WEATHER

My stomach was still acting evil when Don dropped me off at home. It was lunchtime, but all I wanted was to lie down awhile. Kyle had the bad luck of complicating this plan. The door to his new office faced the door to the bedroom, and as I passed he gave me a cheerful hello, asking how I was getting along with my EnCompass. I confessed that I’d loaned it to Don.

“Good thinking,” he said, leaning against the doorframe. “Next he’ll be wanting to buy one.” He asked if I wanted company for lunch.

“Actually, I was going to lie down awhile.”

“What, your stomach giving you trouble?”

He answered my look of annoyance by explaining that Jean had told him about my stomach problem. What he wanted to know was if there was anything at all he could do to help me out with it. He’d be glad to bring me something to drink or eat. If I wanted he could get in touch with his mom.

I told him not to do anything for me and then shut the bedroom door in his face.

Sometimes you get caught in the rain without an umbrella or a waterproof jacket. When that happens you turn up your collar and hunch your shoulders and maybe hold a newspaper above your head, trying to protect yourself. But if there’s anything to the rain, and if you have any distance to go, you soon reach a point where these meager measures become useless. And then it’s best to just accept that you’re going to get wet.

There was no kind of gear to protect me from the personal weather I knew would be coming after what I had just witnessed...
at Cory’s. And so it was in a spirit of acceptance that I now lay down and let myself steep in Edward’s last summer.

He was eighteen. He had just finished high school, he was “taking time off” before applying to college, and it didn’t look to me like hanging on at home was doing him any good. All summer he’d been running around with his high school pals. He would turn up at home every few days to sleep off the last party and bum money from his mother for the next one. He had no job, no real plans, and (I felt) no right to expect us to feed and fund him while he avoided the future and shirked present responsibilities and squandered all his energy having a good time. On this, as on most things touching our son, June disagreed with me. Lying there, I could hear our old bedtime arguments, as familiar as the catechism to a Catholic.

Charlie, he’s been in school for twelve straight years, or thirteen. Let him play.

He’s been playing since he could crawl. Shouldn’t he be ready to try something else?

You act like it’s all fun and games with him. It’s not. He’d like to have a plan. He’d like to know what he wants from life. I’m sure he’d like to have a father who didn’t think he was worthless.

One day he might wish he’d had a mother who expected something from him.

Right, then he’d be perfect—a tough guy, just like his dad. It’s not about being like me. It’s about being himself. Who is he? What is he?

Try asking him. He might tell you.

How can he tell me if he doesn’t know? How can he find out if you don’t let him?

If I hadn’t known this track so well I’d have expected to hear myself start bragging about the five miles I used to walk to school every morning. I admit I could be boorish. And yet I did have evidence to back up the arguments I made that summer. Between Edward and me things had been strained for ages, but that didn’t mean all was harmonious between Edward and his
mom. She claimed I was blind, and maybe in some ways I was. But not so blind I failed to see the way he rolled his eyes when she asked what he was thinking. The way he would stand up and walk out of the room when she was in the middle of telling him something. And once, when she was hovering over him trying to stick a thermometer in his mouth, the way he barked and batted her hand away.

I confess I felt somewhat vindicated, and not all that surprised, when at the end of the summer he appeared at the dinner table one night and told us about his plan to go up to the Sierras for a month.

At first I thought he was talking about another party, one of his gang whose family had a ski cabin they were going to use. “Who you going with?” I asked him.

“No one. I’ll get somebody to drop me off up there.”

“Where’ll you stay?”

“I’ll figure that out once I get up there. I’m going to make a shelter and forage for all my food. I got this book that explains all about living off the land.”

First I fought to keep down a loud chorus of I-told-you-so’s—some aimed at June, whose clinging had driven him to devise this caper, and some at Edward, who for years had been turning down my invitations to do outdoor things together. Then I set about silencing my more serious doubts, reluctant to quell the kid’s initiative—even if it did seem misguided.

“You sure you need to go for a whole month?” I asked him.

“What’s the use of going for a shorter time than that?”

“You could take a week to try it out, see how it goes. If you like it, go for a longer time later on.”

“A week is nothing. It’s too short.”

“When you’re foraging, seven days probably seems like a hell of a long time.”

June said, “What if you couldn’t find anything to eat?”

Edward rolled his eyes.

I said to June, “That’s what the book’s for.”
“But going out into the woods with nothing to eat, no tent. That’s dangerous. Isn’t it, Charlie?”

Dangerous, maybe. Dumb, definitely. But I didn’t say it. I had started to get a feel for what was happening here. It was a new thing, Edward and I on one side, June on the other. For as long as I could remember I’d been the odd one out. Let June read those lines for a while, I said to myself. See how she likes them.

“Dangerous?” I said. “It’s dangerous to drive your car to the supermarket.”

“At least I know how to drive. And if I get hurt, or sick, God forbid, I can drive myself to the doctor.”

“Mom,” Edward said, “how can I learn anything without doing it?”

I kept a straight face. “He’s got a point.”

“I don’t expect it to be easy. If it was, I wouldn’t want to do it. Everything I do is easy. I’m sick of it.”

She opened her mouth to answer but he stood up and threw his napkin on the table. “I’m sick of this town. I’m sick of this house. I’m sick of you thinking I’m sick.” He wheeled and stormed out of the kitchen.

“I don’t care what you say,” June told me later on in bed, “I know it’s dangerous. What if he got hurt all alone out there? What if he got sick?”

“Those are legitimate questions. They’re not reasons to stop an adult from doing what he wants to do.”

“He’s no adult. He’s a kid.”

“Yeah? Tell that to the draft board.”

Over the next couple of weeks I lowered my shoulder against the doors of her mind and tried to open them to what Edward was doing. I think my persistence surprised her a little. In all our years together I had thrown a few fits like the one I threw during the dress-up show, but most of the time I deferred to her when it came to raising the kids. She had convinced me early on that growing up motherless had left me with a skewed sense of things. Fair enough. But if I lacked expertise on how mothers ought to behave
with young kids, my grandma left me with some very definite views on how they ought not to behave with grown ones. When I arrived at my grandma’s house, at age seven, two of the four adults living there were sons in their thirties. Neither of them ever lived anywhere else. One night before we went to sleep I reminded June about my uncle Norman, the nasty hypochondriac she’d met a few times before we moved west. “He was Grandma’s favorite,” I told her. And then I told her about Uncle Dale, who had drunk himself to death by the time I was twelve. “Dale was the baby.”

“Don’t compare them to Edward,” she said. “That’s a whole different world.”

“Yes and no. The point is, sticking around home has its dangers too.”

I considered reminding her of some of the hostile sparks Edward had been giving off in recent weeks, but when I looked at her I saw I didn’t need to. Her eyes had filled up with tears. “He hates me, doesn’t he? I know it.”

I took her hand and held it on my chest. “He doesn’t hate you. It’s like when Sadie was two and she used to push us away and say, ‘I can do it myself.’ Only now it’s an eighteen-year-old doing the pushing, so he pushes harder.” She turned toward me and lay her cheek on her hand on my chest. This sent a wave of warm feeling all the way down to the soles of my feet. When the wave came back up it carried the idea that Edward going away might be good for us, some practice for what lay ahead. It was the first time I’d seen that side of this thing. I mentioned it to her.

The way she said, “Oh, Charlie,” and the way she opened up and clung to me showed that she too had glimpsed the change that awaited us, had been stirred by the size of what she saw. Stirred, and I think torn. She liked the idea but was scared of what it might mean after all the years we’d spent cobbling together a relationship that was not pretty, not at all sound in structure, but known—and in that sense safe. Edward’s adventure would be ours also, the first steps into unknown territory. Making love that night, we were as awkward and excited as a couple of novices.
The rest of the time Edward spent getting ready was good time, time I couldn’t help but remember fondly, in spite of what ended up happening. Edward was around the house a lot, studying up on his survival skills and gathering the gear he needed. After work I’d help him with the packing and we would pore over maps together, looking for the place most apt to put him to the test he wanted. Later on, in bed, June and I would discuss his plans—she would list her doubts, I would try my best to assuage them. And then like a couple of giddy alchemists we would lie there combining our fear for Edward with our hopes for him, we would mix that with the hopes and fears we had for ourselves, and it seemed every night what we came up with was a powerful love potion.

By the time Edward was ready to head out October was right around the corner, and I’d started to worry a little about the weather. In general the early fall is a lovely time in the Sierras. But some years the hard weather hits ahead of schedule—as the Donner Party found out in 1846. Weather wasn’t on June’s list of worries, and I didn’t bring it up with her—I’d thrown my weight behind this expedition and it was too late to back away now. Anyway the risks didn’t seem all that drastic to me, weighed against the potential rewards. Injury and sickness I refused on principle to worry about. In my opinion Edward wouldn’t have needed to prove himself like this if June hadn’t used injury and sickness as excuses to keep him from doing things she thought were dangerous his whole life. I figured he would last a week at the most. Foraging sounds like a neat idea until you bust your ass all day scratching around for a bunch of roots and seeds that don’t taste very good and don’t fill you up. If hunger didn’t drive him back to civilization, the tedium of finding food would. Either way, I planned to do all I could to help him look on his time in the woods not as a failed bid for independence, but as the start of something he had the rest of his life to build on.

The afternoon of his departure the three of us were oddly fond and tender together. That evening June and I made love more
gravely than ever before. There was a grim kind of zeal, a fierce patience in this loving, as if with each thrust of our bodies we were hoisting a heavy stone together, placing it in some magical wall we believed would protect our son. It was fervent, if not really intimate. It was like prayer. And it kept on that way. During the day I would try to talk her out of her worries, doing all I could to convince her my predictions were right—he’d be up there a week, I told her, and when he came back we’d have to do our best to make him feel like he’d achieved something. In the evening we would go to bed early and set to work on our wall.

Between the talking and the loving, it looked to me like we were getting somewhere when at the end of the first week June started speaking about Edward as though he would be home soon. She turned down a couple of tennis games because she was planning to get a call from him saying he needed us to drive up and get him. When I came home from work, or inside from the garden or yard, she would tell me he hadn’t called before I even had a chance to ask.

But that first week ended and no call. In the middle of the next week October began. I did my best to stay upbeat, saying to June that we’d sold Edward short, ten days and still not a peep from him.

I was looking at the weather page one day at the end of week two and saw a chain of storms tracking toward us from out in the Pacific. This was at breakfast. I showed June the satellite picture and said it looked like the kid was going to get wet. “Good thing I convinced him to take rain gear.”

She said what I’d been trying not to think. “What if it snows?”

“It won’t. Winter’s a long way off.”

“Anything can happen up there, you always say.”

“So what do you think we should do? Send him a telegram and tell him to come home?”

When the six o’clock news came on that day we were both in front of the TV. Announcing the first storms of the season, the weatherman was jolly and smug, as if he had ordered them.
He jabbered away for a while without giving us any clear idea of whether the storms would be cold enough to drop snow on the mountains: the first one was still a couple of days offshore, and he probably didn’t know yet. That’s what I explained to June.

“What if it does snow?” she said.

“We know the general area where he is. We can call the rangers up and tell them to go in and get him.”

“Why don’t we call them up right now.”

“And say what? There’s a storm coming, go find our son?”

“Charlie, it’s dangerous.”

“Not if it’s a rainstorm. Then it’s just wet. They don’t send out rescue parties for wet campers.”

Which is basically what they told me a day and a half later, when to soothe her nerves I called. I told the ranger on the phone that my concern was not rain but snow. He said snow wasn’t likely, but even if it did snow, it wouldn’t snow much—not enough to keep the kid from walking out. This turned out to be true. That first storm only dropped six inches of powder. It fell at night.

It was the second storm that scared me. This one was as chilly as the first and far fiercer than they predicted. It rode roughshod across the valley, dropping two inches of cold rain on us before it slammed into the Sierras and bellied there from Friday evening to Saturday night, too heavy to crawl over the jagged peaks. Most of that Saturday it was clear in the valley. I was out in the yard gathering up the leaves and twigs and other debris the storm had tossed around when June came out and went to the edge of the fence to gaze east. From our hilltop we had an open view of the Sierras. I went over to her and we stood together watching the heavy bank of clouds that brooded over the mountains like God Himself deciding our fate.

June looked ragged—her face as gray and creased as a piece of newsprint that’s been wadded and then smoothed.

“Shall we try calling again?” I asked her.

“It’s no use.”
“We might get through, you can’t tell. It might be letting up enough for crews to start working.”
“We can’t do anything.”
“June.”

Our bedroom rites had darkened the past two nights, to the point where in the light of day we had been avoiding each other’s gaze. But now she looked me square in the eyes. “We had eighteen years to do something, Charlie. We didn’t do it.”
“What are you saying?”
She looked off toward the mountains. “Don’t pretend we can wash our hands of it because he’s legally an adult.”

I reached for her wrist but she pulled it away. “Who’s to say he’s not perfectly safe and sound right now? I’m sure he is,” I lied.

“Maybe he is, maybe he’s not. That doesn’t change anything between you and me.”

She looked me in the eyes again. “How did we manage it so long?”

The third storm passed over us three nights later. It was warmer than the first two storms and its rains melted away a good deal of the snow that had fallen in the mountains. By the time the call came from the Nevada County sheriff’s office it was clear again and colder, and Sadie had come home from Long Beach, where she was going to college.

The three of us drove up to Truckee and identified Edward’s body for the medical examiner. Then a stooped, skinny sheriff’s deputy told us what had happened, based on what they’d been able to piece together. The first storm hadn’t caused Edward any problems. Probably he’d slept through it in the shelter he’d built by heaping pine boughs across the open space between a boulder and a fallen tree. The deputy said that had been a pretty snug spot. When he woke up the next morning and saw the snow, Edward had sense enough to know that he should break camp and cut his adventure short. He started to hike out. By the time the next storm started to boil up over the ridge behind him, he was too far from
the shelter to think about going back. Anyhow, he was making good time walking through the powder, he figured he could get out to the road before the new snow had enough time to slow him down. That’s where he was wrong.

The blizzard whited out everything from noon that day till late the next night. No rescue party could go out while the snow fell because it was too thick to see or even move through. When it finally stopped falling they spent a long time digging themselves out. So that Edward had been exposed more than twenty-four hours by the time they started looking for him, and more than seventy-two by the time they spotted the red bandana I’d given him to dip in water and wear around his neck if he got hot while out foraging. He had tied it to a limb above the boulder he had taken shelter under.

Whenever I look back on that afternoon in Truckee (I looked back on it at least twenty times a day the first year after it happened), I can’t remember seeing Edward’s body laid out on the metal table at the morgue. I remember the table, I remember the medical examiner with his handlebar mustache, and I remember the sheriff’s deputy describing how they found Edward curled up around himself, frozen in his fight to keep warm. That’s how I’ve always seen him, huddled deep down in a womb of rock, wrapped into a final fetal ball.

Sadie withdrew from school that semester. She and June and I spent a couple of months wandering around the house, three molecules missing the one element that would bind us into a compound with some solid identity and purpose. Christmas came and grimly went. Against her will, we sent Sadie back to school. That freed June and me to draw up papers and divide the spoils. It was with immense relief, and more immense shame at feeling such relief, that I went bouncing about for the next two years, doing my work but otherwise courting oblivion, letting myself drift through a sonless universe.