

## The Farewell

“My life was a find-out.”

—John Lame Deer

Rain was falling, just turning to snow. The thermostat was turned up, all was warm and cozy inside, but I already had my jacket on and was sweating. Mom looked at me but didn't say a word. There wasn't anything to say. Dad hadn't come home yet and probably wouldn't. We both knew he was off in a tavern someplace, drinking alone, not wanting to be there when I left. It didn't matter. I was leaving, and the rain and the snow wouldn't stop me.

“You've got the sandwiches?” mom said finally, breaking the icy silence.

I nodded.

“And the cheese?”

I nodded again.

My backpack was all packed, stripped to the bare essentials: sleeping bag, jeans and a flannel shirt, extra underwear, a bottle of wine my mother didn't know about, a well-thumbed copy of the *Tao Te Ching*.

I was sitting on the plush sofa in the living room, woolen-socked feet on the shag carpet, looking around one last time at everything I was leaving. It was a nice house. Dad had worked hard for it. But it wasn't home. I didn't know where home was, but I knew it wasn't here.

When I'd come back for Christmas break—before I'd told them I was leaving—there was a big “Welcome Home” banner over the front door. But the house was just a house, a modern split-level in a new housing development just outside the city limits, cold and completely without memories, nothing at all like the old farmhouse, with its missing shingles and peeling paint, where I was born and raised and where grandpa still lived. The farmhouse had a certain smell to it you could recognize as soon as you walked in the door. Here at the new place everything was antiseptic, no familiar odors, only the fumes of freshly painted walls.

“Are you sure you won't take the coffee?” mom asked.

“I already told you. I don't want to have to worry about the thermos and it only makes me pee.”

Mom sat down in a lounge chair across the room from me, trembling a little and trying to hold back the tears.

“Why do you have to leave now, just before Christmas?” she asked. It was more a statement than a question.

“Mom,” I replied. “How many times have we been through this before?”

“You're just being selfish, spoiling it for everyone.”

She was looking at me with tear-filmed eyes. I couldn't bear to look back. The house was decorated magically, just like it had been every Christmas, even back at the farmhouse, candles in each of the windows, pine boughs on the mantel above the fireplace, a Christmas tree—always a real tree, never an artificial one—strung with lights, hung with ornaments and bells, covered with tinsel, a shining silver star on top. Tomorrow night they'd be going to the Christmas Eve service, just like we did every year, to hear the priest remind us that the real birth of Christ is something that happens inside our own hearts. I would miss that this Christmas.

Indeed, we'd talked about it—the three of us—but it hadn't been any use. Dad assured me I could get a deferment since I was still officially enrolled in college, but I said that a deferment wasn't the solution. The real reason I was leaving didn't have anything to do with avoiding the draft.

“But how can you just up and throw away your future like that?” he'd asked me.

I didn't reply. The previous summer dad had helped me get a part-time job at the steel factory where he worked and was upset that I'd quit halfway through. It wasn't just about me, but it made him look bad, too. Dad worked in the mill and I worked in the yards, helping to load trucks. Sometimes we had lunch together. Dad said it would be easy for me to get a job in the main office after I graduated, something he himself had always dreamed of. He told me he still had hopes of getting a promotion.

I spent the rest of the summer reading books at home, not the ones I was supposed to, but the ones I wanted to. When I got back to school in the fall, I already knew that I didn't want to finish

college. But I stuck out the semester and didn't tell mom and dad about it until a couple of days ago.

"You know," dad said. "Right now you have at your fingertips everything I'd ever wished for when I was your age."

And that was the problem precisely. All that remained was for me to act out the script that had been written for me in advance by others. I didn't want life to be handed to me on a silver platter. I had a vague idea of what my dad had been through—the depression, the war, and all that. I'd heard the stories a thousand times—the ones about breadlines and soup kitchens—yet it never occurred to me then just how insecure it had all been, how everyone could be so concerned now about having a roof over their heads and acquiring a few of "the nicer things in life."

Dad had fought in the war, too. I'd seen all the old black and white movies with the troops coming home, waving flags and kissing girls while the marching bands played. I knew that the movies only told half the story and that dad had also seen foxholes and moon-cratered fields and friends getting their heads blown off. That's what he wanted to shield me from. He didn't have any objections to me getting out of the war. He just didn't want me to run away from it.

"If I had it to do over again," he told me, "I may have run away, too. It wasn't worth it. But I did what I had to do."

"Well, maybe I'm doing what I have to do, too," I said.

He didn't reply directly to what I'd just said but looked up at the ceiling and went on: "There I was at the bus station. I'd just been discharged and they'd given me my last paycheck. I was standing there, suddenly all on my own. Up till then there'd always been someone giving me orders, telling me exactly what to do and where to go. But then everything had changed. There was no one to tell me to go up to that bus station window and buy that ticket home. I could have bought a ticket to anywhere I wanted. But the only place I wanted to go was home."

No doubt he'd suffered and had done his best to make sure I wouldn't suffer, too. Dad, and mom as well, always told me, "We just want what's best for you," never quite realizing that each person needs to figure that out for himself.

All my life I'd been a pampered prince, kept in an edenic state of innocence, protected from all the truly rotten things that can happen to people in life. I felt spoiled. I wanted to know what it was like to do without. I wanted to live intentionally and confront the world in all its dimensions, to experience everything there is, the bad as well as the good. I was prepared to endure anything, to be a fugitive and a wanderer, going from city to city, from wilderness to wilderness until I found what I was looking for, knowing already that I would never find it, that there is no final destination, that the journey itself is all there is.

"I think it's time for me to go," I said to my mom, picking up my backpack and heading for the front door.

She instantly sprang from her chair, rushed ahead of me, positioning herself between me and the door.

"Don't go," she said.

I reached out to embrace her one last time. She wrapped both her arms around me. We stood there for a moment holding each other. I felt her warmth rush into me, remembering when, as a child, she had held me just like this, sheltering me from the world outside, making me feel safe, secure, assured that she would guard me from all evil.

I gave her a final squeeze. But when I tried to ease myself away, she tightened her arms around me.

"Mom," I said. "I really have to leave."

"I won't let you," she replied.

Her arms became chains around my body, her hands locks around my neck. She was choking me.

"You can't keep me here!" I gasped, trying to wriggle myself out of her clutch.

"But why not?" she replied tearfully. "Why *not*? You're confused. You don't know what you're doing. I know what's right for you."

With a violent twist I wrenched myself free, throwing her down. She sat there all crumpled up on the floor, legs akimbo. Not looking back, I opened the door and stepped into the black night, cold snowflakes falling on my face.