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Before Winter

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BEFORE WINTER

FIRST YOU REMEMBER YOUR FATHER'S HANDS, thick hairy fingers with joints round as marbles. Powerful hands meant to haul rope, slice logs, gaff fish—like the November day he and one of your uncles, a lanky red-faced man with a curse for each change in the weather, set out in a jonboat at the height of the flood to fish the overflowed salmon hatchery nearby. You were five, hands softer than a bird. You watched as they left seven times that day, each time returning with the boat weighed down to the water by piles of salmon. Each fish bigger than your leg.

The kitchen was no different: stacks of fish, their brains malleted to a pulp by your grandmother—your mother scouring the brilliant flesh, spinning away scales like shrapnel. The women's knives worked as deftly as extra limbs, splitting the bright red meat, dropping the entrails into buckets by their sides. Raised on milk and liver pellets, the salmon stank like old beef. But for an entire winter's supply of food, no one dared complain.

Not even you, not even when the smell made you nauseous, not even after you fled to the furnace room where your grandmother had penned the three brown-and-black hounds. Nestled into the dogs' fur, you thought about the eyes of those fish, glazed over with a stare less like death than knowledge, the end of a story written into their first gasp of water. A look of regret.

And even now, thirty years later—grandmother gone, mother gone, all gone except your father—you cannot chase that look from your mind. In the small bed beside you, your father's large hands can barely muster the strength to clutch the wool blanket closer to his trembling chest. A wooden cross above his headboard faces the window on the far wall, through whose thin panes you listen for the first crack of cold descending from the mountains to the west, feeling it the hulk of your chest dark and house-like. Somewhere the

salmon continue their run, a great loop which may be an eternal cycle or may just be a futile joke that only the salmon understand. You see them within your father's eyes, moving beneath the thickening film, beneath the water's surface, a movement which is itself the only truth, ending with the smell of liver and frightened boys clutching the fur of dogs in rooms not distant enough to let them forget.