

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Touch

Alexi Zentner

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About the Book

On the eve of his mother's funeral, Stephen, a middle-aged priest recently returned home, sits down to write her eulogy. But as the evening creeps into night, he is haunted by memories from his childhood - birthday trips to the sawmill with his father; the moment his sister slipped under the thick winter ice forever; and the memorable day his grandfather, Jeannot, came home after a thirty-year absence with a bundle of bones in his pocket and a mission to raise the dead.

Masterfully weaving the stories from three generations of one family, *Touch* tells the founding tale of Sawgamet - originally a gold-mining village - where deep in the forest reign golden caribou drinking from a honey-sweet river. Yet also in the forest lurk malevolent shapeshifters disguising themselves as friends, storms raging against foolhardy settlers, and the forest taking back its land for itself, branch by branch and root by root.

Touch is a singular, startling debut as enchanting as it is unnerving. A darkly sinister fairy tale, Alexi Zentner builds a magical world as distinctive as a grown-up Narnia, and marks himself out as a real talent to watch.

About the Author

Alexi Zentner was born in Ontario, Canada, and currently lives in Ithaca, New York, with his wife and two daughters. A graduate of the MFA writing program at Cornell, he has had short stories in various American magazines and anthologies, including the O. Henry Prize Stories and the Pushcart Prize anthology both in 2008. *Touch* is his first novel.

For my wife, Laurie,

the reason why everything I write is really about love,

and for my daughters, Zoey and Sabine.

Touch

ALEXI ZENTNER

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

ONE

Touch

THE MEN FLOATED the logs early, in September, a chain of headless trees jamming the river as far as I and the other children could see. My father, the foreman, stood at the top of the chute hollering at the men and shaking his mangled hand, urging them on. "That's money in the water, boys," he yelled, "push on, push on." I was ten that summer, and I remember him as a giant.

Despite his bad hand, my father could still man one end of a long saw. He kept his end humming through the wood as quickly as most men with two hands. But a logger with a useless hand could not pole on the river. When the men floated the trees my father watched from the middle of the jam, where the trees were smashed safely together, staying away from the bobbing, breaking destruction of wood and weight at the edges. The float took days to reach Havershand, he said. There was little sleep and constant wariness. Watch your feet, boys. The spinning logs can crush you. The cold-water deeps beneath the logs always beckoned. Men pitched tents at the center of the jam, where logs were pushed so tightly together that they made solid ground, terra firma, a place to sleep for a few hours, eat hard biscuits, and drink a cup of tea. Once they reached Havershand, the logs continued on by train without my

father: either south for railway ties or two thousand miles east to Toronto, and then on freighters to Boston or New York, where the towering trees became beams and braces in strangers' cities.

I remember my father as a giant, even though my mother reminded me that he was not so tall that he had to duck his head to cross the threshold of our house, the small foreman's cottage with the covered porch that stood behind the mill. I know from the stories my father told me when I was a child that he imagined his own father—my grandfather, Jeannot—the same way, as a giant. He never met my grandfather, so he had to rely on the stories he heard from my great-aunt Rebecca and great-uncle Franklin—who raised him as their own after Jeannot left Sawgamet—and from the other men and women who had known my grandfather. My father retold these same stories to me.

I had my own idea of Jeannot well before I met him, before my grandfather returned to Sawgamet. And meeting him, hearing Jeannot tell the stories himself, did not make it any easier for me to separate the myths from the reality. I've told some of these same stories to my daughters: sometimes the true versions that Jeannot told me, sometimes the pieces of stories that made their way to me through other men and women and through my father, and sometimes just what I think or wished had happened. But even when I tell my daughters stories about my own father, it is hard for me to tell how much has changed in the retelling.

It is more than thirty years past the summer I was ten—my oldest daughter has just turned ten herself—and I would like to think that my daughters see me the same way I saw my father, but it is hard to imagine that they do; my father worked in the cuts taking down trees, and he ran the water when he was younger, poling logs out of eddies and currents and breaking jams for the thirty miles from

Sawgamet to Havershand. I, on the other hand, have returned to Sawgamet as an Anglican priest, coming home to live in the shadows of my father and my grandfather in a logging town that has been drained of young men headed off to fight in Europe for the second war of my lifetime.

So many years I've been gone. I left at sixteen to Edmonton and the seminary, and then went across the Atlantic, a chaplain for the war. I came back in June of 1919, getting off the ship the day the Treaty of Versailles was signed. My mother would have liked me home, but with Father Earl, Sawgamet did not need a second Anglican priest. I ended up in Vancouver, with a new church and a new wife of my own. I've come back to Sawgamet to visit—infrequent though that has been—but now I have returned, at Father Earl's request, to take over the Anglican church from him. He asked me to come even before it was clear my mother was dying, but still, I almost arrived too late. Soon enough—tonight, tomorrow—my mother will be dead and I'll have to write the eulogy for the funeral.

I've had enough experience with telling others the tired homily that God works in mysterious ways, to know that there is no making sense of the workings of God. Though, if I were to be honest, I would admit that I think of my father and grandfather as gods themselves. I do not mean gods in a religious sense, but rather like the gods that the natives believe preceded us in these northern forests. In that way, my father and my grandfather *were* gods: they tamed the forests and brought civilization to Sawgamet, and in the stories passed down to me, it is impossible to determine what is myth and what is the truth.

There were only the last few weeks of sitting at my mother's side, knowing she was preparing to die, and trying to sort out the truths from the myths. I talked with her and asked her questions when she was awake, held her hand when she was asleep. And yet, no matter how many times my thoughts returned to the winter I was ten, no

matter how many questions I asked my mother as she lay dying, no matter how many stories I have heard about my father and grandfather, there are still so many things I will never know.

For instance, I never knew how my father felt about his mangled hand, and as a child I was afraid to ask. He did not talk about the dangers; the river was swift and final, but it was out in the cuts, among the trees, when each day unfolded like the last—the smooth, worn handles of the saw singing back and forth—that men’s minds wandered. Men I knew had been killed by falling trees, had bled to death when a dull ax bounced off a log and into their leg, had been crushed when logs rolled off carts, had drowned in the river during a float. Every year a man came back dead or maimed.

When I was not quite eight, on the day of my sister Marie’s fifth birthday, I had asked my mother about my father’s hand. That was as close as I was ever able to come to asking my father.

“I was thankful,” she said. We sat on the slope by the log chute, looking out over the river, waving uselessly at the black-flies. My father had taken Marie into the woods, the preserve of men, a present for her birthday.

“You were thankful?”

“It was only his hand,” my mother said, and she was right.

That summer morning, Marie had carried her own lunch into the cuts, all bundled together and tied in a handkerchief: two slices of blueberry bread; a few boiled potatoes, early and stunted; a small hunk of roast meat. My father let her carry his ax, still sharp and gleaming though he had not swung it since his accident, and as they walked away from the house, I argued that my father should take me as well, that other boys helped their fathers on Saturdays and during the summers. I was old enough to strip branches, to help work the horses, to earn my keep.

"You've been enough," my mother said, though she knew that I had been only twice, on my birthdays. "It's too dangerous out there." I knew she was thinking of the way the log had rolled onto my father's hand, crushing it so tightly it did not begin to bleed until the men had cut him free. I must have made a face, because she softened. "You'll go again next month, on your birthday."

They returned late that night, the summer sun barely drowned, Marie still bearing the ax and crying quietly, walking with a stiff limp, spots of blood showing on her socks where her blisters had rubbed raw, my father keeping a slow pace beside her. My mother stepped off the porch toward Marie, but my sister moved past her, climbing up the three steps and through the door. My father shook his head.

"She wouldn't let me carry her."

"Or the ax?"

"I tried."

"And?"

He kissed my mother and then shook his head again. "It's a hard day for a child. She'll go again next year, if she wants." My mother nodded and headed inside to see to Marie's blisters, to give her dinner, to offer her a slice of pie.

The next week, Charles Rondeau, bucking a tree, did not hear the yells from the men, and Mr. Rondeau had to carry his son, Charles, bloodied and dead from the bush. Charles was only a few years older than I was then, and a month later, when I turned eight, my mother gave me a new Sunday suit, hot and itchy, and my father went to the cuts without me.

DESPITE CHARLES RONDEAU'S DEATH, the season that I turned eight was a good one, the cold holding back longer than

usual. My father kept the men cutting late into October. There had not even been a frost yet when they started sending logs down the chute from the mill into the river.

When the last log was in the water, my father waved to us from the middle of the jam, and Marie and I ran along the banks with the other children for a mile or two, shouting at the men. My father, like every man that year, came back from Havershand laughing. They all had their coats off, their long, sharp peaveys resting on their shoulders, and small gifts for their wives and children tucked under their arms. Even the winter that year was easy, and when the river did finally freeze up in December, the latest the ice had ever been, Marie and I had our first new skates. There was still tissue paper in the box. Christmas had come early.

EVEN THOUGH WE wanted to be with my father in the cuts during the summers, the winters were better, because at least then we had him to ourselves. School days, he took to the mill, filing blades, checking the books, helping the assistant foreman, Pearl, tend to the horses, but he was home when we were, sitting at the stove at night, listening with us as my mother, a former schoolteacher at the Sawgamet schoolhouse, read from her books. He carved small wooden toys for Marie—a rough horse, a whistle—using his destroyed hand to pin the block of wood to the table. Mostly, though, he told us stories.

I know that out in the cuts he was a different man. He had to be. He kept the men's respect and, in turn, they kept the saw blades humming through green wood. While their axes cut smiles into pines and stripped branches from fallen trees, while they wrapped chains around the logs, my father moved through the woods, yelling, talking, making them laugh, taking the end of a saw when it was needed.

He pushed them hard, and when they pushed back, he came home with bruises, an eye swollen shut, scabs on his knuckles. He made them listen.

At home, he was gentle. At night, he told us stories about his father, how Jeannot found gold and settled Sawgamet, and then the long winter that followed the bust. He told us about the Gallupilluit and Amaguq, the trickster wolf god, about the loup-garou and the blood-drinking adlet, about all of the monsters and witches of the woods. He told us about the other kinds of magic that he stumbled across in the cuts, how the sawdust grew wings and flew down men's shirts like mosquitoes, how one tree picked itself up and walked away from the sharp teeth of the saw. He told us about splitting open a log to find a fairy kingdom, about clearing an entire forest with one swing of his ax, about the family of trees he had found twisted together, pushing toward the sky, braided in love.

Our favorite story, however, the story that we always asked him to retell, was about the year he finally convinced our mother to marry him. The last time I remember him telling the story was the spring before I turned ten.

"Every man had been thrown but me and Pearl Gasseur," he said.

"Old Pearl?" Marie giggled, thinking of Pearl as I thought of him, riding the middle of the float with his close gray hair bristling crazily from his scalp, yellowed long underwear peeking from the cuffs of his shirt.

My father had told the story so many times that Marie probably could have recounted it word for word by then, but like me, like our mother, she still laughed and clapped.

"Old Pearl? Old Pearl?" my father roared, his teeth flashing. "Old Pearl wasn't always old," he yelled happily. "Old Pearl could sink any man and would laugh at you while he spun the log out from under your feet."

"And Mrs. Gasseur was happy to tell you about it," my mother said. "She was happy as winter berries watching

him dunk the boys." My mother smiled at this. She always smiled.

Logrolling in Sawgamet was a tradition. Every year the entire town came down to the river the day before the float. They carried blankets and baskets full with chicken, roasted onions and potatoes, bread, blueberry pies, strawberry wine. My father—and before him Foreman Martin—would roll out a few barrels of beer, and the men took to the water. They spun logs, a man on either end, turning the wood with their feet, faster and faster, stopping and spinning the other way, until one, or sometimes both, pitched into the cold water to raucous cheers from the banks.

"Pearl won ever since I could remember," my father said. "He'd never been unseated, but I had to win." He slapped the worn pine table with his mangled hand and winked at my mother. "Oh, your mother was a clever one." He stood up from the table and hooked his arm around her waist, pulling her close to him and looking over her shoulder at Marie and me. "She still is."

He kissed her then, and it surprised me to see my mother's cheeks redden. Before she pushed him away, she whispered something into his ear and he reddened as well, pausing a moment to watch her take the plates from the table.

"Papa," Marie said, demanding more.

"Oh, but you know all this already. She married me," he said, turning back to us and waving his hand, "and here you are."

"Papa," Marie said again, shaking her finger at him like our schoolmarm.

"Tell it right," I said.

He smiled and leaned over the top of his chair. "She wouldn't marry me."

"But Mama," Marie asked, "why didn't you love Papa?"

My father stopped and looked at my mother. This was not part of the story. "Why didn't you love me?" he said.

"You asked every girl in Sawgamet to marry you," my mother answered.

"But I only asked them once," he said, turning back to Marie. "Your mother I asked every day. All of the men had asked her to marry them, even some of the ones who were already married, but I kept asking. Every day for three years I called on her at the boardinghouse, and every day I asked her to marry me."

"And she always said no." Marie reached out and cupped the withered fingers of my father's bad hand in her two hands. He sat down next to her. "Mama," she asked again, "why didn't you love Papa?"

"I always loved him, sweetheart," she said, pouring hot water from the stove into the dish tub. She leaned in toward the steam, letting it wash across her face. "I just didn't know it yet."

"So I kept asking her to marry me, until one day she didn't say no."

"What did she say?" Marie could not stop herself.

"She said the day she'd marry me was the day I got Pearl into the water."

"I thought it was a safe bet," my mother said. "Your father never could seem to stay dry."

My father was leaning back in his chair now, staring at the moon through the window. He had taken his hand back from Marie, and he rubbed the fingers of his good hand across the back of the bad, as if it ached.

I wanted to hear about his triumph, how that was the year the log had spun so fast he could not see his feet, and how it was not until he heard a splash, and a roar from the banks of the river, that he knew he had finally dunked Pearl Gasseur. I wanted to hear him describe the feel of the cold water when he dove from the log and swam to the bank, the river dripping from his clothes as he walked to my

mother. I wanted to see the wink he gave us when he said that our priest, Father Hugo, was asleep with drink at the barrels of beer. I wanted to hear how Father Earl, who had arrived from Ottawa only the day before and who was Anglican and younger than my father, performed the wedding right then and there on the bank of the Sawgamet. But before he could tell us that, before he could tell us how he had to leave the next morning for the float, and how he ran home all the way from Havershand, running to his wife, I asked him, "Do you miss it? Do you miss the float?"

He looked at me for a moment, as if he had not heard my question, and then my mother spoke. "You and Marie wash up now, get ready for bed."

As I rose from the table, he stopped me. He raised his ruined hand, the fingers curled like a claw. "I miss it," he said.

He did not tell many stories for the next few weeks, and then when the snow finally melted enough for the men to take out their saws and axes and get into the woods, my father pushed them terribly, as if he knew how bad the coming winter would be. He kept them working from dawn to dusk with not a day's break until the first of September, when the trees were stacked and lined beside the mill.

THE LOGS HAD TO RUN the river, of course, for the money to come in, and the winter that Foreman Martin had misjudged the weather and waited too long, the river froze with the logs still in it. That had been a hard winter, with money tight and credit long. When cutting started again in the spring, snow still on the ground, my father crushed his hand the first week, and then later that month Foreman Martin died when the errant swing of an ax caught him across the back of the head. The company gave my father the foreman's job.

The year that I was ten, ice clung to the banks of the river on the morning of the float, and the men glanced appreciatively at my father, knowing that the freeze-up would not be far behind. The winter was coming early and fierce, troubling even for the few men who remembered the original rush and the year that Sawgamet had turned hard and lean; the boomtown had gone bust and rumors of desperate men eating their mules to stay alive through the snowed-in winter had been overshadowed by whispers of their eating more pernicious meat than what came from mules.

My father pushed the men to send the logs down the chute, screaming at them, adding his weight to the poles when needed, and by supper, Father Hugo and Father Earl had both blessed the float; the men were gone, the logs gone with them.

The men came back from Havershand in the snow, cold but laughing, flush and ready for a winter of trapping and hunting, a chance to file saw blades and sell a few furs. But by the end of October the cold ate at us, wind pulling tears from our eyes, solid on our cheeks in moments. Men stacked firewood three rows deep outside their houses, the thump of axes a constant sound. Mothers kept their stoves burning all day, the dishwater they threw out the door freezing as it hit the ground.

The river froze inward, flat and even near the banks at first, but by November even the fast-moving water at the center of the river, the dangerous meeting of the Sawgamet and the Bear Rivers, had iced over. Daylight fading, we skated on the river after school while shoreline bonfires raged, giving us a place to warm our hands. Girls played crack the whip while the men and boys played hockey on the broad run of ice swept clear of snow.

Sundays, before dinner, we usually went down to the river. That Sunday, however, my mother stayed in the house to finish her baking, so only my father came down with us,

carrying his and Marie's skates slung over the hockey stick he rested on his shoulder. With the cold, which had shattered the schoolhouse's glass thermometer the week before, even my father wore a scarf over his face to protect him. My mother had swaddled Marie and me with so many layers of clothing that we had trouble with the steps. Still, the cold seeped through the layers like water, and we were eager to skate and warm ourselves a little.

Down at the river, we sat on the packed snow at the banks, and my father helped Marie with her skates. He tied her laces and sent her off on the river. As he tied his own laces, she skated slowly toward the tip of the channel, pushing away from us with timid steps, like a newborn moose with shivering legs. The sun was already setting, and I could feel the temperature falling away and getting colder, if such a thing was even possible.

I had my head bent down over my skates and was pulling the laces tight, eager to take my stick and join the other boys playing shinny, when my father suddenly jumped from the snow along the bank, one skate still unlaced. He screamed Marie's name, skates chewing the frozen water, flying toward the thin ice at the confluence of the two rivers. There was just a dark hole where Marie had broken through the ice and disappeared.

Other men raced behind my father, but he was the first to the open water, screaming her name. For a moment he stopped at the edge of the fissure. Suddenly we saw her—we all saw her—gasping, bobbing, taking a last breath at the surface of the water, too cold or too scared to even scream, and as I reached the water, I saw my sister's eyes lock on to my father.

He dove into the water.

And then they were gone.

I hesitated at the edge, staring at the water, surprised at how smooth it was. Pearl grabbed my shoulder roughly.

“No,” he said, as if he were holding me back, and I realized that I had not even thought of following my father in.

The black water in the hole that Marie’s fall had opened up started icing even as Pearl held my arm. The men yelled for rope, but then, not willing to wait, they linked arms, Pearl the first one into the breach. I could see the shock on his face at the first touch of the water. It was a minute at most before the men hauled him back from the water, the skin on his hands gone white from the cold. He could not stand when they took him out, his legs shaking uselessly beneath him.

The sun seemed to have fallen from the sky, pulling the temperature down with it. In the dark, I could barely see the hole in the ice freezing back over, like a mouth that had briefly yawned open and was now closing again. Even though it was too late, another man, and then another, went into the river, reaching beneath the water to feel for my father and Marie. As the last man was pulled from the water, the ice almost sealed shut around his legs, as if the river wanted one more.

It was Father Earl who brought my mother down to the river, and she found me sitting around the bonfire on the bank, near the men with the blue chattering lips. Boiling sap in a burning pine log popped, sending up a shower of sparks; a few embers floated out over the river before dying in the night.

Later, there were the other wives and mothers, quiet murmurs, Pearl sitting beside me, changed into dry clothes but crying, and then, finally, my mother and I turning home.

I HAVE TOLD MY daughters—the two oldest, not the baby—this story, though perhaps not every moment of it. Even now, years later, I can still picture the way my sister looked skating out toward the tip of the channel, her legs

wobbling, and I know that as we settle into Sawgamet, as the snow comes and the river finishes freezing, I'll have to watch my own daughters trembling across the ice. A small mercy that the winter has come late to Sawgamet this year, giving me a few precious, extra weeks of knowing that my daughters have been safe on mud and dirt and rock. Still, after nearly two decades in Vancouver, I welcome the snow.

Up here, in my study—what used to be my stepfather's study—I can look out the window and see down the streets of the village. The chromium lights of the train yards leak over the tops of the trees and the buildings three streets away; they are working into the night to load wood to be used for the new war. Every man too old, too young, or too infirm to join the Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles regiment doing his part for the boys across the ocean. There are some women out there, too, in the train yard, working the cuts, driving trucks, handling horse teams. But it's not the machinery of war calling my attention. Rather, I'm staring at the snow drifting down from the sky, held harsh against the artificial lights.

The snow is starting to stick, making the woods and the village appear fresh. There had been snow enough when we lived in Vancouver, but it usually stayed in the branches of the trees, or congregated as slush in the gutters, and even then only for a day or so. Much of the time it came simply as rain rather than snow, and that was a miserable dampness that I never learned to enjoy. Even with a coat and fingerless mittens I struggled to write my sermons during the dampest part of winter. The branch-snapping cold here, the sort of chill that takes all moisture out of the air—too cold to snow sometimes—is preferable to the barely freezing wetness of Vancouver. But I suppose I should be careful what I wish for: the cold in Sawgamet can break you.

The winter that Marie fell through the ice was that sort of winter. What little warmth there had been in October

and November dropped completely away from us, and even with a constant fire in the stove, my mother and I took to wearing our overcoats in the house, hats and mittens to bed. Though there were no bodies, there was a funeral, and afterward my mother spoke little to the women who brought plates of food, little to my great-aunt Rebecca and great-uncle Franklin, my aunt Julia and her husband, Lawrence, their daughter, Virginia, little to Mrs. Gasseur, to Pearl, little to Father Hugo or to Father Earl, who visited us even though we were not in his flock. She did not speak to me, even when I lifted my father's ax from the wooden pegs over the stone lintel of the doorway and took it out behind the house. I split wood every morning, and the sound of the ax on the wood seemed to linger, floating through our house long after I had returned from school. Every evening I sharpened the blade, the rasp of the stone on metal making my mother shiver.

The winter punished us into December. Snow fell hard, our roof creaking until angry winds beat the white dust onto the ground. The same winds cleared a great swath of snow from the Sawgamet, until finally, between Christmas and New Year's, the sun came out and the men and children, bundled against the cold, took their skates down to the river again. Except for the whip of the wind and the crackling of wood in the stove, our house was quiet.

The knock on the door sounded like a shot.

Pearl led us to the river, helping my mother down the snow-crusting steps cut into the hill next to the log chute, holding her arm as we walked across the ice to the small circle of men. The ice was smooth and clean after a month of scouring from the wind.

The hands were not touching. Even through the plate of frozen water covering them, we saw clearly that little more than the width of an ax blade separated my father's two hands from my sister's one. His mangled fingers on one hand, the smooth, alabaster fingers on the other hand, all

stretched toward Marie's small hand. The ice, like glass above their hands, thickened as we tried to look further out, to see the rest of their bodies and their faces. The lines blurred, only shadows, dark shapes.

There was talk of axes, of chopping at the ice, but my mother forbade it, as if they had suggested pulling my father and Marie from their graves, and then the men left, gliding away from us on their skates. Pearl touched me on the back and headed toward the bank, leaving my mother and me over the ghosts of our family. As the sun dropped below the peak of the hill, we turned from the ice and trudged back up the steps, holding the side of the log chute for balance.

THE NEXT MORNING, when I woke, my mother was sitting in her chair by the stove, rocking slowly, staring at the fingers of flame that showed through the gaps in the metal. I dressed slowly for church, waiting for her to pin back her hair, to put on her gray Sunday dress. But she stayed in the chair.

After a little while she looked up at me. "Go on, then."

I thought about taking Communion, the wafer melting in my mouth like a chip of ice, the wine, diluted by Father Hugo, more water than blood. Then, instead of going to the church, I walked down to the river, the ice and snow screeching under my boots. In the sun, the winter felt like it had flown away, and I began to sweat during the short walk.

I knelt down above them, waiting to see them move. I put my hand on the ice above my father's fingers. I wondered if Marie had known how close my father's hands had been to hers. I waited for something to happen, for my father to reach out and bridge the gap separating him from Marie, but neither of them moved. Finally, as I heard the

first yells of the other children rushing down to the river after church, I rose and returned to the house.

My mother had not moved from her chair by the stove. She kept shivering, even with the blankets wrapped around her, even with the surprising heat of the day, so I fed more logs into the fire. And then, as the screams and laughter drifted up from the river, the slaps of sticks on ice, my mother startled with every sound. My skates hung from their laces on a rusty nail half driven into the corner post of the mill, and I thought of taking them down to the river, of skating over my father and Marie, of carving the ice above them, but I did not want my mother to ask me where I was going.

I WOKE IN THE MIDDLE of the night, thinking I heard Marie calling me. Out the window, something looked wrong, as if the entire world were underwater with my father and Marie, and I realized that thin sheets of rain were falling from the sky, icing the trees, turning all of Sawgamet into a frozen river. I went to check the fire in the stove, remembering my mother's shivering, and I saw that the ax no longer hung above the door.

The steps beside the log chute were slick, and the mist was star-bright, neither water nor ice—diamonds falling from the sky. When I reached the river, my mother was swinging the ax. The ice shone below her, as if the river had swallowed the moon, and the sound of the ax hitting the ice was ringing and clear, like metal on metal.

I walked closer to my mother and almost expected the river to shatter under the sharp, oiled blade, the ice to cleave beneath our feet. The river would take us and freeze us alongside my father and Marie. Or my father would step from the open ice himself, pulling Marie behind him, holding her hand, the four of us walking to the house,

where we could sit in front of the fire and he could tell us stories about fish made of ice.

My mother kept swinging the ax, and between the pings of the blade skittering off the surface of the ice, I heard her crying. She stopped when she saw me and fell to her knees, shaking. I knelt beside her. The ice was still smooth and clean, as if she had never been here with the ax, and when I put my hand flat on the ice it was warm against my palm, like bread cooling from the oven. Then the light beneath the river disappeared, leaving us on the ice, the film of rain covering us.

In the house, my mother covered me with my blanket and kissed me on my forehead. "I'm sorry," she said, so quietly that I was unsure whether she had really spoken or I had only imagined it.

I lay in bed, falling asleep listening to her sharpen the ax, the rhythmic grind of metal on stone.

The next morning, when Mrs. Gasseur, who was, as usual, the first to morning prayers, found Father Hugo frozen on the bench outside the church, she did not realize right away that he was dead.

"I asked him if he had been well during his morning walk," she said, "since I had such a terrible time with the frozen rain, and when he didn't answer, I touched his hand."

I did not see Father Hugo, but Pearl told me later that the old man looked alive under the clear coating of ice, still holding the Communion cup full of the blood of Christ. The men had to build a small fire in front of the church, waiting until the ice melted to pull him from the bench. Pearl said that he thought Father Hugo might have passed before he was frozen, but with the wine he could not tell.

They tried to dig a grave, but even with pickaxes, the ground was too hard. Father Earl said prayers over the body, and then Father Hugo spent the rest of the winter in