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MICHAEL DORRIS

Shining Agate

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There was a beautiful young woman named Shining Agate, the oldest of three daughters, and she was very proud. Always, she insisted that her hair flow loose and free of tangles, that her dress be sewn from the most supple skins, that the meat of her soup be tender and cut into very small pieces. To her parents' eyes, Shining Agate could do no wrong, even in the smallest thing, and they never welcomed into their long-house anyone who suggested otherwise. As a result, Shining Agate grew up convinced of her own perfection, a conviction so powerful and sure that by the time she was twenty almost everyone in the village agreed with her.

Whatever special place Shining Agate preferred immediately became the most desirable spot to visit. Whatever flower made Shining Agate smile became the favorite blossom of every woman, old or still a child. Whatever song, whatever tale, whatever color of the sky pleased Shining Agate, that song or tale or color became for a time the delight of the world.

Now it happened that there was a young man named Left Hand, who was the oldest of two brothers—his younger brother was named Right Hand. For as long as he could remember, Left Hand had dreamed that someday Shining Agate would consent to be his wife, but he was afraid to ask because of course he did not feel worthy of her. Certainly he was a good hunter, an excellent trapper, a weaver of tight, impenetrable fishnets. Certainly he was strong and robust. Certainly the mothers of many young women had invited him to sample the foods their daughters prepared, but none of those daughters interested him. Shining Agate was the only wife Left Hand desired.

"What can I do?" he asked Right Hand. "How can I make her accept me?"

Right Hand was a devoted brother and wanted to help, but to him Shining Agate was too proud, too happy with herself. To him, her

beauty was not that great, her ideas not that amusing, her smiles not that charming. It was as though Right Hand saw Shining Agate through a mist that obscured her brightness, and because of that, he judged her more clearly than anyone else. He did not find her a bad young woman, but he did consider her vain. Most of all, he hated for his brother to be so unhappy at Shining Agate's expense.

"She is a woman the same as any other, just as you are a man the same as any other," Right Hand told Left Hand. "Perhaps she will accept you, perhaps not. You will never know unless you inquire."

Left Hand trusted Right Hand and listened to his advice. The next day, when he encountered Shining Agate playing stick games with her sisters, he took a breath and spoke to her.

"I have it in mind to marry," he said softly. "Do you think I can find a wife for myself?"

Shining Agate looked up and noticed Left Hand as she never had before. He was tall and the sun danced on the blackness of his hair. His voice was frightened, his eyes bright, his skin without flaw. For some time she had wondered why no man had yet mentioned marriage to her when even women much younger had found husbands, and she felt a surge of gratitude toward Left Hand for removing this worry from her heart. She smiled on his question, and answered with the words he had hoped to hear.

"Of course," she said without laughter, surprising her sisters. "You must only ask permission of the mother of the wife you prefer and I'm sure she will agree."

No sooner had the news passed through the village—for Shining Agate's sisters were anxious to tell, glad to think of Shining Agate as married and out of their way—than people decided that Left Hand was truly an exceptional young man, even better than they had previously realized. Everyone was glad to celebrate the union, and were certain that it would produce many healthy children. No one was ever happier than Left Hand.

Yet soon after the marriage, Shining Agate experienced a curious change. Now that she found herself with a husband who approved of her every action, who complimented her sixteen times each day, who insisted upon repeating her every observation to anyone who would listen, and who felt so shy in her presence that he dared not touch her or ask anything of her without some prior signal that she welcomed the

request, Shining Agate, for the first time in her life, became tired of praise.

Only occasionally at first, but ever more frequently, she intentionally tested her husband's devotion. Some days she would not comb her hair with the hawk's claw that made it smooth, but even then Left Hand would look at her and sigh: "How beautiful you are, Shining Agate. What a sunrise for my eyes." Some nights as they lay together beneath their fur covers she would wait until Left Hand was nearly asleep and then poke him sharply with her elbow or kick him with the heel of her foot. He would wake instantly, but instead of asking her to be still, he would say, his voice low and whispering, "How wonderful to be reminded that you are by my side." Some days Shining Agate would boil the stew meat with salmonberry leaves, making it bitter and sour, but Left Hand would only flatter the taste. Some nights Shining Agate would push Left Hand away when he rolled against her in passion, but he would shut his eyes peacefully and dream of her instead.

"I would do anything for you," Left Hand promised Shining Agate every morning. "No task is too large."

Finally Shining Agate could endure her husband no longer.

"I have heard there is a pure white wolverine deep in the forest," she told Left Hand. "Go seek it for me and don't return until you can bring me the skin for a hat."

Left Hand looked out the doorway. It was early winter and the snows were already heavy upon the ground.

"Surely such an animal will already be asleep deep in its den," he replied. "In the springtime I will trap it and make the hat for you myself."

"Wolverines don't sleep in the winter like bears," Shining Agate reminded him. "And I won't need a hat in the springtime. Go now. Find the pure white wolverine and don't return without it. Was your promise a lie?"

Left Hand gathered up his bow, his snowshoes, and his parka. "It was the truth," he assured Shining Agate as he left the longhouse.

What Left Hand did not know was that Shining Agate had made up the story of the pure white wolverine. No such animal had ever been seen.

Days passed, then weeks, then months, and still Left Hand did not come back to the village. At first Shining Agate was relieved. She visited

with her sisters, slept on her back, and ate whatever and whenever she pleased from the ample provisions Left Hand had stored for the winter. Sometimes she did not think even once of her husband between sunrise and sundown, between sundown and sunrise, and tried to convince herself that she was again exactly as she had been before her marriage.

But certain things could not be changed back. When women of the village remarked to her that no wife had ever been so brave at the prospect of a lost husband, Shining Agate could not enjoy their words. When young men began to leave fine pelts and fresh moose meat by her door, she could not receive their gifts as her due. When her parents offered her comfort and sympathy, she could not bear their kindness.

Instead, she sought out the company of the only person who frowned whenever he beheld her, for Right Hand would not forgive Shining Agate his brother's disappearance.

"Sister-in-law," he said one morning as they stood together at the hole in the ice from which lake water was drawn. "Is your head cold today? Would the fur of a white wolverine keep you warmer?"

Shining Agate saw herself through Right Hand's eyes—selfish, cruel, and greedy—and it was as though a heavy cloak had fallen from her shoulders and her arms were free to move.

"No condemnation you can say is bad enough for me," she told Right Hand. The joy in her voice surprised him so thoroughly that he put down his oiled basket and stared at her face.

"Sister-in-law," he tried again. "Have you not been sleeping well? Your face is gray and older than I remember."

"I do not deserve sleep," Shining Agate replied. "I do not deserve to be called sister by the brother of my husband."

"I am too harsh with you," Right Hand apologized. "My brother will be angry when he returns."

"He will not return," Shining Agate said. "You are not harsh enough." And with that she plunged her arm into the icy water, her face bright in pain.

"Shining Agate, stop this," Right Hand cried, and pulled her up. He tucked her dripping arm inside his parka, hugged it against his chest to keep it warm. This touch was lightning in a summer sky, and soon it happened that every night Right Hand slept in his brother's house, and Shining Agate never turned away from his embrace.

Even then the people of the village found nothing to criticize. "How

appropriate," they agreed. "The grieving widow is consoled by the loyal brother-in-law who fulfills his obligation." But Shining Agate paid no attention, and one late night, after Right Hand was too in love with her to hate her, she told him the truth about the pure white wolverine and why he need not worry that Left Hand would come home.

A year passed, another, a further spring. Shining Agate bore a handsome son whom she named Laughter, and who, like his father, reached only with his right hand. In the summer they moved to a fish camp down the inlet, and guarded by their secrets, the lovers made each day different and better than the one before. Laughter justified his name, and the cabin was filled with his merriment.

On the first day of the last summer moon, however, a rumor flashed through the village: Left Hand was on his way.

"How did he survive?" people asked when they heard the news.

"He almost froze," they were told. "He broke his leg in a fall and had made his death song when he heard wide-spaced footsteps. It was the Sesquatch, the bear people who lived in the world before human beings and who now dwell only in the highest mountains. They took pity on Left Hand and carried him back to their village. They used their ancient magic to set the bone of his leg, but it was a bad break and took many months to heal. Even by the first summer, Left Hand was still too weak to return and so he stayed with the Sesquatch another year, hunted with them, became wise in their ways. When his full strength at last returned, he taught them human skills in gratitude for their hospitality, but their fingers were too blunt to tie sinew dense enough to catch salmon, so Left Hand stayed through the spring and early summer and left behind forty-eight nets of his own construction. The Sesquatch gave him as a sign of their friendship and appreciation a prize of great rarity: the pelt of a pure white wolverine."

When Right Hand heard of his brother's adventures his face turned to stone. Without speaking, he ran from the fish camp. Shining Agate grabbed up Laughter and rushed after him, but by the time she reached the beach, Right Hand had already pushed out his boat and was digging his paddle into the sea, heading toward the sun.

"Take me, take me," Shining Agate called and waded far into the foaming surf. She held Laughter high above her head, but in his shame Right Hand would not look back. "You can't deny me. I will be too lonely," Shining Agate cried, and stumbled farther and farther from

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shore. The water passed her knees, passed her waist, and finally it passed her shoulders until only her head and her arms, holding high her smiling son, were visible.

When it became clear to Shining Agate that Right Hand would not come back, that she must face Left Hand without him, her heart turned cold and smooth. She lowered her strong arms, sank Laughter deep beneath the waves, hugged him against her chest until he stopped moving. Then her own legs were caught by the undertow, and she disappeared. The surface of the ocean was once again empty and calm.

—AS COLLECTED FROM SERGEI MISHIKOFF,
SUSCITNA, ALASKA, AUGUST 1970

. . .

“Sir,” the annoyed flight attendant addressed me. “This airplane cannot move unless everyone is seated.”

Everyone was me, and I wasn’t, and yet we were. I pleasantly pointed out this paradox to illustrate the capriciousness of codified law: what shouldn’t be, nevertheless was.

She was not intrigued. “Sit,” she ordered curtly, and, faced with a direct command, I obeyed.

I was on my way to Alaska, propelled by inertia. Three years ago, I had enrolled in a graduate anthropology program, and, having taken the required course work for six semesters, it only remained for me to prove myself in the field. I had no ambitious queries of my own to resolve, so I appropriated one from my adviser, Abraham Wentworth. While passing through a remote subarctic village in 1927, a question arose in his mind that he had never answered to his own satisfaction: Why did human beings remain in this remote, cold, barren environment?

“Find out,” he directed me. “It’ll be good for at least a major publication or two.”

So here I was, my stowed bags packed with painkillers and antiseptics, my sensitive film protected against weather by tied condoms, my future as a respected professional in the balance, aboard a flight diagonal across the continent. My fellow passengers were Japanese businessmen on their way home to Tokyo, healthy hikers, mothers grim-lipped from saying goodbye to their

daughters-in-law and knowing, despite protests and promises, that their own solicitous faces would fade within a day from the memory of their drawling grandchildren.

It was one of those endless journeys in which all sense of *from* and *to* is lost, when secrets are confided to seatmates, great thoughts are pondered but not written down, plans are made that will never be carried out. It was a two-meal, two-hot-towel flight, a dislocating hang in the air, and by the hour I arrived I'd be a time traveler: no longer truly from where I'd started but not yet one with where I'd come.

Once in Suscitna, I was given over to the care of small children until I was educated enough to deal with adults without taxing their patience. It took months for me to learn the rudiments of the language—the local dialect varied widely from anything previously published—and so I spent my first days shepherded by reluctant young boys or girls to whom parents had assigned the chore of my improvement. Aimlessly I followed one or another of them along the lanes of the community, pointing at objects and dutifully repeating the name to my instructor's satisfaction before phonetically transcribing it into my notebook.

I had arrived in the early autumn, naively treating my stint of fieldwork as if it conformed to a standard academic calendar. Within weeks the sun all but disappeared from the murky sky, the temperature fell permanently below zero, and my child-hosts returned to their classrooms for hours each day. Time dragged, its waste insufferable whenever I imagined the activities I could engage in elsewhere, the conversations I could carry on, the tasks I could accomplish. Winter was a long, insomniac night, featureless and infuriating, in which events occurred only to vaguely blur together in their recollection. My vocabulary lists lengthened, my hair grew, my connections to the world outside the village frayed and snapped.

One day in March, warmer than most, unable to endure the indoor boredom, I ventured out alone on a path bound high on either side by hard-packed snow. Turning a sharp corner, I saw in the gloom a deeper shadow, tall and menacing. The bear—it must be—hungry from hibernation, out, like me, for the first

time. Running was pointless, so I did a thing I'd read about: I dropped to the ground, shut my eyes, and lay completely still. A bear was supposed to believe me dead and therefore unappetizing or unthreatening, anything, to convince it to avoid me. My ears strained for the scrape of paws, the low rumble of a growl. Was it staring at me, transfixed in wonder? Finally I opened one eye and found myself alone, the only spot of color in a vast whiteness.

My immediate terror broadened. I dreaded loneliness, failure, accident. I saw myself drifting within a pointless life, defined by cautious habit, oscillating along the short curve between amusement and annoyance. It was as incorrect to say that nothing mattered to me as it was to claim that something did. At last, the cold penetrated my goosedown parka. I stood up, retraced my steps, went back inside. Two o'clock. In an hour, school would end and perhaps a child would be sent to visit.

I had been resident in Suscitna for eight months before I felt reasonably fluent. Even then, I had no choice but to frequently interrupt my eavesdropping with requests for repetitions, explanations, distinct pronunciations. I fit into no preestablished category within the existing social structure of the village, and so uniquely came to fill my own niche, a role approximately described as "nosy, inept, noncontributory stranger." In the eyes of my informants it must have seemed as though I fairly panted for any scrap of simply expressed gossip, historical or modern, and a few of them took delight in leading me astray, exhorting me to speak inappropriate words. I had no alternative but to become the butt of bad jokes, an irresistible buffoon, a moron who could be counted upon to laugh with the crowd at his own stupidities. How else to ingratiate myself? Anger or resentment would have resulted only in an attitude toward me of indifference or scorn, and the thrust of my work depended upon access. And so I hid my true feelings, reserved my sarcasm and wit for letters that would be appreciatively read thousands of miles to the south, and bided my time. When this exile was over, my voice would be restored.

In the interim, there was the place. Denied the distraction of conversation, I had no choice but to interact with my surround-

ings, to open myself to their feel and sound, to the salt in the unflagging wind. After the months of darkness, the return of daylight was exhilarating, thrilling. The air smelled brown and green, the sky abounded with calling birds, the ice retreated each day farther from the shore, and beneath its transparent glare could be seen flashes of movement as insects skated the widening pockets. Roads turned to mud, mud to caked ruts. Men heated rocks for sweatbaths and children forgot their coats when they went out to play. At Easter a man, Ivan Kroto, went to church drunk. He sat and knelt and prayed loudly out of tune with the rest of the congregation, and no one minded. His behavior made them smile.

That summer, I moved from the village to an abandoned fish camp, where I lived alone in a tar paper-covered shanty perched high on a bluff, its one glass window fronting the blue-gray of Cook Inlet. From that solitary eye, one July dawn, I spied movement on the rocky beach and quickly descended the steps—planks pushed into the crumbling slope—to find a seal pup the tide had left stranded. It stared up at me, trusting and curious, too surprised at the firmness of land to propel itself back to water, and allowed me to stroke its sleek fur. I kept it safe, protected from the sun by a crate, through the slow revolution of the sea's cycle, and the next day it was gone.

I filled those hours I allotted to myself with projects and assignments. Each night, I would transcribe the notes I had collected, bits of new village trivia, emendations to previously recorded data, chance insights, lines of inquiry to pursue in the future. Most mornings, when the tide was out, I walked the beach, my eyes screening the pebbles for good luck. Among the dozens of locally identified charms, none was more prized than an opaque, soft, orange stone, slightly translucent when held before a light. Encased within, like the grain of sand around which in warmer oceans a pearl is formed, was a dark core of rock, and the smaller the heart, the greater the potency. I kept a collection in a mayonnaise jar on my table.

In winter, I had eaten the charity of others—donated moose meat, muskrat, dried fish. But in the summer, I caught my own salmon with a nylon net I stretched between two barrels and anchored thirty feet offshore. First came the humpies, then kings,

and reds, as run followed run. I supplemented my diet with boiled noodles, instant potatoes, Rice-A-Roni, or Hamburger Helper in a rotation of the six flavors stocked by the village all-purpose store. I drank tea, instant coffee, or Kool-Aid, watched the skies for the mail plane. Each night, I listened to country music on KYAK, or to the cassette tapes I had culled from my collection at home and brought north to keep me company. For society, I lost copiously but with forced grace at pinochle or cribbage, the village's twin obsessions. For work, I amassed indiscriminate information from anyone I could persuade to talk to me.

Participant-observation is the name of the game in cultural anthropology, and accordingly I had apprenticed myself to Nikefor Alexan, the experienced fisherman whose one-room summer fish camp lay six miles from the village. With plywood, tar paper, a door, and a window ordered from Anchorage, I constructed a makeshift cabin on a flat, cleared bluff a mile up the beach.

Nikefor, his wife, Madrona, their infant daughter, Mary, and Madrona's father, Sergei Mischikoff, were a quiet family, traditionalists who spoke no English and practiced a religion that combined old beliefs with the more recent teachings of nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox missionaries.

I was under no illusion that I was much help to Nikefor with fishing—an extra pair of arms, albeit clumsy and needing constant instruction—but for the group as a whole I believe I provided mild diversion. Though they rarely asked me questions about my background, they suffered my own queries with patience and good humor. In the evenings, during the preparations for supper, the mending of the nets, the sorting of the hooks, I was their excuse to repeat old stories and jokes, a fresh audience who never failed to signify interest and enthusiasm. My tape recorder was always available.

We were not friends, these people and I—too much divided us—but we grew used to each other's presence, began to relax our respective guards. They knew by and large what to expect from me, and I had gauged, more or less, when to laugh. We shared food and labor, weather and isolation, and within the parentheses

of the warmer season, we constituted a kind of unit. I felt myself part of a process I had read about in fieldwork courses: the researcher's perspective shifts over the course of his investigation from that of a complete outsider to something approximating an insider's point of view. Oddness is replaced by familiarity, novelty by routine. I had experienced the loneliness I had so dreaded in anticipating my stay in Suscitna, but over time the emotion had evolved and altered. Solitude became my most cherished companion, my trusted friend. After a long day of my own fawning, exhausting smiles, I sought it out.

Silvers are the last salmon to return from the open sea to seek for spawning the streams where they were hatched, and this season, as July turned into August, their appearance was behind schedule. The preference of the canneries, which were our prime source of cash income, an abundance of silvers was directly proportional to the village's prosperity, and so we watched for them impatiently.

"They're smart," Nikefor commented. He sat in shirtsleeves at the table, a hand of solitaire dealt before him. He wore his dark hair long, combed to a ducktail in the back. "They'll come at night when they think we're asleep, or during a storm when they believe we won't take out the boat."

Not sure whether to nod or smile, I lifted Mary out of her playpen and rocked her in my arms.

Madrona stood stirring an iron pot on the woodstove. When the water reached a high boil, she spooned in chunks of fresh fish, a can of green beans, a can of beets.

"Watch for a light," Nikefor addressed me. "If the silvers come when I can't send for you overland, I'll put the lantern on the boat. You come down from your camp and I'll pick you up."

The logistics of my living arrangement were a frequent source of worry for Nikefor. At high tide, the beach between our two camps was swamped under four feet of water, and the danger from bears was too great to permit passage along the top of the bluffs at night. He wanted me to sleep on his floor to ensure my availability the moment the run started. Every day, he tried to persuade me, but I refused to give up my few hours of privacy.

"Stay here tonight, why don't you?" he offered. "Look, the tide

is already up to your ankles. You'll get wet if you leave now."

"I have my hip boots," I reminded him. "I'll watch for your light."

"You should listen," Madrona said. She reached her hand into a huge bag of dried potato flakes, came up with a fistful, and then dramatically tossed these into her stew. This technique was her specialty, a conjurer's trick that both thickened the broth and created a skim of tiny dumplings. "This time of year those ghosts you are always asking about will come and get you if they find you walking alone at night."

I looked over Mary's head at Sergei, who made his eyes round in mock fright. My preoccupation with collecting ghost stories was a cause of much teasing. Grown men and women, it was implied, had more important things to think about.

The waves knocked at my knees as I sloshed toward my cabin. The night was moonless, overcast, with a promise of autumn in the chill air. I judged distance by the one constant marker located halfway along my route, a stagnant tidal pool that always stank of rotting seaweed. Once I passed by it, my stairs were only fifteen minutes farther ahead.

By the time I climbed them and closed my door, the Inlet had reached nearly four feet up the bluff. I could imagine Nikefor squinting into the night, frustrated and suspicious, wondering if the silvers would take this murky opportunity to evade his nets. I switched on my battery lamp, dropped a Roberta Flack tape into the player, and finished the day's notes: *N. bullshitting me about believing fish can think? S.'s reaction suggests yes. M. warns me about bogeyman as she would a kid. Cross-check child abduction tales. Function: to keep people inside at night? To instill group dependence?*

Roberta sang "Do What You Gotta Do." I clicked off my lamp, lay on my cot, and zipped myself into my sleeping bag. Four months to go, minimum, before I left this place. I yawned deeply and turned onto my side. A few minutes later, the machine automatically shut itself off and I let myself be lulled by the regular rhythm of the surf, approaching, approaching, approaching.

Suddenly I was alert, listening to light footsteps ascend the

planks, reach the narrow porch. I waited for a voice, a knock, but . . . nothing. An animal, I decided once I thought about it. No one could have crossed the beach after me because of the deepening water. I must have been dreaming.

I recomposed myself, opened a gate for my mind to wander.

There it was again: footfalls, definitely. And there, I smelled the sour odor from down the shore, so it must be Nikefor or Sergei, come to tell me the salmon were making a dash for safe passage. I heard a tap against the wooden door.

"*Tinashdit-ah*," I spoke in Suscitna.

Another tap, soft as a branch moved by an evening breeze.

"*Tinashdit*, come in."

No answer, but wait, I caught the unmistakable sound of stifled giggling. This was a joke, a follow-up to Madrona's imprecation about ghosts. Scare the *bergunidge*, the outsider, with his own research.

"*Aikda*," I called. "I'm already in bed. Pull out the latch string and come in before you fall into the water."

A silence . . . then a loud rapping—bang-bang-bang-bang—but still no words.

"Please yourself," I said. "But I'm not getting up in the cold to play along."

And all was still, utterly still. No retreating steps, no protests, no whispers. Through the four panes of my window glass, the stars were steady and familiar, balanced in their distant silence. I made a mental note to find out how Nikefor got from his camp to mine and, more importantly, to ascertain his motive. I hadn't realized that my reactions mattered enough that he would risk getting wet to provoke them.

The tide was sufficiently out by 5 a.m., and soon thereafter I sat in my place at the Alexan table, ready for breakfast. Alaska Fish and Wildlife restricted fishing in the Inlet to the hours between seven and four during silver season, and enforced the ruling by sending officers in small planes to overfly the beach in unpredictable patterns.

"*Ya l'ida*, how did you sleep?" Madrona asked me.

"*Ya li aleb*, okay, once I was left alone." I gave Nikefor a mean-

ingful look.

"Left alone?" Madrona was a good actress: her expression seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Ask your husband."

Nikefor had been listening to the radio for the weather report, and glanced up.

"What I want to know," I said, "is how you got from here to my place once the tide came in. How you got back home again. It's a good trick."

"What are you talking about?"

"I knew you'd say that."

I turned to Sergei, expecting a reciprocating grin, but his face was blank.

"All right, all right, if you insist," I said, and with as much sarcasm as I could muster in a language not my own, I told my story.

Nikefor, Madrona, and Sergei had stopped what they were doing and listened closely.

"You should have come in," I finished.

No one moved, no one replied.

"Come on," Nikefor said at last, and walked out of the cabin. Madrona wrapped Mary in a blanket and followed. Sergei splashed water on the fire in the stove and beckoned me to precede him down the stairs to the shore.

"Are we going to fish now?" I asked, surprised that we had packed no lunch.

No answer. Instead, once we were all assembled below, the group began to walk the beach, past the empty boat, in the direction of Suscitna.

"What are we doing? Where are we going now?"

No answer. They were pointedly ignoring me, treating me with what anthropology textbooks termed "ritual avoidance." But why, to what purpose? After a while, we went past the stairs to my shanty without breaking stride, and a mile beyond we reached the next fish camp. Theodore Kroto and his teenage son Max had already loaded nets into their boat and were ready to push off. Wordlessly, the rest of us waited while Nikefor approached them. I couldn't hear what was said, but saw Nikefor gesture back in the direction of our camps, saw the worry in his face. Theodore dug

his boot into the sand, nodded once, twice, and finally, in what seemed like an attitude of resignation, threw the anchor from his boat. Max ran to their cabin, and in less than two minutes returned with his mother and younger brother. Quietly excited, they joined us as we resumed our march.

At each camp along the way, a similar sequence occurred. In some instances, boats already launched were summoned back to shore. Laundry was left piled half-washed in rushing streams. Nothing was allowed to delay us, and no one we encountered stayed behind, so that soon we were a ragtag crowd of maybe twenty-five men and women, children, babies, and a few trailing dogs. The only noise was the drum of our feet on sand and rock, the rustle of people in a hurry.

I was confused beyond anything I had ever experienced. To my knowledge, the forfeit of a fishing day was unthinkable, impossible. In Suscitna, what wasn't caught and preserved in August could not be consumed in February—there were no second chances. As I kept pace between Sergei and Madrona, I considered every explanation for this trek, from sudden illness to my own abrupt eviction. Whatever was coming, I was without preparation or defense.

At last, just after noon, the straggling entourage arrived at the entrance to the tiny Russian Orthodox church in Suscitna. Father Peter Oskolov, part Native, though from a different community, listened to Sergei's whispered news and disappeared into the sacristy. He emerged in a purple funerary stole, carrying a gold ciborium in one hand and an ornate metal censer in the other.

I had long since given up asking questions, so I didn't try to catch his eye as we proceeded to the next stop, a log cabin without electricity or running water, the lifelong residence of the oldest woman in Suscitna. Martina Stephan was small and frail, her spine doubled over by osteoporosis. Balding and deeply wrinkled, she was never seen without a black shawl draped over her head. Like the subject of a Goya painting, her hands were forged by arthritis, twisted into attitudes of perpetual supplication. Her voice was harsh, rattling as wind through a gravelly passage, and her eyes were clouded white with glaucoma. She could not have weighed much more than eighty pounds.

"Grandmother," Sergei shouted into her ear as we all stood watching outside the open door. "Bring your hat and come with us. We need you."

Martina gravely dropped her head even farther than its natural posture, then raised it. She shuffled farther into the dark interior, where she rooted among boxes and bags stacked against the far wall. When she moved back into my field of vision, she clutched a small bundle wrapped inside a piece of faded olive-green army blanket. Bunky George, the manager of the store, pulled up in his Jeep, and Sergei and Nikefor lifted Martina into the passenger seat. The rest of us climbed into the beds of what seemed like every pickup in the village, and in a long, jarring procession, we raced the incoming tide back down the rocky beach to the steps that led to my fish camp.

I jumped to the ground, made to go first. I couldn't remember the condition of my room: Had I put away my notes? Straightened my cot? Neatness was a value among the Suscitna and I dreaded further embarrassment.

Sergei touched my arm. "First the priest and the old lady." The fatherly, almost affectionate tone of his voice surprised me. Whatever else he was, he wasn't angry with me.

Nikefor lifted Martina in his arms, carried her like a baby, and matched Peter Oskolov, plank by plank, up the side of the bluff. Madrona, Theodore, Sergei, and I came next, followed by what seemed like most of the population of Suscitna. When he reached the porch, Nikefor gently stood Martina on her feet and stepped back to watch with the rest of us while Oskolov lit his incense and Martina, with jerks and fumbles, unwrapped the blanket. I smelled mothballs as the covering fell to the ground at her feet.

The priest began to chant in Slavonic, the words indistinct and rumbling, to swing the censer in an arc. Martina reached up her arms, pulled off her shawl, and set a hat made of fur on her smooth, shining head. The hat was grayish, fragile-looking, its shape flattened from storage and age, but here and there the pelage bristled magnetic, as if charged with static electricity. Wearing it, Martina seemed to straighten taller.

"I return at last," she said, loud and commanding. "I bring what you asked and now you must be content." With that, unaided, she

pushed open my door and walked inside.

All around me, I felt a relaxation of tension. The world rushed back to surround us the way a high wave rolls onto a dry beach: shoulders lost their hunch, mouths loosened into smiles, children whistled, babies cried, dogs barked, the long grass bent in the sea wind.

"Tonight you'll make lots of tea," Sergei whispered in my ear. "I'll explain you your story."

My work in Suscitna was different afterwards, in the six more months I remained. I had crossed a line, joined forces, been validated. People talked to me with less caution, and stopped playing tricks with vocabulary words. I was treated, I eventually decided, like a big, somewhat backward but favored child, a person who had been absent during a crucial time and needed, for his understanding of things, his sophistication, to catch up to where he should be. There was no lack of joking, no forced solemnity, but unmistakably a sense of acceleration. I was in demand, told what questions I should ask, quizzed the next day after an interview to ensure that I had grasped the significance of what had been conveyed. When fishing was over and we all moved back to the village, I had visitors or invitations every night. I absorbed more than I could record, gained impressions that could not be quantified, forgot my notebook more and more often.

And in exchange, my hosts and guests sought but a single courtesy from me, repeated so often it became a refrain: to recount my visit from lonely Shining Agate and Laughter.

"She needed you to let her in," Sergei had pointed out that first night. "She required the door to be opened as her invitation. And just think, you would have seen her, her long hair dripping from the sea, her face beautiful and sad. She would have told you how her son was drowning, asked for your help, and of course you would have gone. Like many before... but see, you turned out to have more power than we thought."

"More power?" I asked him. "Why do you say that? All I did was stay in bed."

"Yes," he nodded, his face lit and pleased. "Think how unusual a thing that was for you. Always you are so anxious to indulge us.

PLOUGHSHARES

You jump when we call. You laugh at your own errors. You give away your possessions and ask for little in return. But last night, grandson, you were *rude*! That was your power! You are the man who didn't answer, the man who resisted Shining Agate, the man who at last released her by saying no."