

The Year with No Winter · *Stephen Gaghan*

THE YEAR WITH NO WINTER began with a knock on the door of the boy's fourth-grade classroom. First the man's head appeared as the teacher walked towards him. They spoke for a moment and the teacher left the room. The teacher returned to stand behind the boy, saying quietly to bring his things which included a telescope and pencil holder and coat and lunchbox. The boy felt himself lifted high and away to observe a boy led from a classroom. In the hallway the principal of the small school patted him on the back. The adults nodded several times and the man and boy held hands leaving.

It was after lunch and they took icecream to a small park by the ocean. Do you like Mrs. Berry, the teacher? the man asked. The boy liked her and was glad he didn't have the other teacher who wasn't a nice man. His friends were in his class too. The boy was conscious of a strange weight over their conversation and was unusually shy in answering the man's questions.

The man said, let's do something different. Want to take a trip down to Florida with your Dad? He looked intently at the boy before continuing. We'll stop everywhere, see everything. Beaches and the mile-long pier in Maryland, the man paused, catching himself selling. There wasn't any need to sell.

They wore sweaters and the boy's thin blond hair blew around his head. On the sea a man worked a flat bottom boat towards a herring weir. He lashed a rope from the oarlock around the first pole he came to and began unstapling the netting. Early fall leaves bunched in wet piles and slicked to the walks. Labor Day was two weeks past and most of the tourists were gone until the leaves changed colors. The boy shivered. It wasn't much of a day for icecream.

We'll have fun, the man said, not selling this time.

The girlfriend of the man packed them a large cooler with grapes and trailmix and softdrinks while on a large map pinned to the breakfast room wall, the man outlined their route in green marker. The boy became eager as he called his two best friends and told them of the trip. The man and woman argued briefly over whether the boy should make the calls but the

woman put her foot down, insisting. They all went to the smorgasbord restaurant which was the boy's favorite. Dammit it's a hell of a lot worse for me you know, said the woman. It's best, said the man. There was not much talk at dinner and they had sundaes for dessert.

The boy didn't sleep well that night and heard the sweet murmur of conversation almost until the man came to wake him. It was not yet light as the woman said will you please be careful and looked at the man as she kissed the boy. She was on the porch until the car was out of sight with the boy still waving. The man did not look back once.

The boy was very excited and said, goodbye house goodbye tree goodbye the best icecream place, as they drove down the quiet main street. They bought doughnuts and the man wasted no time getting to Highway One.

The man said never to forget the trip, for that matter never forget leaving either, but if you have to forget something, forget the leaving. Did you hear me? he asked.

Soon they changed highways, making for Interstate Ninety-five, which they passed over on the way to Skowhegan, Farmington, Dixfield. The boy appeared to sleep. The man's hand hovered, rested. The man said softly, don't worry about school, no education was ever found in the mass.

The boy awoke in Vermont to a gloomy afternoon. He was on the wide backseat where the man had left a boysized cave for sleeping. He tried to imagine what his classmates would be saying about his not being there. Climbing into the front seat, the man said, we're past the White Mountains. How long till we get there? the boy asked. Soon, the man said, I have to put my feet up.

The next day in Burlington they stood conspicuously on a corner above a street that slanted sharply towards Lake Champlain. The man stood stiffly in the midst of internal debate. The boy had fudge. I'll bet you didn't know, the man said, that this is where I met your mother.

The boy remembered his mother. She was a warm shadow near the Christopher Robin mobile. She used to sing to him, but this he had been told.

Right here. She had been skiing and her friends, they had a car, and I was working in there and I saw her and I waved. She pointed at herself and her friends laughed. But she smiled.

At the water they watched windsurfers gather speed for a run at the wake of a barge. We didn't have those when I was here. We used to rent

sailboats, your mother and I, and cross the lake. She thought all trees were called trees and birds birds.

The boy had never seen his father cry and began to cry also, stronger. The man wiped his eyes as lost seagulls begged for food.

Three days later the early morning was clear and sharp in the Green Mountains and the sky the blue of elevation. They ordered pancakes, dousing them in their own maple syrup brought in from the car. In the Thoreau Museum the man said, impossible, Thoreau was never here and they left.

One afternoon, as they stood by a waterfall rushing wildly after a week of rain, the man pulled a wooden spool from his jacket pocket and said, come on. It was warm in the sun and the top slid down with an electric whirr. The spool had string wrapped around instead of thread. Pull that rag out of the hole there, he said indicating the passenger side floorboard where rust had eaten a small gap into the car.

This is something we used to do when I was younger with my dad. The wheels don't even touch the ground, he would say, once you get moving the magic happens and the wheels lift up. Watch the pavement through the hole rushing by. Doesn't it seem like we are flying? We are flying.

He handed the spool to the boy and said, when we get enough speed, I want you to drop the spool through the hole but not until I say. Hold on, here we go.

The car glided down the smooth untrafficked road. It was a moment before they could get their breath in the sudden chill. The air seemed to have grown, become too big for their chests. The man said, okay, now, lower it through the hole, now.

The string raced out and then the wooden spool bounced and danced twenty feet behind them. Tug on the string, the man said. The spool leapt into the air.

The weeks faltered crept skipped by. They slept in the same room where the mother and father honeymooned. They changed rooms. The man said a honeymoon is where we went after we were married, just after we were married, like a vacation. They hiked Okemo Mountain and looked at the motionless lifts strange above dusky grasses and mud. In Boston they moved past art in the Gardner until the boy became bored. They ate Italian sausages outside the Fenway baseball stadium and bought real Red Sox caps. They stayed with friends of the man in Back Bay who said, please stay all fall, stay through Christmas, we'd love to have you for Christmas, you

know you're welcome. Almost every day they bought the boy an expensive toy: detailed army cannons, troop carriers, and electronic football and baseball games. One morning broke freezing and all the windshields were white. The man gently woke the boy and they left for Annapolis.

This day they traveled highways, making good time except north of New York City. Manhattan was visible from the turnpike. Would you like to go there? the boy was asked. I don't care, he answered. Later they had to pull into a rest area so the man could lie in the grass with his feet raised onto the cooler. His ankles were as round as grapefruits of purple and yellow and the skin above his socks was cracked like a snakeskin wallet and unnaturally brown. This damn edema, he said.

It was seventy in Baltimore that day, but the Middle Atlantic fall was racing to catch the fall of New England. Yellowing oranging browning trees lined the road they followed down to Annapolis. The boy read *The Clocktower Mystery*, a Hardy Boys book.

They toured the Naval Academy and paid to go on a sailing cruise into the Chesapeake Bay. Three college-aged girls on the same cruise became attracted to the boy's father, and over drinks he entertained them three nights with stories from his college and the Navy. They were very nice to the boy too. The boy's father was tall and thin and possessed a dignified manner with high shoulders and close-cut greying hair. The back of his neck was permanently brown. The fourth and final night the man, with the three girls assisting, prepared freshly caught fish for the other six passengers. He had been a professional cook for a while, he explained.

On the drive to Ocean City, the man asked the boy if he ever thought about God. Sometimes, not really, the boy was trying to say what he thought his father wished him to say. Do you think you believe in God? the man asked gently.

Fragmented blurred the boy thought he remembered or was it felt being left on a mat in a high ceilinged room next to other mats with other boys who were all told to nap and then it was his mother who collected him, placing him in a basket on the front seat while cold air blew from the vents. And an argument.

Can you imagine a universe filled with God but without human immortality? Do you know what I mean by without human immortality?

In Ocean City the man found a hotel that looked out on the famous Steel Pier. Right here the man had spent a summer working in a bar, playing

piano. In the hotel room the boy drew back the curtains and looked down at the pier which was deserted, and the amusement park which was dark too. They'll be open on the weekend, don't you worry, the man said.

It was blustery on the pier where they played skeeball and shot water streams into the mouths of clowns. The boy used four ride tickets. They walked to the end of the pier but did not stay long because the weather was changing and the man was coughing. Probably we looked forward to it for too long, didn't we?

It was November when they climbed the lighthouse at Cape Hatteras. The lighthouse was closed both for the winter and for reconstruction, but the man spoke with the caretaker and they were allowed to the top. The tallest lighthouse in the country, the caretaker said, but it looks like the sea's gonna take her back. Not enough money to preserve her. He told tales of history, Blackbeard and lesser pirates, but the man and boy were not listening. The boy had been hiding the man's cigarettes, putting them under the seat and then in the garbage, and denying knowledge. The man knew this and it did not bother him until today when he had yelled, don't lie goddammit, don't lie to me and don't lie to yourself. If you lie to yourself, you don't have anything. You even have less than that because something has you.

I'm not lying to me, the boy said.

They haggled over Myrtle Beach and the man paid twenty dollars to get out of his promise of stopping there. It was mostly shut down anyway. They ate shecrab soup in Charleston and toured the battleship the man had been stationed upon in the Navy.

They stayed in roadside motels where the sink jutted out into the room on a linoleum counter. One morning the boy thought the man had gone outside but surprised him in the bathroom with a hand full of pills and pill bottles of many sizes on the back of the toilet. His father shoved him away, pills spilling, and slammed the door. The man apologized later saying he didn't like anyone to watch him take his pills. Why not? the boy asked. Because it's not fun and I just don't. They taste terrible. It takes awhile.

Every night the man would take the bottle of Scotch from his bag. In a brown paper sack he would carry it outside with an ice bucket and glass to where the boy would have the backgammon board set up by a pool. In foul weather they would play in restaurants and the man ordered his drinks. The man smoked constantly and showed his boy off to strangers. Would

you like to play my son, he would say, he will beat you.

In a Pizza Hut north of Beaufort the man asked the boy what he was best at. The boy said he didn't know. He said that he wanted to be a philosopher. Very seriously the man said that corporations don't pay for that anymore, that they didn't have philosopher kings on the payroll. Well they should, the boy said. They figured things out.

The man gave the boy a book to read. It was my favorite book growing up, he said. It's about a man who makes tiny engines. Little models of engines most of which have no purpose other than to prove they can run smoothly. The boy had finished the Hardy Boys and Doc Savage and Encyclopedia Brown. He wasn't sure he would like this book and it was over six hundred pages. He read quickly. He solemnly told his father it was his favorite book too. I said it was my favorite book growing up, the man said, and gave him another book.

The desolation of the season drew others to the shore. They moved in solitary clumps. Their scarves blowing as they leaned into the wind, they would shuffle past each other with a nod or hello. Empty houses guard the continent from the sea.

The man and boy spent two weeks with an artist they met on the beach. She was sad when they left and gave them a painting of themselves. In the picture they appeared practically as fires burning on a deserted coastline, the boy's smaller build echoing the man's. The picture was rolled tightly and stored in a cardboard tube in the trunk.

Leaves scabbled across the hood of the car like crabs as they drove away. The boy hugged the man across the seat, clinging crushing nuzzling his soft flushed cheek against the grey whiskered flesh of his father. The man slipped his arm down around the boy's back and stared long past the windshield the pavement the highway.

In Beaufort they found an Indian summer. They were sunburned with the top down. The parents of his closest Navy friend recognized the man immediately. The boy stood self-consciously eyeing the dirty children who stared at him with distrust.

Lawdy it's such a shame they ain't here. Shame they gond to Mobeel. Married them sisters you know and we kep 'em last Christmastime. You all stay now. We know you will. This yoh chile?

Children were everywhere, running on pine needles, throwing old tennis balls, chasing matted dogs, kicking dust yelling screaming laughing.

This was old property. An extended family spread through rambling shotgun structures. There were shacks and sheds and grassy bits of old machinery. They were put up in their own small home with a plankwood porch and mosquito netting over the bed.

The next day the boy was barefoot too, stained at the knees, laughing. The man used a green rocker and sipped coffee. Twice before Christmas a party was organized. Armed with chicken necks and long poled nets and a moldstained cooler, they would tramp to a rickety wooden structure, a pier with no house, which rose out of the tidal marshes. As the boy learned to crab, he talked about lobsterpots. He said it was dangerous to boat near someone's pots. Everyone said go on with you about claws as big as your arms. The boy said that in one restaurant they have a stuffed lobster that weighed over one hundred pounds. That's a big crab. Everyone agreed that'd get you.

Christmas day friends appeared until food coated every surface. The afternoon was for singing and in the evening a large fire was lit.

It was an informal rule that no one should receive more or less than one present and the man gave the boy his camera. It had been wrapped in Maine resting unused until Christmas day when the boy dug it out of tissues. The man first explained care then film loading then filmspeed then f-stop then let the boy make his first picture. Everyday the man would teach the boy a finer point but would not take any pictures himself. It's not showing, he would say, but doing that'll make you.

For two days the man did not get up, saying that he felt very tired and needed to rest and he allowed the boy eight pictures each day instead of four and when the boy asked for more because he was going to the beach with a family, he was told that you only learn to appreciate when you don't have too much of it. If you had all the film you wanted, no one picture would mean anything.

When the man arose they left to visit the boy's aunt and uncle, his mother's brother who lived in a large apartment where a street met the ocean in Palm Beach. Dogs chased the car down the drive and onto the street until they gave up panting in the road.

On the way they toured a fort in St. Augustine and the man talked about Ponce de Leon and the fountain of youth. For miles and miles they saw nothing but hotels and condominiums with a rare flash of sea between. The man said, I could never live here because this is no place for humans.

These structures measured against the sky taught the boy about grain and composition. The boy was reading the poetry of Stephen Crane.

The apartment of the boy's uncle had many bowls and vases under boxes of glass. He was told that he was never allowed to enter the livingroom without an adult. In his cousin's rooms he played with their presents. Not a train set but train lines competing for station space with headquarters in office buildings in different towns. The man stayed up late drinking and talking with the uncle and they were both ill the next day. The boy knew they had argued and did not like each other.

In Key West they rented an efficiency apartment with powder blue walls and a dinette that monopolized the room. The man's coughing became worse and one morning he went to the bathroom in his bed. The man was very tired and could not move so the boy used paper towels to clean his father. The man did not say a word but gripped the bedside table with thin fingers. Later he said, I'm so goddamn sorry you have to see me like this.

Every night their landlady brought fresh flowers for the table. She would knock enter humming and sometimes fix dinner which was never as good as the man's. She was born in Mexico and gave the boy a papier mâché fish with poppingcorn inside. She told him to shake it while she sang and cooked.

Many nights they watched the sunset over the sea at the southernmost tip of the United States and they would have drinks and backgammon tournaments at the Pierhouse which was an expensive hotel. The boy saw a signup sheet for a real backgammon tournament and the man entered them both.

The boy won three rounds before losing to a man built very much like his father who also gave him advice while he was choosing his moves. He was a very great player who earned a living gambling professionally. The boy's father and this man entered the finals. The sidebets ran into the thousands and spectators whispered the results of each game in advance of its conclusion. It was apparent that the gambler and his father liked one another immensely. When the boy's father won his face burned red and his eyes sparkled. He leaned on both his cane and his son on the walk home.

In March the gambler took the boy bone fishing. He said, there's never anything to worry about that didn't diminish appreciably sooner than you expect. Here's my card you're always welcome but don't tell your dad, he said.

One afternoon there was summer heat and after purchasing a present for the landlady they drove north for the first time. They drove up the west coast of Florida cutting inland to Disneyworld. The man was not able to leave the room. He asked the boy, why do you think it is wrong to hate? Because it isn't important, the boy answered. The man asked if this meant it was wrong to love also and the boy said he didn't know. Later the man asked, what is important? And the boy said he didn't know.

Before leaving Orlando they traded the convertible for a fourdoor Jaguar with rich leather seats and a burlled walnut instrument panel. It had two gas tanks and an ivory button to switch between the two. I've always wanted one of these, the man said, besides it is important never to go back the way you came. They lowered the windows just to be sure they were moving and the boy missed the old convertible.

In Washington the man collapsed in the hotel. He sank slowly to the floor and the boy could not lift him onto the bed. The boy ran to the front desk. An ambulance arrived and white jacketed men wheeled his father away. A policeman drove the boy to the hospital. Two days later the man was moved to another hospital.

The nurses were charmed by the boy who read quietly, slept in a chair, cleaned in a sink, and never left the intensive care waiting room. One morning the boy's uncle turned the corner with his aunt close behind. The aunt was in tears and the uncle gathered him up in a rigid hug. The boy's eyes were cold as he stared over his shoulder. They said, you must come with us to the hotel this instant and have a good rest and real food. The boy resisted but they took him anyway. The boy got into the habit of sleeping at the hotel and visiting the hospital during the day. He would read quietly in the same waiting room.

A special nurse was assigned to the man and she would often sit with the boy. Some days the doctor allowed the boy to visit his father. He was too weak to talk but the boy held his hand and tried not to cry. His cheeks were gone. His forehead had grown impossibly large. His body did not seem to make an impression under the sheet. Once the man smiled.

A warm spring Thursday night after eleven the phone rang and the special nurse was on the line and his uncle was on the line. And the uncle drove him to the hospital and waited in the car. He said, don't worry about me I'll just be here waiting. The boy smelled dogwoods before the sterile hospital smell engulfed him. The halls were deserted and he rode the ele-

vator to the third floor. The halls were deserted there also. The special nurse was crying as he walked past her down the hall telling himself not to cry do not cry you will not cry. She moved ahead of him to open the door and inspect the room. She closed the door after and the boy moved to the side of the bed near the window. The man's head was turned to face the window but his eyes were closed. The boy placed his hands upon the bed-railing and bent his head to where his chin touched his chest. When he looked up again his father's eyes were open. The man looked hard at the boy squinting and then his eyes flew wide and he arched himself up in the bed. He said, oh my I thought you were an angel. I was positive you were an angel but you're not are you? And his right hand extended. The boy put his out and they shook hands. I guess the old grip isn't what it used to be, is it? And the boy shaking the man's hand said, no no it's very strong phew whoa it's a strong grip. And the man said, I thought you were an angel, and the boy couldn't say anything. Then the man slipped down in the bed a ways and his eyes closed. They were still holding hands and the man slept. His eyes opened later and he said, you're still here and smiled and drifted to sleep in the middle of a sentence. He woke again and said, what was I saying, goddamn drugs, and his eyes closed again.

The special nurse came into the room quietly and motioned to the boy. His hand felt cool against the man's as he pulled away. He was saying, don't cry you will not cry do not cry, as he passed the nurse. At the door he heard the man say, did you see my boy I got to say goodbye to my boy, got to say goodbye to my boy. The boy fled in tears.

They took the boy to Florida and gave him his own room with a picture of his mother on the dresser and new clothes in the drawers. In Sunday School he asserted that the universe was created by purple dust brought together by gravity and his uncle spanked him in the car. In his room he pulled from a closet the milkcrate of his things, his books, the spool with string, nineteen rolls of film, the painting in its tube, and his father's blue blazer which hung almost to the floor as he put it on. The boy took the camera from its casing and felt its weight in his hand hefting it from one to the other. That's a very valuable piece of equipment you got there, his uncle had said, one heckuva piece of equipment. And the boy opened the window of his own bedroom and looked out over the ocean and the parking lots and stores. He hefted the camera up in the air and caught it. He hefted it again.