a long line of crazy people on all sides, who was both happy and relieved to have chosen long ago not to reproduce. What, she thought, was the not-crazy thing to do? It was to make a glass of iced tea and see if her sister, Lois, had left any shortbread in the cookie jar.

When did Lois first mention him—Charlie Wickett—sometime in January? But Minnie hadn't paid attention, because she was planning her summer trip to Rome. He was Tim's son, Lillian and Arthur's grandson, produced by means of one of those irresponsible high-school romances that every principal was only too familiar with. The baby had ended up in St. Louis. Tim had ended up in Vietnam, killed by a grenade fragment. Charlie now lived in Aspen, said he would be happy to meet everyone, to drive to Denby, and within a week, a reunion had exploded around his coming. They were all heading to the farm—Frank and Andy, Michael and Richie with their wives and kids, Janet, alone (Minnie remembered that Janet had always had a thing about Tim), Arthur and Debbie and her kids (Hugh, her husband, couldn't come because of exams, though). There hadn't been a family gathering of this size since Claire's wedding—1962, that was. Minnie hoped everyone would mind their manners. She knew plenty of farm families who did not get along, but they kept their conflicts to themselves and behaved at least in public. Families that had scattered, like the Langdons, could end up looking and acting like alien species of a single genus. Frank had nothing in common with Joe (never had), except that, thanks to Frank, the farm was paid off. Frank let Jesse and Joe work the land however they wished. Lillian, whom everyone had loved, had passed three and a half years before, and there was plenty of family gossip about what a mess Arthur and Debbie were. Dean kept to himself, and Tina, the youngest, had taken off to the mountains of Idaho. She wasn't coming (but she had driven down to Aspen, met Charlie, liked him, and issued a bulletin in the form of a drawing that depicted a handsome, laughing kid. How she had gotten the twinkle into his eye, Minnie didn't understand). For once, Henry was coming from Chicago (Minnie suspected that no one in Chicago knew that Henry was a farm kid). Only Claire, who was driving up from Des Moines, was a regular visitor. A big party. Lois was in charge of the cooking, Jen in charge of shopping, Joe in charge of the generous welcome. Minnie had done a lot of cleaning.

Now Charlie appeared on the other side of the screen door, loose-limbed and fit. He saw her, h

smiled, and Minnie said, "I thought you were a phantom."

"Oh, I am sorry," said Charlie. "When I got out of the car and realized how hot it was getting, decided I had to take my run right away, so I ran around the section. What is that, do you think?"

"Four miles," said Minnie.

He said, "Well, I'm not used to the heat yet. But it's really flat, so that makes up for it a little."

She got up and opened the door. She said, "I'll bet you'd like some water."

She took a glass out of the drainer and held it under the tap. Not too brown. Lois had bought some kind of French sparkling water for the weekend, though Minnie was surprised you could get that sort of thing in Iowa. He tilted his head back, opened his mouth, poured it down. She didn't see the Langdon in him the way Frank had when he first espied him in a coffee shop in Aspen last fall, and supposedly, was convinced the boy was a younger version of himself. Nor did she hear it in his voice (but, then, she hadn't spent much time with Tim). What she saw was grace and a ready smile. His eyes flicked here and there as he drank—he was no less observant than Frank, probably, but he looked like those kids she had known over the years whose parents were indulgent and easygoing, kids who understood that redemption was automatic.

Yes, she was charmed.

She said, "I've made the bed in your room. You can take your things up there and have a rest, you'd like. Everyone else should be home in a bit. Jen took Guthrie and Perky into town to Hy-Vee but she should be back any time." He filled his glass again and drank it down. She said, "My name is Minnie Frederick; my sister, Lois, is married to your great-uncle Joe. Gosh, we sound old! I'm the dedicated aunt of Annie and Jesse, also nosy neighbor, retired local principal, and arbiter of disputes."

"Are we going to need one of those?"

"We should know by tomorrow evening."

The smile popped out. He said, "I thought of bringing my protection squad along, but she had work."

"Your girlfriend?"

He nodded.

"We heard about her."

"You did?"

"You don't know that you were followed, that your license-plate number was jotted down, that your every move went into the photographic memory of Frank Langdon?"

"When was that?"

"Last September. You sold him boots, too."

Charlie shook his head, but he didn't seem disconcerted. He looked at the ceiling moldings for a moment, then said, "May I look around the house? My mom would love this house."

"It's a kit house from 1916. It arrived on the train, and my father, grandfather, and uncles helped put it together. There used to be lots of other houses around, including the Langdon place, which you could see from here, but that one had to be torn down. We had a one-room schoolhouse within walking distance, but that's gone now. In some places, there are a few trees where houses used to be." Minnie made herself stop talking, only said, "But you look around, ask questions if you want. I'm going to clean up in here."

He went through the swinging door into the dining room. She tried to imagine how the place looked

to him. Old, though not decrepit. Weighty? Awkwardly set into the tall-grass prairie (maybe a sod hut would be more appropriate)? She had lived here her whole life, except for a few years in Cedar Falls getting her teaching degree. Her parents had died here, and not easily—her mother had lingered for years after her stroke, with only Minnie to take care of her and Lois after her father disappeared, and then her father returned, full of drunken resolve to get something back that was owed him; Lois had found him at the bottom of the cellar stairs, his head smashed into the concrete. (What had he been looking for? Booze? Treasure? Revenge?) But if every day was spent in the same place, then bad days were overlaid by good ones, your home was just your home, there was no reason for restlessness. Even the story Minnie told herself, that she'd always and only loved Frank, was a dusty remnant now that she had watched him habitually disregard the beautiful Andy, now that she'd realized that the small value he placed on his wife had its source in him rather than her. If Frank had, by some miracle, appreciated Minnie, for these forty years ago, and loved her, and married her instead of Andy, he would have estimated her, too, at less than her real value. It wasn't in him, whatever it was.

Charlie came back into the kitchen as Minnie was wiping down the sink. He said, "Airy."

Minnie laughed. "Well, exactly. But thanks for reminding me to shut the windows. We can keep out maybe five degrees of heat if we close the place down for the afternoon. Tonight might be okay; your room has a fan, at any rate. No air conditioner—sorry."

"Oh, I don't like air conditioners. My grandmother's lived in St. Louis for almost sixty years without an air conditioner. She believes in wringing a cloth out in cool water, then folding it across the back of your neck."

"She sounds enterprising. You do what you want. There's always plenty of food. You weren't supposed to be here till tomorrow, but I'll tell Jesse and Jen that you'll be coming and going as you please."

And he took her hand in his warm one, squeezed it, and said, "Thanks! Thanks, Minnie. You are great! I hope all the Langdons are like you."

—

THE OFFICIAL DINNER WAS Sunday at three. Janet was standing maybe a little too close to her cousin Debbie, but Debbie didn't seem to notice. She was saying, "Why would we ever see him again, now that he's seen us roast this hog? I mean, look at the smoke over the house, like a black cloud. Could it be any cruder?" Debbie sneezed. They were in the kitchen—Janet slicing tomatoes, Debbie chopping celery. Through the window, Janet could see the whole family staring at the sizzling pig; of course her dad looked avid, but everyone else was smiling in anticipation, too. Janet had thought meringues and soufflés were more Aunt Lois's sort of thing. Debbie went on, "I mean, I was ready for Tim's doppelgänger, you know? But I don't see it in this Charlie. And that's a relief." Janet did see it, though—the hips, the hair, the vocal timbre. Debbie said, "I admit I was afraid at first, and to you, I will admit why—the comeback of the golden boy." She shook her head. "But this is good for me. I've come to terms with my own issues, which everyone has to do at some point, right?"

Janet did not confess the waves of irrational hope that had broken over her these last few weeks. This Charlie would be something of a resurrection; would she adore him, would she embarrass herself? Her childhood worship of her cousin Tim was family legend. She said, "I hope so." Charlie had turned out to be himself, in spite of his resemblance to Tim. And Janet had turned out to have no feelings toward Charlie other than regular first impressions. She said, "At least he's not some strange

product of my dad's youth."

"Uncle Frank had a youth?" They both smiled. "Who said that?"

"My mom," Janet said. "She thinks of that as a joke." Debbie rolled her eyes. Janet said, "Has anyone told Fiona?" Janet remembered Fiona as Debbie's wild and intimidating equestrian girlfriend, much braver than any horsey girl Janet had known at Madeira or Sweet Briar. That Fiona had been all interested in any boy, even Tim, and had gotten pregnant, was more than a little startling.

"I did," said Debbie.

"How did she react?"

Debbie spun toward her, knife in hand. "She said, I quote, 'How interesting. Oh dear. There's the van. I'll call you.' "

"Did she ever call you?"

Debbie shook her head.



HE FIT RIGHT IN, thought Henry, who was standing on the back stoop, letting the breeze blow the stench from the roasting hog away from him. Extrovert, for sure. Charlie didn't just shake your hand, he patted you on the shoulder, looked you in the eye. From where he was standing on the porch, a little elevated, Henry could see the pattern—the kid would go from group to group, listen first, say something, listen again, his head bent slightly forward. When he was introduced to Henry, he'd said, "Oh, I hear you teach medieval literature! I took two semesters of that, and, you know, it wasn't what I expected." What had he expected? "Well, you can imagine: the first book I ever read was *The Once and Future King*. I thought it would be lots of sorcerers, not so many monks." Charming, but he was not Henry's type. Were he to show up in, say, Henry's freshman lit class, Henry would prod him, treat him a little severely, imply all semester that Charlie Wickett wasn't putting anything past Professor Langdon. The boy might rise to the occasion—sometimes they did. Minnie leaned out the door and said, "Time to get organized!" Everyone began moving toward the table.



EMILY SAID that she had to go to the bathroom, but it was just so that she could wait and see where her mom was sitting, and then sit somewhere else. The downstairs bathroom door was closed, though, so she went upstairs, and instead of going to the bathroom, she went through the baby's room and out onto the back porch. From there she could see over the fields to the horizon, and she could imagine her favorite thing, which was flying. She didn't know how this had started, but maybe from dreaming. Now the dreams and the made-up stuff were mixed up in her mind. She often thought about a myth they had read this year in her school, where a father figured out a way to fly (the book showed giant spreading wings, like eagle wings), but he put the wings together with wax, and when the son got too close to the sun, the wax melted, and the son fell into the ocean. Eli Grissom, who sat behind her in class, pointed out that the son—Icarus, his name was (Eli pronounced it "EYE-carus")—could not have gotten ninety-three million miles in ten minutes, if at all, but in spite of Eli, Emily imagined almost every day, the wings catching an updraft, the boy feeling himself lifted, the warmth and the brightness all around. It was too bad, Emily thought, that he didn't remember how birds bend their necks and fold their wings and swoop downward—maybe he was so excited that, when the wax started melting and the feathers dropped away, he didn't notice it in time. Emily rested her hands on the sill.

and leaned toward the window. The horizon was a beautiful thing, she thought.



“THERE SHE IS,” said Joe. He cocked his head toward the second-story windows, and Janet looked up. She said, “I thought she was going to the bathroom!” She began to push her chair back, but Joe said, “She’ll be fine.” Janet looked up again, bit her lip. She said, “Uncle Joe, I should have done what Loretta’s done. Emily could have gotten lost in the crowd. She hates being an only child.”

Joe shifted his position—his hip was bothering him a lot this year—and said, “Sweetheart, and number’s the wrong number.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I really do.”

Joe patted Janet on the knee. She gave him an uncertain look, then went back to staring at Emily. There wasn’t a time Joe could remember seeing Janet, even as a toddler, when she didn’t look like a face outside the window, exiled, staring at the warmth inside. According to Lois, this was all Andy’s fault; according to Minnie, it was all Frank’s fault. Joe hadn’t intended to say what he said—it just popped out. But it was true, and not only with regard to inheritances. He and Lois had agreed that Joe’s childhood on this farm, as Frank’s much-pummeled younger brother by two years, had been a nightmare, and so he and Lois had decided that Annie and Jesse were enough; but as a result, Annie and Jesse had never gotten a moment’s privacy. Joe’s always darling sister, Lillian, and her adored Arthur seemed to have hit on the right mix, but Debbie, their skeptical oldest, would not have agreed. Your hog had a big litter, and you were glad, but then there were always those runts consigned to the hind teats, who didn’t have much of a chance. Joe had bred his retrievers twice. Thirteen pups the first time, two pups the second time. You are never satisfied, said Lois. The corn crop was too big, the corn crop was too small. Impossible to know what to hope for.

Well, it was Jesse’s problem now. Jesse was scientifically trained, and he sank all his dreams into predictive models. When he had gone to Frank and asked for some money to use to trade commodities futures, Frank was proud of him—playing both ends, good strategy, and why not—but Joe himself had been too dumb to think of it.

Still, it made Joe uncomfortable when Jesse talked about “growth medium” and “inputs” and “upticks.” He spent his evenings on a computer, and when he walked the fields, it was with soil moisture instruments and that sort of thing in his hand. If he wondered about the weather, he watched the news, not the western horizon, and he would never in a million years name a sheep or pat a cow. What you needed to do these days, just to survive, was to turn it into an equation. With an equation every solution was interesting, even the one that put you out of business. Lois set Joe’s plate before him, patted him on the shoulder, then said, “Kevvie? You want a popover? I made some.”



NOW EVERYONE WAS SEATED, including Emily, who had come around the house and claimed the seat beside Andy. Andy squeezed her granddaughter’s hand and spooned some of the pork and the potato salad from her own plate onto Emily’s. Emily’s head dipped forward and her nostrils flared, suddenly reminding Andy of what had happened sometime before dawn. She and Frank had the guest room of that funny house where Joe and Lois lived, now that they’d let Jesse, Jen, and the two boys take over the big house. The room suited Frank (twin beds, a row of six double-hung windows facing east), and

while they were getting ready for the night, he had gotten a little talkative about Charlie: he was entirely wrong, the kid *did* look like him from the back; he had recognized when he bought the book that the kid had gotten a gene for agreeability from somewhere, but Joe was agreeable, Jesse was agreeable (he smiled automatically when he referred to Jesse, couldn't help himself). He hadn't thought of Tim at the time, but if he had...Andy had drifted off to the sound of his voice.

The double-hung windows looked out on the back field, and when a light along the fence line came on, she woke up. There was a fox, triangular head, dark eyes, pointed ears, gray and bushy but small, taking a drink from the dogs' water bowl. The window was open; she could hear lapping. She stared wide awake at once. The fox lifted its head, looked away, looked at her. She would not have said this to anyone, but she did trade a thought with it before it trotted off—not words, but perspective, the tunnel through the corn, amplified sounds of crickets, the crusty feel of the dirt beneath its paws.



WHEN HIS TWIN BROTHER, Michael, started yelling at their cousin Jesse about farm subsidies, Richie saw with amusement that Loretta's immediate reaction, though her hands were full with Binky, six months old, who was burping or something, was to knock Michael's bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon off the table—surely an effort to distract him. Richie licked his lips and took a bite of potato salad to hide his smile. Michael and Loretta had been married for almost eight years now, and Loretta had informed Richie that sometimes distraction did work with Michael: The last time he was in California, the Labrador retriever had taken Michael's dirty undershorts and was found rolling on them out in one of the horse paddocks. When Loretta came upon Michael holding the Lab by the collar and taking off his belt, she rammed the corner of a box she was carrying into his side, as if by accident, and when he jumped off the way, no doubt shouting, "What the fuck fuck this fuck that!" he lost his grip on the dog, who ran off. Loretta said that they ended up laughing about the undershorts. She said Michael had a good sense of humor. Yeah, right, thought Richie. She had also said—with perfect sincerity, as far as Richie could tell—that she and her mother agreed, if you wanted a man with some fire in him, and who didn't, you had to deal with getting burned every so often.

Jesse was shaking his head. "I think you have to accept that farming doesn't fit easily into the free market—"

"Bullshit!"

"The free market doesn't control the weather—"

"Externals can be accounted for, and would be, if the government would allow it. The subsidies are what destroy the market, and let bad farmers keep farming!"

Jesse's good-natured wife, Jen, was breathing a little hard. She said, quietly, "Why do you care? Why is it your business?"

"Because I don't want to pay taxes to keep you in your fucking house if you aren't competitive enough to keep it on your own."

Richie reached for another piece of the pork, happy not to be involved, then kissed his own wife, one year, Ivy, on the cheek. Ivy made a face and squeezed his knee affectionately. They were in complete agreement that this reunion would count as one of the four times per year that they had to see his brother, Loretta, and the kids.

The real problem, Richie knew that Loretta knew, was that Michael's mistress, Lynne, had kicked him out two weeks ago, and, worse than that, it had been a surprise—Michael had thought he was safe.

until someone he preferred came along. It was pretty obvious to Richie that Lynne had taken up with Michael mostly to get connected to his Wall Street friends as clients for her remodeling business. Loretta wasn't supposed to know this, of course.

Now Michael got himself together. In their whole life, possibly even in the womb, Michael had been good at getting himself together, though often his initial go-to strategy had been hammering Richie a few times. Michael coughed and said, "Okay. Okay." Then he leaned forward and poked Binky lightly in the chest. He smooched at her, "Peek-a-boo, you!" He held out his arms, and Loretta put their still-fussing daughter into them. He stood up. "I think we need a little walk."

Nothing about this persuaded Richie that it would be good to have a kid.



THE PERSON Charlie reminded Arthur Manning of was not Tim as much as his own father, and not his father as he'd known him, but his father in old black-and-white photographs from the 1890s—he had short pants and long hair, and had been told to be still but wasn't quite able to accomplish that; the ghost of a smile fluttered around the child's mouth, strangely predicting the ebullient Brinks Manning who spent a lifetime not going into battle, but procuring things for going into battle, not caring for his son, but making sure that his son was cared for by kind and amusing nannies, teachers, principals. There was no one more useful, and in some sense more self-assured, than a practical young man, and Charlie Wickett was a practical man who, by his own account, had been solving this problem and this problem for as long as he could remember. (When is the best time to escape the house? When Mom is taking a shower. When is the best time to talk your way into the high-dive class? When they are fed up with you but can't resist your smile. When is the best time to ask a girl out? When she thinks her new haircut makes her look bad. When is the best time to tell your parents you are leaving St. Louis for Colorado? When they are delirious with relief that you actually graduated from college and have a job, even though it is with some sort of wilderness rafting company. When is the best time to dive out of the raft? Just above a waterfall that looks dramatic but really isn't—gives the customers a frisson of excitement and is quite refreshing on a hot afternoon, especially good if the other rafting guides are coached to shout, "Hey! Hey! Oh my God!")

Charlie made Arthur laugh, and he made Arthur grateful that he had missed those early years. After dessert, Debbie sat down next to Charlie, and she and Arthur did the thing that maybe they were destined to do: they alternated telling him stories about his mother, Fiona—fox hunting, jumping huge jumps in shows, standing on her horse's back and racing down the hill—but sweeter ones, too, Fiona teaching her horse to push a little tire with his nose, Tim hiding raw eggs all over the house on Easter, playing in his band, the Colts, going to a used-car dealer with his best friend and paying six hundred dollars for a ten-year-old Dodge with sawdust in the engine that managed to roll down the hill out of the dealer's yard but got no farther. "And," said Arthur, "those are only the stories we know. They were pretty good at keeping secrets, Tim and Fiona."

"So good we never realized that your parents knew each other," said Debbie.

Arthur had told Charlie that Tim had been killed in Vietnam, but none of the details, and that Tim's mom, Lillian, universally adored (Debbie nodding), had died of a metastatic brain tumor—"She would have loved you"—but none of the details about that. What had Arthur done before he retired? Charlie wanted to know. Debbie looked away; Arthur said that he worked in the federal government, waving his hand as if he meant the Department of Agriculture, certainly giving no details about what he had really done, the agency he had really worked for. All three agreed that Arthur and Debbie should meet

FRANK HAD DONE his best. He hadn't said anything impatient, cutting, sharp. He had prevented his foot from tapping irritably under the table. He had spoken when spoken to, smiled when he had to, bounced his grandson Chance on his knee. When he finally fled, he did it smoothly, with a congenial nod, not saying, or even implying, that the clamor of voices was driving him crazy. He strolled as if idly, as if only admiring the straightness of Jesse's rows, out toward the bean field. He put his hands in his pockets and looked west and north, pretending to care about the weather. Twelve more hours and he could leave, whether the others went with him or not. Yes, he was too old to find his origin maddening. Yes, he was too mature to be hurt that Jesse hardly spoke to him. (How many letters had he written to Jesse? More than to anyone else he had ever known, for sure.) Walking along the lilac bushes, remembering his mother, Rosanna, clipping the flowers (they had grown so much that she wouldn't be able to reach them now), he took some long, intentional deep breaths, clenched and unclenched his fists, turned around at last, stared at everyone. Everything was easier to take if he couldn't hear them. It mattered less that Andy was gazing into the trees, that Emily was jumping up and down, that Janet kept wringing her hands without even knowing it, that Richie was practically entrapping Ivy in his bearlike embrace, that Michael was flexing his muscles. Charlie was the prize but he was Arthur's prize. Charlie was a restless one—huddling with Arthur and Debbie, nodding and laughing, then bouncing from his chair. The person Frank saw in him was not himself anymore, not Tim, not any Langdon, but Arthur, the only truly charismatic human being Frank had ever known, the one who could get you to do whatever crazy thing he wanted you to, not because he had a good argument, or made you an offer you couldn't refuse, but because he wrapped you in a story, filled you with pleasure, dared you to do it. Frank saw Charlie ask Jesse a question, and saw Jesse lean forward intent upon answering thoughtfully. His mother would have said, "Well, pick of the litter. No two ways about that."

CHARLIE KNEW that the Highway 61 he was on wasn't the one Dylan meant in the song, but he was glad to be on it—it was much more lost in time than 70, or 80, or 90. He'd already passed Keokuk, gone over a tiny bridge across the Des Moines River, toll ten cents. Iowa made Missouri look very strange. North of the border, towns were flat, with wide streets, grain elevators, and unpretentious storefronts. Houses and barns were close to the road, and fields were neatly planted in corn and beans. South of the border, the landscape was hillier and the houses, with their verandas and even a few columns, were set far up long driveways. He remembered from college that Missouri had once been a great producer of hemp. Charlie was in favor of hemp, but Riley, his girlfriend back in Aspen, was ready to wear hemp, live inside hemp walls, sauté her onions in hemp oil, eat hemp seed for breakfast, write on hemp paper, shampoo with hemp, rappel with hemp (Charlie preferred nylon), and then compost her waste products and grow more hemp.

When he got to Hannibal, he turned off the highway and drove through town; and why would you not leave this run-down but self-satisfied burg when you were eighteen, as Mark Twain had done, and head south, west, east, anywhere you possibly could? He stopped on 3rd Street and went into a café for a Coke, but the cigarette smoke nearly drove him out. At the Langdon farm, only Michael had smoked and he did it on the back stoop, right beside a bowl of sand for stubbing out and burying his butt.

Thinking of Michael made Charlie laugh. He'd acted like the arm wrestling was a joke, at least at first—“Oh, your face is turning red! Oh, your eyeballs are rolling! Okay, I'm going to actually try now!” laughing, sticking out his tongue. But Charlie could feel in his own arm and shoulder and in Michael's grip that Michael was trying harder than he pretended; in the third round, he could feel the jolt of anger that held Michael's arm steady just when Charlie thought he had him. It had crossed Charlie's mind then that he could get a punch in the jaw, but suddenly Michael had smiled, backed off. Later the other woman, the wife of Michael's twin, came up to him and apologized. Of course, his mother would have called Michael a bully, but Charlie had a lot of experience with bullies—you outgrew them, you walked away from them, or you took them down in an unexpected way, like the time in seventh grade, before he'd outgrown anyone, when he noticed that his customary tormentor, Bobby Rombauer, had just gotten braces; when Bobby grabbed his shoulder that day, Charlie whipped around and smacked him on the mouth, flat-handed. Ouch. Bobby never touched him again.

South of Hannibal, the highway veered inland, through some areas that made Charlie want to stop and get out and run a mile or two, but he knew Mom was expecting him by dinnertime, and dinnertime was six—he could get a couple of miles in before the sun went down at eight, and maybe the humidity wouldn't be so bad by then, anyway. She had been her usual agreeable self about this whole reunion thing. His parents had always been open about his adoption. He was blond, they were dark; he was tall, they were short; he misbehaved, they liked rules and catechisms and confessions and routine. She didn't say what he knew she was thinking—“You'll do what you want to do no matter what”—she just said, “That ought to be very interesting. Have fun!”

The one he liked best was still Tina, who had come by the shop in April. She was quiet and easygoing; even while taking him and Riley to lunch, she'd been looking at things, and not just the mountains and the clouds, which everyone looked at, but cobwebs and moldings and stray cats hidden. She was observant, and when she left Charlie her phone number and a sincere invitation to come to Sun Valley for a visit, she'd doodled his own face beside it, a likeness that Riley now kept in her wallet.

It was sunny and getting hot; he drove into range of KSHE and turned the radio up. Some Guns N' Roses carried him across the Missouri River, a beautiful and evocative waterway and, in Charlie's opinion, the true main branch of the river. The bridge was a high one, taking him from the bluffs on the north side to the flatlands on the south side. The afternoon sunlight glinted in lengthening rays on the opaque water. He wondered if he would ever see his grandfather Arthur again. It was uncanny to meet your family as strangers, to look like them, to see yourself in them, but have feelings for them that were only random and new, not conditioned into you. And here he was—this was the oddest thought—alive, speeding through Chesterfield, knowing that in two weeks, when he turned twenty-two, he would have outlived his own father.

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IVY WAS in the shower, and Richie was lingering over the front page of the *Times*, when he heard the telltale creak in the fifth step of the third flight of stairs—their flight of stairs—which meant that someone was on his way up, and certainly it was Michael, since Loretta and the kids were back in California; without them, Michael was an early riser. Why sleep when you could get on the motorcycle, zip across the Brooklyn Bridge, terrify everyone on Flatbush Avenue, then get something to eat? Richie hadn't heard the bike, but the window of the co-op faced away from Eighth Avenue onto the tiny yard behind their building. Always drawn to disaster stories, Richie had just finished

reading the article about hundred-mile-an-hour winds, whirlwinds, and square miles of fallen trees southeast of London (didn't they know what a tornado was?). The accompanying picture was of a beached ferry. A British radio announcer had named the storm "Hurricane Ethelred," but so far only thirteen people had died. Michael shook the door handle as if he had a right to come in, and Richie got up from the table. On the way to the door, he picked up the coffee pot. Maybe a cup left.

Richie knew about the stock-market dip—everyone did. He had nothing to say about it. He hoped he could remember that when Michael began babbling. He opened the door. "Fuck," said Michael.

Richie couldn't tell if he was saying this in a positive way or a negative way. He stepped back and Michael strode in. Richie said, "Haven't seen you in a while."

Michael said, "Fuck, I am rich. I am fucking rich."

"Sounds like you're the only one," said Richie.

"I don't mind that," said Michael. "If you could've seen those guys yesterday, just standing around with their mouths open—what does Uncle Joe say? 'Catching flies.' You got some coffee?" He took a cup out of the cabinet and poured out the pot, then pulled out a chair and sat down. "What does the fucking *Times* say?"

"Haven't gotten to the business section yet."

Michael began rummaging through the paper, and found the article he was looking for. "Fuck!" he shouted. "Three hundred thirty-eight million shares! Ha!" He sucked down his coffee as if he didn't even notice that it was hot, and leaned his chair back. His head grazed the window. If, Richie thought, he should lose his balance, he would certainly crack his head on the sill, maybe even break the window and cut open his scalp.

"A hundred points! A hundred and eight, really. You know how many points the Dow fell in 1929? Thirty-eight. So many guys are just completely fucked."

"But not you," said Richie.

"Fuck, no."

He might as well be wearing a T-shirt—Fuck No, Fuck Yeah, Fucked Up, Fucked Over, Fuck Me, Fuck You. He did not talk like this when Loretta and the kids were around. "You have a plan," said Richie, standing up to put some bread in the toaster.

"I went for the delta."

"What's that?"

"Basically, you bet both ways, way up and way down. If the market pisses and moans and piddles around where it is, I'm—"

"Fucked," said Richie.

"God, yeah," said Michael. "But if it jumps or drops big, I win big."

As Michael said this, Richie could almost see the testosterone throbbing through his brother's carotid arteries. He said, "What are you going to do to make sure one of these things happens?" He was joking, but Michael said, "I don't know yet, but I've got till Monday to figure it out." Everyone had a system now. Even his dad had a system, something some guy had explained to him in Aspen, a year ago. Frank didn't use the system, but it seemed like his mom was using the system, in her way which was to wake up in the morning and say, "I think IBM is about to have an uh-oh day," and then Andy would buy, and then, apparently, IBM would rise, and his dad would say, "I think she's going to turn out to be a genius after all."

Richie, of course, would have to have something to say about the crash, too—Congressman Scheuer would be required to issue a statement about volatility and regulation and why should our nation be beholden to the fat cats—but it was possible that the market would bounce back, and those remarks could be shelved before they were needed. Richie heard the door to their bedroom open, and here came Ivy. When she saw Michael, she gaped, stuck out her tongue, and rolled her eyes, but then she laughed and kissed him on the cheek. She had told Richie over and over that she wanted to see Michael and Loretta as little as possible, but in the end she was always won over. The toast popped, and she buttered it. She said, “You want jam? I have some pear I just got.”

Michael said, “Any eggs?”

“There’s no such thing as a free breakfast.”

Michael said nothing. Ivy got out the frying pan, opened the refrigerator door. Later, Richie knew she would say that Michael’s attitudes were a kind of performance, blond-guy rap. Sure, there was part of him that was aggressive and inconsiderate, but he was nice to Loretta and better with his kids than, just as an example, their dad had been with them. Michael was a complex person, no two ways about that. She sprinkled in the chili powder and the cumin; she knew what he liked. Richie had told her about the girl at Cornell—Alicia. He’d told her what he remembered from their sophomore year that Michael had attacked Alicia, he, Richie, had tried to stop things, and Alicia had stabbed Michael with the scissors in her bag and gotten away. He’d also told her what Michael told him after Richie left Cornell for Rutgers—that Alicia told everyone they both attacked him. Ivy didn’t believe either story. They were kids, Michael had a temper, things got out of hand; what was the girl doing, playing them off against one another, anyway? Richie allowed Ivy to give Michael the benefit of the doubt because didn’t he want the same thing for himself?

She said, “You think the computer trading is a problem?”

“Nah,” said Michael. “The computers functioned great. I mean, the real problem is people, not computers. It’s hard to keep up with them, and you get tired. I’m glad the fucking day is six hours, not eight. Should be four, you ask me, but they haven’t thought about that. I mean, we knew this was coming. We knew that volume would pop, and they’ve spent years preparing for it, so...” He shrugged. “Things might settle down on Monday, but if they do I’m fucked.”

Ivy cast Richie a glance. Richie raised his eyebrows, their signal for I-will-untangle-this-mess-for-you-later. Ivy set Michael’s eggs in front of him and handed him a fork, a napkin.

Michael said, “You pregnant yet?”

“Is that your business?”

“It’s not my business, but Loretta asked.”

They waited too long to answer. The latest missed period had presented itself only the day before. It had been five days late. Michael said, “Let me try. I have a perfect record.” Ivy smiled, thinking he was kidding. “I mean, as an experiment. If I can’t do you, then the problem is yours, not Richard’s. Down and dirty. Save a lot of medical expense, and if it works, the result is the same, basically.”

He lolled back in his chair again, then moved it with a loud scrape. His elbow banged the windowpane, and Richie thought: out the window, three stories, four if he fell into the stairwell leading to the basement co-op.

Ivy scowled, and Michael noticed. He said, “What?” as if truly perplexed. “Okay, I said something. I didn’t rape you or go behind Richie’s back. I didn’t even make an actual proposal. I just floated an idea. I am not blinded by social norms. I can see solutions. So what? It’s called thinking outside the box.”

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