

A Handful of Leaves

In the year 1919, Edgar's grandfather, who was born with an extra share of whimsy, bought their land and all the buildings on it from a man he'd never met, a man named Schultz, who in his turn had walked away from a logging team half a decade earlier after seeing the chains on a fully loaded timber sled let go. Twenty tons of rolling maple buried a man where Schultz had stood the moment before. As he helped unpile logs to extract the wretched man's remains, Schultz remembered a pretty parcel of land he'd spied north and west of Mellen. The morning he signed the papers he rode one of his ponies along the logging road to his new property and picked out a spot in a clearing below a hill and by nightfall a workable pole stable stood on that ground. The next day he fetched the other pony and filled a yoked cart with supplies and the three of them walked back to his crude homestead, Schultz on foot, reins in hand, and the ponies in harness behind as they drew the cart along and listened to the creak of the dry axle. For the first few months he and the ponies slept side by side in the pole shed and quite often in his dreams Schultz heard the snap when the chains on that load of maple broke.

He tried his best to make a living there as a dairy farmer. In the five years he worked the land, he cleared one twenty--five--acre field and drained another, and he used the lumber from the trees he cut to build an outhouse, a barn, and a house, in that order. So that he wouldn't need to go outside to tote water, he dug his well in the hole that would become the basement of the house. He helped raise barns all the way from Tannery Town to Park Falls so there'd be plenty of help when his time came. And day and night he pulled stumps. That first year he raked and harrowed the south field a dozen times until even his ponies seemed tired of it. He stacked rocks at the edges of the fields in long humped piles and burned stumps in bonfires that could be seen all the way from Popcorn Corners—the closest town, if you called that a town—and even Mellen. He managed to build a small stone--and--concrete silo taller than the barn, but he never got around to capping it. He mixed milk and linseed oil and rust and blood and used the concoction to paint the barn and outhouse red. In the south field he planted hay, and in the west, corn, because the west field was wet and the corn would grow faster there. During his last summer on the farm he even hired two men from town. But when autumn was on the horizon, something happened—no one knew just what—and he took a meager early harvest, auctioned off his livestock and farm implements, and moved away, all in the space of a few weeks. At the time, John Sawtelle was traveling up north with no thought or intention of buying a farm. In fact, he'd put his fishing tackle into the Kissel and told Mary, his wife, he was delivering a puppy to a man he'd

met on his last trip. Which was true, as far as it went. What he didn't mention was that he carried a spare collar in his pocket.

That spring their dog, Violet, who was good but wild--hearted, had dug a hole under the fence when she was in heat and run the streets with romance on her mind. They'd ended up chasing a litter of seven around the backyard. He could have given all the pups away to strangers, and he suspected he was going to have to, but the thing was, he *liked* having those pups around. Liked it in a primal, obsessive way. Violet was the first dog he'd ever owned, and the pups were the first pups he'd ever spent time with, and they yapped and chewed on his shoelaces and looked him in the eye. At night he found himself listening to records and sitting on the grass behind the house and teaching the pups odd little tricks they soon forgot while he and Mary talked. They were newlyweds, or almost. They sat there for hours and hours, and it was the finest time so far in his life. On those nights, he felt connected to something ancient and important that he couldn't name.

But he didn't like the idea of a stranger neglecting one of Vi's pups. The best thing would be if he could place them all in the neighborhood so he could keep tabs on them, watch them grow up, even if from a distance. Surely there were half a dozen kids within an easy walk who wanted a dog. People might think it peculiar, but they wouldn't mind if he asked to see the pups once in while.

Then he and a buddy had gone up to the Chequamegon, a long drive but worth it for the fishing. Plus, the Anti--Saloon League hadn't yet penetrated the north woods, and wasn't likely to, which was another thing he admired about the area. They'd stopped at The Hollow, in Mellen, and ordered a beer, and as they talked a man walked in followed by a dog, a big dog, gray and white with brown patches, some mix of husky and shepherd or something of that kind, a deep--chested beast with a regal bearing and a joyful, jaunty carriage. Every person in the bar seemed to know the dog, who trotted around greeting the patrons.

"That's a fine looking animal," John Sawtelle remarked, watching it work the crowd for peanuts and jerky. He offered to buy the dog's owner a beer for the pleasure of an introduction.

"Name's Captain," the man said, flagging down the bartender to collect. With beer in hand he gave a quick whistle and the dog trotted over.

"Cappy, say hello to the man."

Captain looked up. He lifted a paw to shake.

That he was a massive dog was the first thing that impressed Edgar's grandfather. The second thing was less tangible—something about his eyes, the way the dog met his gaze. And, gripping Captain's paw, John Sawtelle was visited by an idea. A vision. He'd spent so much time with pups lately he imagined Captain himself as a pup. Then he thought

about Vi—who was the best dog he'd ever known until then—and about Captain and Vi combined into one dog, one pup, which was a crazy thought because he had far too many dogs on his hands already. He released Captain's paw and the dog trotted off and he turned back to the bar and tried to put that vision out of his mind by asking where to find muskie. They weren't hitting out on Clam Lake. And there were so many little lakes around.

The next morning, they drove back into town for breakfast. The diner was situated across the street from the Mellen town hall, a large squarish building with an unlikely looking cupola facing the road. In front stood a white, three-tiered drinking fountain with one bowl at person height, another lower, for horses, and a small dish near the ground whose purpose was not immediately clear. They were about to walk into the diner when a dog rounded the corner and trotted nonchalantly past. It was Captain. He was moving in a strangely light-footed way for such a solidly constructed dog, lifting and dropping his paws as if suspended by invisible strings and merely paddling along for steering. Edgar's grandfather stopped in the diner's doorway and watched. When Captain reached the front of the town hall, he veered to the fountain and lapped from the bowl nearest the ground.

"Come on," his buddy said. "I'm starving."

From along the alley beside the town hall came another dog, trailing a half-dozen pups behind. She and Captain performed an elaborate sashay, sniffing backsides and pressing noses into ruffs, while the pups bumbled about their feet. Captain bent to the little ones and shoved his nose under their bellies and one by one rolled them. Then he dashed down the street and turned and barked. The pups scrambled after him. In a few minutes, he'd coaxed them back to the fountain, spinning around in circles with the youngsters in hot pursuit while the mother dog stretched out on the lawn and watched, panting.

A woman in an apron walked out the door of the diner, squeezed past the two men, and looked on.

"That's Captain and his lady," she said. "They've been meeting there with the kids every morning for the last week. Ever since Violet's babies got old enough to get around."

"Whose babies?" Edgar's grandfather said.

"Why, Violet's." The woman looked at him as if he were an idiot. "The mama dog. That dog right there."

"I've got a dog named Violet," he said. "And she has a litter about that age right this moment back home."

"Well, what do you know," the woman said, without the slightest note of interest.

"I mean, don't you think that's sort of a coincidence? That I'd run into a dog with my own dog's name, and with a litter the same age?"

"I couldn't say. Could be that sort of thing happens all the time."

"Here's a coincidence happens every morning," his buddy interjected.

“I wake up, I get hungry, I eat breakfast. Amazing.”

“You go ahead,” John Sawtelle said. “I’m not all that hungry anyway.”

And with that, he stepped into the dusty street and crossed to the town hall.

When he finally sat down for breakfast, the waitress appeared at their table with coffee. “If you’re so interested in those pups, Billy might sell you one,” she said. “He can’t hardly give ’em away, there’s so many dogs around here.”

“Who’s Billy?”

She turned and gestured in the direction of the sit--down counter. There, on one of the stools, sat Captain’s owner, drinking a cup of coffee and reading the *Sentinel*. Edgar’s grandfather invited the man to join them. When they were seated, he asked Billy if the pups were indeed his.

“Some of them,” Billy said. “Cappy got old Violet in a fix. I’ve got to find a place for half the litter. But what I really think I’ll do is keep ’em. Cap dotes on ’em, and ever since my Scout ran off last summer I’ve only had the one dog. He gets lonely.”

Edgar’s grandfather explained about his own litter, and about Vi, expanding on her qualities, and then he offered to trade a pup for a pup. He told Billy he could have the pick of Vi’s litter, and furthermore could pick which of Captain’s litter he’d trade for, though a male was preferable if it was all the same. Then he thought for a moment and revised his request: he’d take the *smartest* pup Billy was willing to part with, and he didn’t care if it was male or female.

“Isn’t the idea to reduce the total number of dogs at your place?” his buddy said.

“I said I’d find the pups a home. That’s not exactly the same thing.”

“I don’t think Mary is going to see it that way. Just a guess there.”

Billy sipped his coffee and suggested that, while interested, he had reservations about traveling practically the length of Wisconsin just to pick out a pup. Their table was near the big front window and, from there, John Sawtelle could see Captain and his offspring rolling around on the grass. He watched them awhile, then turned to Billy and promised he’d pick out the best of Vi’s litter and drive it up—male or female, Billy’s choice. And if Billy didn’t like it, then no trade, and that was a fair deal.

Which was how John Sawtelle found himself driving to Mellen that September with a pup in a box and a fishing rod in the back seat, whistling “Shine On, Harvest Moon.” He’d already decided to name the new pup Gus if the name fit.

Billy and Captain took to Vi’s pup at once. The two men walked into Billy’s backyard to discuss the merits of each of the pups in Captain’s litter and after a while one came bumbling over and that decided things. John Sawtelle put the spare collar on the pup and they spent the afternoon

parked by a lake, shore fishing. Gus ate bits of sunfish roasted on a stick and they slept there in front of a fire, tethered collar to belt by a length of string.

The next day, before heading home, Edgar's grandfather thought he'd drive around a bit. The area was an interesting mix: the logged--off parts were ugly as sin, but the pretty parts were especially pretty. Like the falls. And some of the farm country to the west. Most especially, the hilly woods north of town. Besides, there were few things he liked better than steering the Kissel along those old back roads.

Late in the morning he found himself navigating along a heavily washboarded dirt road. The limbs of the trees meshed overhead. Left and right, thick underbrush obscured everything farther than twenty yards into the woods. When the road finally topped out at a clearing, he was presented with a view of the Penoque range rolling out to the west, and an unbroken emerald forest stretching to the north—all the way, it seemed, to the granite rim of Lake Superior. At the bottom of the hill stood a little white farmhouse and a gigantic red barn. A milk house was huddled up near the front of the barn. An untopped stone silo stood behind. By the road, a crudely lettered sign read, "For Sale."

He pulled into the rutted drive. He parked and got out and peered through the living room windows. No one was home. The house looked barely finished inside. He stomped through the fields with Gus in his arms and when he got back he plunked himself down on the running board of the Kissel and watched the autumn clouds soar above.

John Sawtelle was a tremendous reader and letter writer. He especially loved newspapers from faraway cities. He'd recently happened across an article describing a man named Gregor Mendel—a Czechoslovakian monk, of all things—who had done some very interesting experiments with peas. Had demonstrated, for starters, that he could predict how the offspring of his plants would look—the colors of their flowers and so on. Mendelism, this was being called: the scientific study of heredity. The article had dwelt upon the stupendous implications for the breeding of livestock. Edgar's grandfather had been so fascinated that he'd gone to the library and located a book on Mendel and read it cover to cover. What he'd learned occupied his mind in odd moments. He thought back on the vision (if he could call it that) that had descended upon him as he shook Captain's paw at The Hollow. It was one of those rare days when everything in a person's life feels connected. He was twenty--five years old, but over the course of the last year his hair had turned steely gray. The same thing had happened to his grandfather, yet his father was edging up on seventy with a jet black mane. Nothing of the kind had happened to either of his elder brothers, though one was bald as an egg. Nowadays when John Sawtelle looked into the mirror he felt a little like a Mendelian pea himself.

He sat in the sun and watched Gus, thick--legged and clumsy, pin a

grasshopper to the ground, mouth it, then shake his head with disgust and lick his chops. He'd begun smothering the hopper with the side of his neck when he suddenly noticed Edgar's grandfather looking on, heels set in the dirt driveway, toes pointed skyward. The pup bucked in mock surprise, as if he'd never seen this man before. He scrambled forward to investigate, twice going tail over teakettle as he closed the gap.

It was, John Sawtelle thought, a lovely little place.

Explaining Gus to his wife was going to be the least of his worries.

In fact, it didn't take long for the fuss to die down. When he wanted to, Edgar's grandfather could radiate a charming enthusiasm, one of the reasons Mary had been attracted to him in the first place. He could tell a good story about the way things were going to be. Besides, they had been living in her parents' house for over a year and she was as eager as he to get out on her own. They completed the purchase of the land by mail and telegram.

This the boy Edgar would come to know because his parents kept their most important documents in an ammunition box at the back of their bedroom closet. The box was military gray, with a big clasp on the side, and it was metal, and therefore mouseproof. When they weren't around he'd sneak it out and dig through the contents. Their birth certificates were in there, along with a marriage certificate and the deed and history of ownership of their land. But the telegram was what interested him most—a thick, yellowing sheet of paper with a Western Union legend across the top, its message consisting of just six words, glued to the backing in strips: offer accepted see Adamski re papers. Adamski was Mr. Schultz's lawyer; his signature appeared on several documents in the box. The glue holding those words to the telegram had dried over the years, and each time Edgar snuck it out, another word dropped off. The first to go was papers, then re, then see. Eventually Edgar stopped taking the telegram out at all, fearing that when accepted fluttered into his lap, his family's claim to the land would be reversed.

He didn't know what to do with the liberated words. It seemed wrong to throw them away, so he dropped them into the ammo box and hoped no one would notice.

What little they knew about Schultz came from living in the buildings he'd made. For instance, because the Sawtelles had done a lot of remodeling, they knew that Schultz worked without levels or squares, and that he didn't know the old carpenter's three--four--five rule for squaring corners. They knew that when he cut lumber he cut it once, making do with shims and extra nails if it was too short, and if it was too long, wedging it in at an angle. They knew he was thrifty because he filled the basement walls with rocks to save on the cost of cement, and every

spring, water seeped through the cracks until the basement flooded ankle--deep. And this, Edgar's father said, was how they knew Schultz had never poured a basement before.

They also knew Schultz admired economy—had to admire it to make a life in the woods—because the house he built was a miniature version of the barn, all its dimensions divided by three. To see the similarity, it was best to stand in the south field, near the birch grove with the small white cross at its base. With a little imagination, subtracting out the changes the Sawtelles had made—the expanded kitchen, the extra bedroom, the back porch that ran the length of the west side—you'd notice that the house had the same steep gambrel roof that shed the snow so well in the winter, and that the windows were cut into the house just where the Dutch doors appeared at the end of the barn. The peak of the roof even overhung the driveway like a little hay hood, charming but useless. The buildings looked squat and friendly and plain, like a cow and her calf lying at pasture. Edgar liked looking back at their yard; that was the view Schultz would have seen each day as he worked in the field picking rocks, pulling stumps, gathering his herd for the night.

Innumerable questions couldn't be answered by the facts alone. Was there a dog to herd the cows? That would have been the first dog that ever called the place home, and Edgar would have liked to know its name. What did Schultz do at night without television or radio? Did he teach his dog to blow out candles? Did he pepper his morning eggs with gunpowder, like the voyageurs? Did he raise chickens and ducks? Did he sit up nights with a gun on his lap to shoot foxes? In the middle of winter, did he run howling down the rough track toward town, drunk and bored and driven out of his mind by the endless harmonica chord the wind played through the window sash? A photograph of Schultz was too much to hope for, but the boy, ever inward, imagined him stepping out of the woods as if no time had passed, ready to give farming one last try—a compact, solemn man with a handlebar mustache, thick eyebrows, and sad brown eyes. His gait would swing roundly from so many hours spent astride the ponies and he'd have a certain grace about him. When he stopped to consider something, he'd rest his hands on his hips and kick a foot out on its heel and he'd whistle.

More evidence of Schultz: opening a wall to replace a rotted--out window, they found handwriting on a timber, in pencil:

$25 \frac{1}{4} + 3 \frac{1}{4} = 28 \frac{1}{2}$

On another beam, a scribbled list:

lard
flour
tar 5 gal

matches
coffee
2 lb nails

Edgar was shocked to find words inside the walls of his house, scrawled by a man no one had ever seen. It made him want to peel open every wall, see what might be written along the roofline, under the stairs, above the doors. In time, by thought alone, Edgar constructed an image of Schultz so detailed he needn't even squint his eyes to call it up. Most important of all, he understood why Schultz had so mysteriously abandoned the farm: he'd grown lonely. After the fourth winter, Schultz couldn't stand it anymore, alone with the ponies and the cows and no one to talk to, no one to see what he had done or listen to what had happened—no one to witness his life at all. In Schultz's time, as in Edgar's, no neighbors lived within sight. The nights must have been eerie.

And so Schultz moved away, maybe south to Milwaukee or west to St. Paul, hoping to find a wife to return with him, help clear the rest of the land, start a family. Yet something kept him away. Perhaps his bride abhorred farm life. Perhaps someone fell sick. Impossible to know any of it, yet Edgar felt sure Schultz had accepted his grandfather's offer with misgivings. And that, he imagined, was the real reason the words kept falling off the telegram.

Of course, there was no reason to worry, and Edgar knew that, too. All that had happened forty years before he was born. His grandfather and grandmother moved to the farm without incident, and by Edgar's time it had been the Sawtelle place for as long as anyone could remember. John Sawtelle got work at the veneer mill in town and rented out the fields Schultz had cleared. Whenever he came across a dog he admired, he made a point to get down and look it in the eye. Sometimes he cut a deal with the owner. He converted the giant barn into a kennel, and there Edgar's grandfather honed his gift for breeding dogs, dogs so unlike the shepherds and hounds and retrievers and sled dogs he used as foundation stock they became known simply as Sawtelle dogs.

And John and Mary Sawtelle raised two boys as different from one another as night and day. One son stayed on the land after Edgar's grandfather retired to town a widower, and the other son left, they thought, for good.

The one that stayed was Edgar's father, Gar Sawtelle.

His parents married late in life. Gar was over thirty, Trudy, a few years younger, and the story of how they met changed depending on whom Edgar asked and who was within earshot.

"It was love at first sight," his mother would tell him, loudly. "He couldn't take his eyes off me. It was embarrassing, really. I married him

out of a sense of mercy.”

“Don’t you believe it,” his father would shout from another room.

“She chased me like a madwoman! She threw herself at my feet every chance she got. Her doctors said she could be a danger to herself unless I agreed to take her in.”

On this topic, Edgar never got the same story twice. Once, they’d met at a dance in Park Falls. Another time, she’d stopped to help him fix a flat on his truck.

No, really, Edgar had pleaded.

The truth was, they were longtime pen pals. They’d met in a doctor’s office, both of them dotted with measles. They’d met in a department store at Christmas, grabbing for the last toy on the shelf. They’d met while Gar was placing a dog in Wausau. Always, they played off each other, building the story into some fantastic adventure in which they shot their way out of danger, on the run to Dillinger’s hideout in the north woods. Edgar knew his mother had grown up across the Minnesota border from Superior, handed from one foster family to another, but that was about all. She had no sisters or brothers, and no one from her side of the family came to visit. Letters addressed to her sometimes arrived, but she didn’t hurry to open them.

On the living room wall hung a picture of his parents taken the day a judge in Ashland married them, Gar in a gray suit, Trudy in a knee-length white dress. They held a bouquet of flowers between them and bore expressions so solemn Edgar almost couldn’t recognize them. His father asked Doctor Papineau, the veterinarian, to watch the dogs while he and Trudy honeymooned in Door County. Edgar had seen snapshots taken with his father’s Brownie camera: the two of them sitting on a pier, Lake Michigan in the background. That was it, all the evidence: a marriage license in the ammo box, a few pictures with wavy edges.

When they returned, Trudy began to share in the work of the kennel. Gar concentrated on the breeding and whelping and placing while Trudy took charge of the training—something that, no matter how they’d met, she shined at. Edgar’s father freely admitted his limitations as a trainer. He was too kindhearted, too willing to let the dogs get close to performing a command without getting it right. The dogs he trained never learned the difference between a *sit* and a *down* and a *stay*—they’d get the idea that they ought to remain approximately where they were, but sometimes they’d slide to the floor, or take a few steps and then sit, or sit up when they should have stayed down, or sit down when they should have stood still. Always, Edgar’s father was more interested in what the dogs *chose* to do, a predilection he’d acquired from his own father.

Trudy changed all that. As a trainer, she was relentless and precise, moving with the same crisp economy Edgar had noticed in teachers and nurses. And she had singular reflexes—she could correct a dog on lead so fast you’d burst out laughing to see it. Her hands would fly up and drop

to her waist again in a flash, and the dog's collar would tighten with a quiet *chink* and fall slack again, just that fast, like watching a sleight-of-hand trick. The dog was left with a surprised look and no idea who'd hit the lead. In the winter they used the front of the cavernous hay mow for training, straw bales arranged as barriers, working the dogs in an enclosed world bounded by the loose scatter of straw underfoot and the roughhewn ridge beam above, the knotty roof planks a dark dome shot through with shingling nails and pinpoints of daylight and the crisscross of rafters hovering in the middle heights and the whole back half of the mow stacked ten, eleven, twelve high with yellow bales of straw. The open space was still enormous. Working there with the dogs, Trudy was at her most charismatic and imperious. Edgar had seen her cross the mow at a dead run, grab the collar of a dog who refused to down, and bring it to the floor, all in a single balletic arc. Even the dog had been impressed: it capered and spun and licked her face as though she had performed a miracle on its behalf.

Even if Edgar's parents remained playfully evasive on the subject of how they'd met, other questions they answered directly. Sometimes they lapsed into stories about Edgar himself, his birth, how they'd worried over his voice, how he and Almondine had played together from before he was out of his crib. Because he worked beside them every day in the kennel—grooming, naming, and handling the dogs while they waited turns for training—he had plenty of chances to sign questions and wait and listen. In quieter moments they even talked about the sad things that had happened. Saddest of all was the story of that cross under the birches in the south field.

They wanted a baby. This was the fall of 1954 and they'd been married three years. They converted one of the upstairs bedrooms into a nursery and bought a rocking chair and a crib with a mobile and a dresser, all painted white, and they moved their own bedroom upstairs to the room across the hall. That spring Trudy got pregnant. After three months she miscarried. When winter came she was pregnant again, and again she miscarried at three months. They went to a doctor in Marshfield who asked what they ate, what medicines they took, how much they smoked and drank. The doctor tested his mother's blood and declared her perfectly healthy. Some women are prone, the doctor said. Hold off a year. He told her not to exert herself.

Late in 1957 his mother got pregnant for a third time. She waited until she was sure, and then a little longer, in order to break the news on Christmas Day. The baby, she guessed, was due in July.

With the doctor's admonition in mind, they changed the kennel routine. His mother still handled the younger pups herself, but when it came to working the yearlings, willful and strong enough to pull her off

balance, his father came up to the mow. It wasn't easy for any of them. Suddenly Trudy was training the dogs *through* Gar, and he was a poor substitute for a leash. She sat on a bale, shouting, "Now! Now!" in frustration whenever he missed a correction, which was quite often. After a while, the dogs cocked an ear toward Trudy even when Gar held the lead. They learned to work the dogs three at a time, two standing beside his mother while his father snapped the lead onto the third and took it through the hurdles, the retrieves, the stays, the balance work. With nothing else to do, his mother started simple bite--and--hold exercises to teach the waiting dogs a soft mouth. Days like that, she left the mow as tired as if she'd worked alone. His father stayed behind to do evening chores. That winter was especially frigid and sometimes it took longer to bundle up than to cross from the kennel to the back porch.

In the evenings they did dishes. She washed, he dried. Sometimes he put the towel over his shoulder and wrapped his arms around her, pressing his hands against her belly and wondering if he would feel the baby. "Here," she'd say, holding out a steaming plate. "Quit stalling." But reflected in the frosty window over the sink he'd see her smile. One night in February, Gar felt a belly--twitch beneath his palm. A halloo from another world. That night they picked a boy name and a girl name, both counting backward in their heads and thinking that they'd passed the three--month mark but not daring to say it out loud.

In April, gray curtains of rain swept across the field. The snow rotted and dissolved over the course of a single day and a steam of vegetable odors filled the air. Everywhere, the plot--plot of water dripping off eaves. There came a night when his father woke to find the blankets flung back and the bed sodden where his mother had lain. By the lamplight he saw a crimson stain across the sheets.

He found her in the bathroom huddled in the claw--footed tub. In her arms she held a perfectly formed baby boy, his skin like blue wax. Whatever had happened had happened quickly, with little pain, and though she shook as if crying, she was silent. The only sound was the damp suck of her skin against the white porcelain. Edgar's father knelt beside the tub and tried to put his arms around her, but she shivered and shook him off and so he sat at arm's length and waited for her crying to either cease or start in earnest. Instead, she reached forward and turned the faucets and held her fingers in the water until she thought it warm enough. She washed the baby, sitting in the tub. The red stain in her nightgown began to color the water. She asked Gar to get a blanket from the nursery and she swathed the still form and passed it over. When he turned to leave she set her hand on his shoulder, and so he waited, watching when he thought he should watch and looking away at other times, and what he saw was her coming back together, particle by particle, until at last she turned to him with a look that meant she had survived it.

But at what secret cost. Though her foster childhood had sensitized

her to familial loss, the need to keep her family whole was in her nature from the start. To explain what happened later by any single event would deny either predisposition or the power of the world to shape. In her mind, where the baby had already lived and breathed (the hopes and dreams, at least, that made up the baby to her) was a place that would not vanish simply because the baby had died. She could neither let the place be empty nor seal it over and turn away as if it had never been. And so it remained, a tiny darkness, a black seed, a void into which a person might forever plunge. That was the cost, and only Trudy knew it, and even she didn't know what it meant or would ultimately come to mean.

She stayed in the living room with the baby while Gar led Almondine to the workshop. Up and down the aisle the dogs stood in their pens. He turned on the lights and tried to sketch out a plan on a piece of paper, but his hands shook and the dimensions wouldn't come out right. He cut himself with the saw, peeling back the skin across two knuckles, and he bandaged them with the kit in the barn rather than walk back to the house. It took until midmorning to build a box and a cross. He didn't paint them because in that wet weather it would have taken days for the paint to dry. He carried a shovel through the south field to the little grove of birches, their spring bark gleaming brilliant white, and there he dug a grave.

In the house they put two blankets in the bottom of the casket and laid the swaddled baby inside. It wasn't until then that he thought about sealing the casket. He looked at Trudy.

"I've got to nail it shut," he said. "Let me take it out to the barn."

"No," she said. "Do it here."

He walked to the barn and got a hammer and eight nails and the whole way back to the house he brooded over what he was about to do. They'd set the casket in the middle of the living room. He knelt in front of it. It had turned out looking like a crate, he saw, though he had done the best he could. He drove a nail into each corner and he was going to put one in the center of each side but all at once he couldn't. He apologized for the violence of it. He laid his head against the rough wood of the casket. Trudy ran her hand down his back without a word.

He picked up the casket and carried it to the birch grove and they lowered it into the hole and shoveled dirt over it. Almondine, just a pup at the time, stood beside them in the rain. Gar cut a crescent in the sod with the spade and pounded the cross into the ground with the flat side of the hammer. When he looked up, Trudy lay unconscious in the newly greened hay.

She woke as they sped along the blacktop north of Mellen. Outside the truck window the wind whipped the falling rain into half-shapes that flickered and twirled over the ditches. She closed her eyes, unable to watch without growing dizzy. She stayed in the Ashland hospital that night and when they returned the following afternoon, the rain still fell,

the shapes still danced.

It so happened that their back property line lay exactly along the course of a creek that ran south through the Chequamegon forest. Most of the year, the creek was only two or three feet wide and so shallow you could snatch a rock from the bottom without getting your wrist wet. When Schultz had erected a barbed--wire fence, he dutifully set his posts down the center of the stream.

Edgar and his father walked there sometimes in the winter, when only the tops of the fence posts poked through the snowdrifts and the water made trickling, marble--clicking sounds, for though the creek wasn't wide enough or fast enough to dissolve the snow that blanketed it, neither did it freeze. One time Almondine tipped her head at the sound, fixed the source, then plunged her front feet through the snow and into the icy water. When Edgar laughed, even his silent laugh, her ears dropped. She lifted one paw after the other into the air while he rubbed them dry with his hat and gloves, and they walked back, hands and paws alike stinging.

For a few weeks each spring, the creek was transformed into a slug--gish, clay--colored river that swept along the forest floor for ten feet on either side of the fence posts. Any sort of thing might float past in flood season—soup cans, baseball cards, pencils—their origins a mystery, since nothing but forest lay upstream. The sticks and chunks of rotten wood Edgar tossed into the syrupy current bobbed and floated off, all the way to the Mississippi, he hoped, while his father leaned against a tree and gazed at the line of posts.

They saw an otter once, floating belly up in the floodwater, feet pointed downstream, grooming the fur on its chest—a little self--contained canoe of an animal. As it passed, the otter realized it was being watched and raised its head. Round eyes, oily and black. The current swept it away while their gazes were locked in mutual surprise.

For days after her return from the hospital, Trudy lay in bed watching raindrops pattern the window. Gar cooked meals and carried them to her. She spoke just enough to reassure him, then turned to stare out the window. After three days the rain let up but gray clouds blanketed the earth. Neither sun nor moon had appeared since the stillbirth. At night Gar put his arms around her and whispered to her until he fell into a sleep of exhaustion and disappointment.

Then one morning Trudy got out of bed and came downstairs and washed and sat to eat breakfast in the kitchen. She was pale but not entirely withdrawn. The weather had turned warm and after breakfast Gar talked her into sitting in a big overstuffed chair that he moved out to the porch. He brought her a blanket and coffee. She told him, as gently as

she could, to leave her be, that she was fine, that she wanted to be alone. And so he stayed Almondine on the porch and walked to the kennel.

After morning chores he carried a brush and a can of white paint to the birches. When he finished painting the cross he used his hands to turn the dirt where paint had dripped. The slow strokes of the brush on the wood had been all right but the touch of the earth filled him with misery. He didn't want Trudy to see him like that. Instead of returning to the kennel he followed the south fence line through the woods. Long days of rain had swelled the creek until it topped the second strand of barbed wire. He found a tree to lean against and absently counted the whirlpools curling behind the fence posts. The sight provided him some solace, though he couldn't have said why. After a while he caught sight of what he took to be a clump of leaf litter twisting along, brown against the brown water. Then, with a little shock, he saw it wasn't leaf litter at all, but an animal, struggling and sputtering. It drifted into an eddy and bobbed under the water and when it came to the surface again he heard a faint but unmistakable cry.

By the time he reached the fence, the creek water was over his knees—warmer than he expected, but what surprised him most was the strength of the current. He was forced to grab a fence post to keep his balance. When the thing swept close, he reached across and scooped it from the water and held it in the air to get a good look. Then he tucked it into his coat, keeping his hand inside to warm the thing, and walked straight up through the woods and into the field below the house.

Trudy, sitting on the porch, watched Gar emerge from the woods. As he passed through a stand of aspen saplings he seemed to shimmer into place between their trunks like a ghost, hand cradled to his chest. At first she thought he'd been hurt but she wasn't strong enough to walk out to meet him and so she waited and watched.

On the porch, he knelt and held out the thing for her to see. He knew it was still alive because all the long walk through the field it had been biting weakly on his fingers. What he held was a pup of some kind—a wolf, perhaps, though no one had seen one around for years. It was wet and shivering, the color of a handful of leaves and barely bigger than his palm. The pup had revived enough to be scared. It arched its back and yowled and huffed and scrabbled its hind feet against Gar's callused hands. Almondine pressed her muzzle around Gar's arm, wild to see the thing, but Trudy frowned sternly and took the pup and held it for a minute to look it over, then pressed it to her neck. "Quiet now," she said, "shush now." She offered her littlest finger for it to suckle.

The pup was a male, maybe three weeks old, though they knew little about wolves and could only judge its age as if it were a dog. Gar tried to explain what had happened but before he could finish the pup began to

convulse. They carried it inside and dried it with a towel and afterward it lay looking at them. They made a bed out of a cardboard box and set the box on the floor near the furnace register. Almondine poked her nose over the side. She wasn't even a yearling yet, still clumsy and often foolish. They were afraid she would step on the pup or press him with her nose and scare the life out of him, and so, after a time, they put the box on the kitchen table.

Trudy tried formula, but the pup took a drop and pushed the nipple away with forepaws not much bigger than her thumbs. She tried cow's milk and then honey in water, letting the drops hang off her fingertips. She found an apron with a broad front pocket and carried the pup that way, thinking he might sit up, look around, but he just lay on his back and peered gravely at her. The sight made her smile. When she ran a finger along his belly fur he squirmed to keep sight of her eyes.

At dinnertime they sat and talked about what to do. They'd seen mothers reject babies in the whelping room even when nothing seemed wrong. Sometimes, Gar said, it worked to put orphans with another nursing mother. As soon as the words were out, they left the dishes on the table and carried the pup to the kennel. One of the mothers growled at the pup's scent. Another pushed him away and nosed straw over his body. In response, the pup lay utterly still. There was no point in getting mad but Trudy did anyway. She stalked to the house, pup clasped between her hands. She rolled a tiny piece of cheese between her fingers until it was warm and soft. She offered a shred of roast beef from her plate. The pup accepted none of these.

Near midnight, exhausted, they took the foundling upstairs and set it in the crib with a saucer of formula. Almondine pressed her nose through the bars and sniffed. The pup crawled toward the sound and shut his eyes and lay with hind legs outstretched, pads up, while the bells in the mobile chimed.

Trudy woke that night to find Almondine pacing the bedroom floor. The pup lay glassy-eyed in the crib, without the strength to lift his head. She pulled the rocking chair to the window and set the pup in her lap. The clouds had passed and in the light of the half-moon the pup's fur was silver-tipped. Almondine slid her muzzle along Trudy's thigh. She drew the pup's scent for a long time, then lay down, and the shadow of the rocking chair drifted back and forth over her.

In the pup's final hour, Trudy whispered to it about the black seed inside her as though it might somehow understand. She stroked the fuzz on its chest as it turned its eyes to her, and in the dark they made a bargain that one of them would go and one would stay.

When Gar woke, he knew where he would find Trudy. This time it was he who cried. They buried the pup under the birches near the baby's grave—both of them unnamed, but this newest grave unmarked as well—and now, instead of rain, the sun shone down with what little

consolation it could give. When they finished, Edgar's parents returned to the kennel and went to work, their work, the work that never ended, for the dogs were hungry, and one of the mothers was sick and her pups would have to be hand--fed and the yearlings, unruly and headstrong, desperately needed training.

Edgar didn't learn that story all at once. He assembled it, bit by bit, signing a question and fitting together another piece. Sometimes they declared that they didn't want to talk about it just then, or changed the subject, trying perhaps to protect him from the fact that there was no happy ending to some stories. And yet they didn't want to lie to him either.

There came a day (a terrible day) when the story was almost fully told, when his mother decided to reveal everything, all of it, start to finish, repeating even those parts he knew, leaving out only what she herself had forgotten. Edgar was upset by how unfair it seemed, but he hid his reaction, afraid she would sugar the truth when he asked other questions. Until then, he thought he understood something about those events, about the world in general—that there would be a certain balance to the story, that somehow there was to be compensation for the baby. When his mother told him the pup died that first night, he thought he'd heard her wrong, and made her repeat it. Later, he came to think maybe there had been a certain compensation, though harsh, though it lasted only a day.

His mother became pregnant again, and this time she carried the baby to term. He was that baby, born on the thirteenth of May, 1958, at six o'clock in the morning. They named him Edgar, after his father. And though the pregnancy went smoothly, a complication arose the moment he drew his first breath to cry.

He was five days in the hospital before they finally brought him home.