A PERMANENT MEMBER OF THE FAMILY

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FORMER MARINE

After lying in bed awake for an hour, Connie finally pushes back the blankets and gets up. It's still dark. He's barefoot and shivering in his boxers and T-shirt and a little hungover from one beer too many at 20 Main last night. He snaps the bedside lamp on and resets the thermostat from fifty-five to sixty-five. The burner makes a huffing sound and the fan kicks in, and the smell of kerosene drifts through the trailer. He pats his new hearing aids into place and peers out the bedroom window. Snow is falling across a pale splash of lamplight on the lawn. It's a week into April and it ought to be rain, but Connie is glad it's snow. He removes his .45-caliber Colt service pistol from the drawer of the bedside table, checks to be sure it's loaded and lays it on the dresser.

By the time he has shaved and dressed and driven to town

in his pickup, three and a half inches of heavy wet snow have accumulated. The town plows and salt trucks are already out. The plate glass windows of the M & M Diner are fogged over, and from the street you can't see the half-dozen men and two women inside eating breakfast and making low-voiced, sporadic conversation with one another.

By choice, Connie sits alone at the back of the room, reading the sports section of the Plattsburgh *Press-Republican*. He has known everyone in the place personally for most of their lives. They are all on their way to work. He, however, is not. He calls himself the Retiree, even though he never officially retired from anything and nobody else calls him the Retiree. Eight months ago he was let go by Ray Piaggi at Ray's Auction House. Let go. Like he was a helium-filled balloon on a string, he tells people. He sometimes adds that you know the economy is in trouble when even auctioneers start cutting back, indicating that it's not his fault he's unemployed, using food stamps, on Medicaid, scraping by on social security and unemployment benefits that are about to run out. It's the economy's fault. And the fault of whoever the hell's in charge of it.

Connie has already ordered his usual breakfast—scrambled eggs, sausage patty, toasted English muffin and coffee—when his eldest son, Jack, comes through the door. Jack nods and smiles hello to the other diners like a man running for office and pats the waitress, Vivian, on the shoulder. He shucks his heavy gray bomber jacket and pulls off his winter trooper

hat, hangs them on a wall hook next to his dad's Carhartt and forest green fleece balaclava, and takes the seat facing the door, opposite his dad.

"I was starting to think it was time to pack that stuff away," Jack says.

Connie says, "One of my goddam hearing aids just told me, 'Battery low.' Like I can't tell when it's dead and that's why I'm getting no reception. Man my age, his batteries are always low, for chrissake. I don't need no hearing aid to tell me."

"Your hearing aids talk to you?"

"It's a way to get me to buy new batteries before I really need them. I'll probably buy fifty extra batteries a year, one a week, just to get my goddam hearing aids to stop telling me my battery's low."

"Seriously, Dad, your hearing aids talk to you? You hearing voices?"

"Yeah, I'm a regular schizo. No, it's these new computerized units Medicaid won't subsidize. Over six grand! I shouldn't have listened to that goddam audiologist and bought the subsidized cheapos instead. With these, there's a little lady inside whispers that your battery's low. Also tells you what channel you're on. I got five channels with these units—for listening to music, for quiet time, reverse focus and what they call master. Master's the human conversational channel. And there's also one for phone. I can't tell the difference between any of 'em, except phone, which when you're not actually talk-

ing on the phone is like a goddam echo chamber. It does help me hear with a cell phone, though."

Vivian sets Connie's platter of food and coffee in front of him. "That gonna be it, Conrad?"

"Please, Viv, for chrissake, don't call me Conrad. Only my ex-wife called me Conrad, and thankfully I haven't heard it from her in nearly thirty years."

"I'm kidding," she says without looking at him. "Connie," she adds. She takes Jack's order, oatmeal with milk and a cup of coffee, and heads back to the kitchen. For a few seconds, while his father digs into his breakfast, Jack studies the man. Jack's been a state trooper for twelve years and studies people's behavior, even his seventy-year-old father's, with a learned, calm detachment. "You seem sort of agitated this morning, Dad. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, sure. I was just teasing Viv about that Conrad business. But it is true, y'know, only your mother called me that. She used it to give me orders or criticize me. Like she was afraid I'd take advantage of her somehow if she got friendly enough to call me Connie."

"You probably would've."

"Yeah, well, your mother took off before I really had a chance to take advantage of her. Smart gal. She quit before I could fire her."

"That's one way to look at it."

"You have to let it go, Jack. She didn't want the job, and I

did. In the end, everybody, including you boys, got what they needed."

"You're right, Dad. You're right." They've had this exchange a hundred times.

Vivian sets Jack's coffee and oatmeal in front of him and scoots away as if a little scared of Connie, mocking him. Jack smiles agreeably after her and shakes out the front section of the newspaper and scans the headlines while he eats. Connie goes back to the sports page.

Jack says, "Looks like we got through March without another bank robbery. Maybe our boy has headed south, like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." He flips the front page over and goes on to national news.

After a few minutes, without looking up, Connie says, "You talk to Buzz and Chip recently?"

Jack looks over at his father as if expecting more, then says, "No, not in the last few days."

"Everything the same with them these days?"

"More or less. Far as I know."

"Wives and kids?"

"Yep, the same, far as I know. All is well. No news is good news, Dad."

"I wouldn't mind any kind of news, actually."

"They're busy, Dad. It's easier for me, I don't have a wife and kids. Plus Buzz has that long drive every day up to Dannemora and back, and Chip's taking criminal justice

courses nights at North Country Community College down in Ticonderoga. And they both live way the hell over in Keeseville. Don't take it personally, Dad."

"I don't," Connie says and goes back to reading the sports page.

Jack finishes his oatmeal, shoves his bowl to one side and cups his mug of coffee in his large red hands, warming them. He's thinking. He suddenly asks, "You ever consider it a little weird that all three of us went into law enforcement? I sometimes wonder about it. I mean, it isn't like you were a police officer. Like me and Chip. Or a prison guard like Buzz. I mean, you ran auctions."

"Yeah, but don't forget, I'm a former Marine. And you're never an ex-Marine, Jack. So that was the standard you boys were raised by, the United States Marine Corps standard, especially after your mother took off. If my father had been a former Marine, I probably would have gone into law enforcement too. I always kind of regretted none of you boys were Marines."

"Dad, you can't regret something someone else did or didn't do. Only what you yourself did or didn't do."

Connie smiles and says, "See, that's exactly the sort of thing a former Marine would say!"

Jack smiles back. The old man amuses him. But he worries him too. The old man's in denial about his finances, Jack thinks. He's got to be worse than broke. Jack gets up from the table, walks to the counter and tries to pay Vivian for both their

breakfasts, but Connie sees what he's up to. He jumps from his seat and slides between his son and the waitress, waving a twenty-dollar bill in her face, insisting on paying for both his and Jack's meals.

Vivian shrugs and takes Connie's twenty, just to get it out of her face.

She hands him his change, and father and son walk back to the table, where both men pull their coats and hats on. "You take care of the tip," Connie says. "Make it big enough so you and I come out even and Vivian ends up forgiving me for being an asshole."

"Dad, you sure you're okay? I mean, financially? It's got to be a little rough these days."

Connie doesn't answer, except to make a pulled-down face designed to tell his son he sounds ridiculous. Absurd. Of course he's okay financially. He's the father. Still the man of the house. A former Marine.

IT'S A THIRTY-MILE DRIVE from Au Sable Forks to Lake Placid, forty-five minutes in good weather, twice that today. The roads are plowed and passable but slick all the way over—slowing to a creep through Wilmington Notch, where the altitude is more than two thousand feet and the falling snow is nearing whiteout.

It's a quarter to ten when Connie pulls his white, two-