

ONE

I watched the clock. The day seemed endless. It had begun at seven thirty when I protested my way out of bed and was now no further along than just past ten. All my days seemed endless. Waiting for my father to answer the letter I'd written him caused the minutes to take hours. The minutes dragged on, seeming to repeat themselves, apparently unable to move beyond the point of their origin. I concentrated my energy on the clock. I willed the large, red second hand to go faster, to spin its way forward so that when I opened my eyes the second day would be done and I could rush home to the mail. But when I opened my eyes it was three seconds later or twelve seconds later, and the stubborn red hand of the clock continued to stutter forward one blasted click after another.

Time always went slowest for me in June and that made it worse. I liked school and did well enough, but by June it was time for it to be over. My mother, Jane, counseled patience. She thought I had none. I didn't see the need. Everything took too long as it was, and I had no

interest in slowing time further by being patient. I'd written my father in May and had waited long enough.

Dear Dodge,

I would like to spend the summer with you. I have thought of many ways to ask about this and have tried to come up with some brilliant scheme to convince you to say yes but finally decided that the best thing was just to ask. So, I'm asking. May I spend the summer with you?

Jane and Horace are going off to Europe on business, then they've taken a house outside London for the month of August. They want me to come but I said no. We won't want to do the same things and I'll just be in the way and in the end we'll all wish I hadn't. They asked me at camp to be a junior counselor but I won't do that either. I'm too old for all that singing around the camp fire and telling ghost stories. So, unless you take me, I have no place to go.

School is out June 15th and I need another week to take care of things around here so I can be ready. Jane and Horace don't leave until the first week of July, but I want to come before then. The sooner the better. I know it must seem strange to you, my asking this when we've spent so little time together, but I've thought about it a lot and about our lives and I think it is important that we get to know each other. After all, I am your daughter.

School has gone well again this year. I have all my usual grades. I haven't grown at all, not taller anyway, but I guess I'm tall enough. Robert, the doorman, retired last month and they had a party for him in the lobby and gave him a suitcase. He told me he had no place to go. I

hope you will give this letter very serious consideration. I've thought about it for a long time and it's very important to me. I hope you are well. I hope to hear from you very soon. Please.

*Love,
Alison*

P.S. I know I would love your house and your island and that we would get along fine and have great fun.

“I wish you'd waited. I wish you'd talked it over with us first. I don't think it's a good idea. It's not a good idea at all.” My mother spoke to me about the letter with a passion I didn't know she possessed. I told her about it the day after I mailed it, and she was crimson with unhappiness.

“I'm sorry to have to say this, but the man never did anything for anyone but himself his whole life. You're someone else to think about, and he doesn't like to think about anyone but himself.” Jane was unrelenting in her opposition to the prospect of my visit, to the idea that I would spend any time at all with Dodge. “He's selfish. He's petty. He's mean.” She said she meant well. She said she was trying to protect me. She said she was trying to prepare me for whatever disappointments would be forthcoming from her former husband, for as sure as the sun sat in the sky, he would break my heart.

I listened to each word and tried to filter out the bitterness. I tried always to do that because I had learned that much of what my mother presented as fact was opinion born of fear or anger or pain or all three. We argued a good deal when I was fifteen and it disturbed us

both and we attempted to establish rules. We would listen to each other without comment and when we responded it would be done without raised voices, without becoming emotional. That morning I broke the rules. I screamed at her.

“He can’t be more selfish and mean and petty than you’re being right now. He can’t be.” She collected herself and left the room.

To my mother time was now. It was something you held in your hand and had control of. The only purpose served by the past and future was what they brought to the present. Her feelings about my father came to the surface, became part of the moment now, because I wanted to spend time with him. I knew when I mailed the letter that she would bring a great unhappiness to it. I almost didn’t mail it because of that. But I was fifteen.

When I was about to become thirteen, she took me aside for a talk about the female body and its functions. “Your period is nothing more and nothing less than a normal female body function. You should be aware of your body. you should understand and appreciate it. Perhaps you’d like to ask some questions. That might be productive.” She lighted a cigarette and leaned back and waited for me to test the information she’d read the night before.

“I got my period a few months ago.” I couldn’t think of any other way to say it. I smiled hopefully. Jane crushed out her cigarette, paced for a moment, muttered something I couldn’t understand and left the room. That was the first big lesson I learned about communicating with my mother.

I was sorry afterward that I hadn't shared the event of my period. I simply hadn't thought to do so. It seemed to me that my mother was absolutely correct, it was nothing more than a normal body function. I'd read about it and talked about it with my doctor when I went for the school physical and dealt with it when it happened. It hadn't seemed necessary to make an announcement. After Jane's reaction to my period it didn't seem at all wise to discuss with her the first boy who kissed me on the lips and tried to jam his tongue in my mouth, nor to mention in any way the first boy who tried to get his hand up my dress.

I continued to watch the clock that day in school and for all those days, and I listened to my teachers droning on and on. I thought about those first boys in my life. I kissed most of the boys who took me out and had done some heavy necking and let one boy unbutton my blouse. I remember fondly the first boy who ever tried to feel me up. We were necking on the couch in his living room, and he moved his hand from the back of my shoulder to an area near my chest where I could see it hovering like some misplaced object in search of a home. I watched that quivering butterfly until it clamped down against my chest approximately where my left breast was supposed to be. My breast was there, and the fact that the young man's hand missed its mark was more a function of his nervousness than my lack of development. I was budding then. In any event, the hand stayed where it was, rigid in its anxiety. We continued to kiss wetly and he made moaning noises and I felt his hand, from time to time, squeeze down on itself. I didn't tell my mother about him.

I didn't tell my mother about the young man who tried to get his hand up my dress in the backseat of a taxi on the way home from a school dance. She waited up for me that night to ask what everyone wore and what the decorations were like and for me to tell her about the young man who'd taken me. I did not tell her how I'd first felt his fingers on my knee and then felt them crawl up my thigh in search of what lay beyond. I hit him with a closed fist and told him to keep his hands to himself. The young man looked frantically to the front and folded his arms tightly across his chest, only to find himself staring at the driver, who had nearly snapped his neck off turning to see what happened. I did rather well not to laugh out loud just then.

The letter from my father finally arrived. It was there one day when I came home from school. I held it gingerly and took it to my room.

Alison,

You may come for the summer, but I wonder why you want to. My place and the way I live are rough. I get along without the things you are used to. You should think twice before finally deciding. I will certainly understand if you change your mind.

If you do come, take the train to Kingston on the 25th. Let me know when the train arrives and I will meet you. I drive a red pickup truck. Let me know your decision.

Dodge

I read the letter and read it again and never did I see in it the message that I wasn't wanted. I saw only the first six words, "You may come for the summer..." All I knew was that I hadn't been rejected.

TWO

Sandy Bateman hesitated for a moment, haunched above Dodge like a pale bird in the dark, then rolled over onto her back and grinned. "It was nice," she said.

"Better than nice," he said.

"It was good." She was teasing him now.

Dodge pushed himself up on an elbow. "Better," he said.

"Okay, better," she said.

"If you say so," Dodge said. He wanted a drink. He'd wanted one all night. Sandy had agreed to go out with him if he promised not to touch a drop. Now he regretted it. His daughter was coming tomorrow. It seemed some sort of dream, as though it were happening to someone else. After a decade of living alone his life was about to be infringed upon. He didn't want to change any aspect of how he lived. He wasn't sure he could. He was being put upon; he was permitting himself to be put upon, and he didn't know why. He said yes when he could have said no.

No was what he meant. No was what he wanted to write her back. He wanted a drink.

It was late and Middleport was closed for the evening. Sandy's apartment was the upstairs of a two-family house. It was back off Smith Street on a lane that ended at the edge of the south cove. It was away from things. She'd picked it because it was private and because it was bare and she'd been able to decorate it to satisfy her own tastes. It was the first time in her life that she'd been able to do that.

They had drinks in the kitchen afterward. Sandy's idea. She couldn't stand to see him suffer. It was late. One drink wouldn't hurt anything. One drink and he had to go because she had to get up early for work. He wanted to talk about his daughter and she wanted to let him. She liked Dodge. She liked pleasing him. She didn't always understand why. He had a nasty temper sometimes and a low opinion of himself and wasn't always decent company. But when he was feeling good, on those rare occasions, he was terrific.

Dodge was not the future, not for her. He had none of his own, and he wasn't going to deny her the slim chance she had for hers. For the present he was fine. He was a good lover and he could make her laugh sometimes and she needed that desperately. Sometimes her life threatened to suffocate her. She married out of high school and followed her husband and, in the horrible vacuum of a strange Midwestern town, she was brutalized and abandoned. Now she worked for her father, and the store would be hers someday if she wanted to spend the rest of her life in Middleport.

She looked at the man at the kitchen table and knew that at least part of her was lying. She did care for him. As he poured his heart out about his daughter and his doubts about having her spend the summer with him she realized she was listening to a frightened man. He was an odd one, Al Dodge, a man not easily understood. He did not altogether fit into the scheme of things in Middleport, certainly not into the mainstream of things. He was still an outsider. He made little effort to accommodate others and participated only as it suited his moods. He was not an open or forthcoming man. He played in the Labor Day softball game but did nothing else by the way of civic activity. He asked for nothing.

What the people of Middleport thought of Dodge was uncertain. His ten years in the village had given him a place. It wasn't enough to make him a native, but it was enough for the natives to acknowledge his presence without raising questions. They knew he lived on the margin of things. They knew he was good craftsman and that he gave an honest job for the pay he asked. Some of them knew he had a daughter in New York who'd never been to their village. Most of them liked him more than they disliked him, and the assumption was that he was with them to stay.

Dodge left Sandy's and drove to the dock and rowed across the channel. It was late and the houses were dark, blacked-out forms against a partially moonlit sky. The oars cut into the water, making small splashing sounds as they went in and came out. The oarlocks clicked to the tune of Dodge's effort. The boat bumped finally against his

small dock and he tied up. The night was quiet. The creatures of his domain were at rest. He stood for a while on the rickety walkway that extended out a few feet past the low-tide mark and contemplated his domain.

Twenty feet in front of him was his house, his house of stone. When he got it, it was falling down. It had been used as a place to drink and smoke and fornicate by anyone with the means to get there. When he first saw it, people and weather and time had all done their share of destruction. All the windows were broken. Rubbish was piled high about the place. The inside had been scarred by vandals, who had written obscenely upon the walls. When Dodge went to Sarah Conway she was pleased to let him live in the place for nothing if he'd fix it up and look after it and the one acre of scrub land surrounding it. He moved in and learned as he went, making many mistakes, working until he was done, and in the process he'd learned enough about fixing things to make his living as a handyman. He created a house that provided warmth and protection. The aesthetics of it were not a concern, then or now. The first half dozen confrontations with intruders left the island free to Dodge and the raccoons and woodchucks and fiddler crabs and birds.

The house was made of brick and stone and had a sloping roof with a single dormer. There were four windows and a door across the front. There was a door in back and a window in the dormer that looked out over the channel. Dodge used old stones and old bricks and concrete to make the house tight. He replaced glass and put in a coal stove and a kerosene heater. He repaired the small dock and bought the skiff and caulked it. He rowed

a great deal and it showed in his shoulders and back. He was muscular from the rowing and from digging quahogs with twenty-foot tongs. That was a merciless operation for a night's dinner, and among the few people in the world for whom he felt compassion were those who made their living at it. Again and again and again the metal jaws at the end of the twenty-foot wooden poles were lowered into the water to the muck at the bottom and worked back and forth until they got pulled up the twenty feet to the surface. The muck was gone through and the broken glass and beer cans and seaweed and empty razor clam shells were sorted out and thrown back. If a quahog or two was to be found after all that, it was a successful haul. Then you did it again, hour after hour, from dawn of the day till its end, every day until you were too old to do it at all.

Dodge was now a professional odds-and-ends man. He painted kitchens and signs for businesses and the outside of houses. He did odd jobs of carpentry and brick masonry and garden work and roof repair. He did a bit of almost everything to make the few dollars that were necessary to eating, drinking, and keeping his life together. It didn't take much. The house, the boat, the truck, a few changes of clothes, his tools, these had been paid for and were all now maintained at minimal cost. The piano had been purchased at Pop's, the used furniture store on old Route One. For fifteen dollars. It had cost him another forty dollars to get it fixed, another twenty-five to get it across to the island, and another twenty-five to get it tuned. Five men had accompanied the piano in a fishing boat at high tide. They'd lifted it gently

and carried it with care, and now it sat upright against a wall of the large room that was the downstairs of his house. The stacks of old sheet music had been cheap. When he bought them, people were still giving such things away.

Dodge's island, as some in town had started calling it, was an acre of sand, rock, slat grass, bush, and scrub pine trees. The far side of it was separated from the mainland by a waterway that could hardly be called more than a stream. At high tide it was perhaps fifteen feet wide and navigable by punt. It was wildly overgrown on both the island and mainland sides, which afforded as much protection and isolation as the wide channel at the island's other side. The island was a place to eat and drink and read and play the piano and sing old songs and get drunk and be alone. That's what he'd wanted when he abandoned New York and his family. It was what he had.

Directly in back of the house was the well that supplied fresh water. It was deep and worked from a hand pump. The water sometimes got brackish. A pipe went from the well to the kitchen, where another hand pump made it possible to get water without going outside. There were days when the pump in the kitchen produced no water at all. There was also a cistern for collecting rainwater.

There was no electricity on the island. Dodge kept a gasoline generator he'd found on the island in repair, but it was never used. He used kerosene lamps and candles. There was no telephone on the island. If you wanted to reach him, you saw him in town or left a note in his

mailbox, or you left word with Sandy at the hardware store.

Behind Dodge's house was an outhouse. It was six feet high, a rectangular structure of wood whose door wouldn't close all the way and whose boards grinned the gaps that winter's abuse had imposed upon them. It got so cold in the outhouse at times of year that Dodge thought for sure he'd freeze to death before he finished his errand.

Dodge looked a moment longer at his world and recognized within himself some sense of satisfaction that he'd been able to make it his. He walked slowly to the house and inside put match to wick and watched the kerosene lamp sputter and smoke and finally make steady flame. He fetched a bottle from the cabinet above the sink, broke the seal, and with a glass took it to the piano where he started to play and think about tomorrow. What the hell was he going to do with a fifteen-year-old kid for a whole summer? He started playing louder and started to sing about voices humming and banjos strumming and about the girl he left behind, down on Moonlight Bay.