

Chapter 1

The Fog Line

The fog found her just north of Bath, the way it always had, as if it had been waiting at the county line with its arms folded.

June Hallett had left Hartford at five in the morning with a thermos of coffee, a garment bag hooked over the back seat, and a dark blue dress she had bought the day before at G. Fox because nothing she owned seemed appropriate for burying her father. The dress had cost sixty-two dollars. She knew this because she had kept the receipt, and she had kept the receipt because she kept every receipt, a habit that had served her well for eleven years as a **claims adjuster in Hartford** and poorly in every other area of her life. Somewhere around Portsmouth she had started calculating what the whole trip would cost, gas and tolls and meals and the dress, and then she had stopped, because there was no line on any form for what it was actually going to cost.¹

Editor · comment 1

Hartford is already named at the start of this paragraph. Could this one become just "as a claims adjuster"?

The Volvo was a 1979 wagon the color of weak tea, and it did not like fog any more than she did. The wipers made a sound like someone clearing his throat in church. She turned the radio up, lost the Portland station in a wash of static, and turned it off again. After that there was only the engine, the wipers, and the gray pressing close against the windows until the road seemed to be unrolling itself a few yards ahead of her and no farther.

She knew this road. That was the trouble. She knew where it dipped at the Sheepscot and where the old Esso station had been before it became an Irving, and she knew the exact bend where the smell of the tidal flats would come in through the vents, low and green and a little rotten, like the inside of a boot. She had not been home in four years. She had not stayed longer than a weekend in sixteen. And still her hands turned the wheel before her eyes found the sign for the Port Anselm road, as if some part of her had never left at all and had simply been sitting in the passenger seat, waiting to be asked.

The Port Anselm road ran eleven miles down a crooked finger of land into the Gulf of Maine. It passed through spruce woods and blueberry barrens gone red with October, past dooryards stacked with wire lobster traps and faded buoys hung on nails like Christmas ornaments nobody had bothered to take down. There were hand-lettered signs for firewood and night crawlers and, at one house, a sign that read “Fresh Eggs, Honest” with a coffee can for the money. June noted that the can had a rock in it to keep it from blowing away. The town had always trusted people just exactly as far as a rock in a coffee can.²

Editor · comment 2

Lovely line. It sums up the town in one image.

Then the trees fell back, the road tipped downhill, and Port Anselm came up out of the fog in pieces.

First the white spire of the Congregational church, floating without a building beneath it. Then the gray shingles of the old Grange hall, which had become the Kilgore Library the year before June was born and which still had the words “Patrons of Husbandry” carved over its door. Then the post office, the hardware store with its window full of rubber boots, the Legion hall, and the long slope of Water Street running down to the harbor, where the fog lay thickest and the masts of the ~~boat's~~boats stood up out of it like the stubble of a burned field.

She pulled over by the town landing and turned off the engine.

For a while she simply sat there. The Volvo ticked as it cooled. Gulls argued somewhere she couldn't see. Out in the harbor a diesel engine idled, then caught and went away, its sound fading into the white until she could not tell whether she was still hearing it or only remembering it.

Her father had died on the town pier on ~~Saturday~~Saturday, October 3, 1987, at approximately six-forty in the morning. That was the phrasing Deputy Sam Beaulieu had used on the telephone, approximately six-forty, and June had been grateful for it. It was the kind of sentence she wrote herself. Walter Hallett, sixty-eight, harbormaster of Port Anselm for thirty years, had collapsed on the planking between his shack and the tide gauge hut, and Hollis Grant had found him when he came down to take his boat out. A heart attack, the doctor said. Quick, the doctor said. As if quick were a kindness he had arranged.

June got out of the car.

The air was cold and wet, and it smelled exactly the way she had known it would, of salt and diesel and herring bait and the particular wet-granite smell of the breakwater, which as a child she

had believed was the smell of the ocean itself before she learned that most oceans do not come with one, ~~her~~. Her good leather shoes were wrong for the pier. She walked out anyway.³

Editor · comment 3

This is a long sentence even after the comma splice is fixed. Would it read more easily if the aside about the breakwater were trimmed or split off?

The town pier ran a hundred and fifty feet into the harbor on creosoted pilings, broad enough for a pickup to back down to the float. Lobster crates were stacked along one side, and a bait barrel sat under a tarp, humming faintly with flies even this late in the year. At the far end, where the pier met the ramp to the floats, stood the harbormaster's shack.

It was not much of a building. It had never been much of a building. Eight feet by ten, shingled, with a ~~sinlge~~single window that faced the harbor and a door that faced the town, so that her father could watch the boats and turn his back on everybody else. A VHF antenna was lashed to the roof peak. A life ring hung beside the door, stenciled PORT ANSELM HBR MSTR in paint that had been white once. Someone had left a coffee can of chrysanthemums on the step, yellow ones, already browning at the edges in the salt air.

June stood looking at the flowers for longer than she meant to.

She tried the door. It was locked, which surprised her. As far as she knew, her father had not locked the shack once in thirty years; he had said that anybody who wanted to steal a pencil and a pair of binoculars was welcome to them, and anybody who wanted anything else would be disappointed. She leaned to the window, cupped her hands against the glass, and looked in.

The desk was there, the old oak one he had salvaged from the Grange hall when it became the library. The chair with the cracked leather seat. The barometer on the wall and the tide chart beside it and the calendar from Anselm Marine Supply, still turned to September. On a shelf above the desk stood a long row of books with cloth spines, dark green and brown and black, and June did not have to count them to know what they were. The ledgers. Her father had written in one every day of her life. Tides, wind, weather, and every boat that came in or went out of Port Anselm harbor, in a small square hand that looked as if it had been set in type.

His reading glasses were on the desk, folded, beside a mug.

She stepped back from the window. The fog had thinned a little, and she could see the tide gauge hut now, twenty yards up the pier, a small shingled box built over the water with its float well and its paper drum recording the rise and fall of the sea whether anybody cared or not. Between the shack and the hut the planks were weathered silver, and one of them had been replaced recently,

bright yellow pine against the gray. She looked at it and then looked away. It ~~were~~was only a plank. The town replaced planks every year.

“You’re Walt’s girl.”

She turned. An old man stood at the head of the float ramp in a green wool jacket and a watch cap, with a coil of pot warp over his shoulder. He had a face like a walnut and pale eyes that were set so deep they seemed to be looking out from inside a cave.

“Mr. Grant,” she said.

“Hollis.” He looked at her shoes and then at her face, and he seemed to find both about as he had expected. “Ayuh. Figured you’d come down here first. Your father would’ve.”

“I was told you found him.”

“I did.” He shifted the coil of rope. “He was already gone, June. I want you to know that. Wasn’t anything I could have done, and he wasn’t ~~laying their~~lying there long. I’d have known. I come down every morning same time, and so did he.”

“Thank you,” she said, and was surprised to find she meant it.

Hollis nodded toward the shack. “It’s locked.”

“I noticed.”

“Deputy locked it, ~~sam~~Sam Beaulieu. Said he’d hold the key for the family.” He considered the door as if it had personally offended him. “Never seen that door locked in my life. Walt used to say—~~“~~”

“Anybody who wanted a pencil was welcome to it.”

A corner of his mouth went up. “That’s the one.”

They stood together for a moment in the fog. Somewhere out past the breakwater a bell buoy clanged, slow and irregular, the way it did when the swell was small.

“Cal’s out hauling,” Hollis said. “In case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Ayuh,” said Hollis Grant, in a tone that covered a great deal of ground, and he went down the ramp to his boat.

* * *

The Breakwater Diner sat at the foot of Water Street where the street ran out of town and into the harbor, a long, low building with a flat roof and a row of windows that steamed up from October to May. It had been a railway dining car once, in the days when the railroad still came as far as Port

Anselm, and though it had been added onto so many times that the original car was now only its spine, the counter still ran the length of the room and the stools still had chrome pedestals and red vinyl seats patched with red electrical tape.

The bell over the door rang when June came in. Every head at the counter turned.

There were six of them, men in flannel and rubber boots and feed caps, and she recognized four. Nobody said anything. The radio behind the counter was reporting the price of heating oil. Somewhere in the kitchen a fry basket hissed into its well. June stood in the doorway in her Hartford coat and her Hartford shoes and felt herself being assessed, itemized, and filed, and she thought, with some professional appreciation, that nobody at her firm in Hartford had ever done it faster.

Then the kitchen door banged open and ~~and~~ Roz Pike came through it wiping her hands on her apron.

“Well, look what the tide dragged in,” Roz said.

She was sixty-one years old and **built along the general lines of a mooring block**, short and solid and not to be moved by weather. Her hair was the same iron gray it had been when June was ten, pinned up with a pencil through the knot. She wore a man’s cardigan over her apron and a pair of glasses on a chain around her neck, and she crossed the diner in about four steps and took June’s face in both her hands, which were warm and smelled of onions.⁴

Editor • comment 4

Lovely. It’s exactly right for the place and for her.

“Ya look numb as a hake,” Roz said. “When’d ya eat?”

“I had coffee.”

“Coffee.” Roz said it the way someone else might have said “arsenic.” “Sit down. Right there, end of the counter. Harold, move ya bag, she’s sittin’ there.” A man in a Red Sox cap moved his bag. “Ya want the chowder or the hash? Don’t say neither, I’ll know ya lyin’.”

“The chowder.”

“Good girl.” Roz kept hold of her face a moment longer. Her eyes were wet, but her voice didn’t change at all. “Ya father’d be wicked glad ya came, June. Don’t let anybody tell ya diff’rent. Specially ya brother.”

Then she was gone into the kitchen, and the men at the counter turned back to their coffee one by one, and the radio moved on from heating oil to the weather, which was fog.

June sat, ~~the~~. The counter was cool under her hands, worn to a dull shine by forty years of elbows. The menu was painted on a board behind the register, exactly as it had been in 1971:

chowder, hash, fish cakes, beans and franks on Saturday, American chop suey on Wednesday, pie. The prices had changed, and somebody had painted “No Credit, This Means You” in a newer hand at the bottom. Beside the register was a ~~a~~ coffee can with a hand-lettered label: “Walt Hallett, Flowers & Such.” It was half full of bills.

The man next to her, the one called Harold, cleared his throat. “Sorry about your dad,” he said, to his coffee.

“Thank you.”

“He was a good harbormaster. Fair.” Harold appeared to consider whether to go on, then did. “Hard. But fair.”

“That sounds like him.”

“Ayuh.” Harold drank his coffee. That, apparently, was the end of it.

The chowder came in a heavy white bowl with a pat of butter melting on top and a sleeve of pilot crackers beside it. It was haddock, potatoes, onions, salt pork, and milk, and nothing else, because Roz Pike believed that anybody who put flour or celery in chowder ought to be run out of the county. June ate it slowly. She had not realized how hungry she was. The fog pressed against the windows, and the diner was warm and loud with the clatter of plates, and for a few minutes she let herself not think about anything at all.

Roz came back and leaned on the ~~counter~~counter across from her with a cup of coffee of her own.

“Funeral’s tomorrow, ten o’clock,” Roz said. “St. Brendan’s. Father Leary’s doin’ it, and he’ll go on too long, he always does, but ya father liked him, so there’s that. Reception after, here. I’m closin’ for it.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t have to. I’m doin’ it.” Roz blew on her coffee. “Ya stayin’ up over with me. Spare room’s made. I aired it out and put the good quilt on.”

“I was going to get a room at the motel in Waldoboro.”

Roz, looked at her over the top of her glasses. It was the look that had ended every argument June had attempted between the ages of six and eighteen.

“The spare room,” June said. “Thank you.”

“That’s more like it.” Roz took a sip. “Ya seen the pier?”

“I went out. The shack’s locked. Hollis said Sam Beaulieu has the key.”

“He does. Sam’s been real good about all of it, he’ll bring it by, he said.” Roz ~~were~~was quiet a moment. “Ya seen Cal?”

“No.”

“He’s out hauling. Went out this mornin’ same as always. I told him, I said, Calvin, ya sister’s comin’ home today, and he said he had traps to tend.” She set her cup down. “He’s takin’ it hard, June. He don’t show it right. He never did. Like ya father that way.”

“I know.”

“He was the one lived here,” Roz said, and it was not quite an accusation, but it was near enough to one that they both heard it. “He was the one saw Walt every day. He’s got a lot on him right now. More than ya know.”

June waited, but Roz only picked up her cup again. June recognized the tactic. She used it herself on claimants: say one true thing and then stop, and let the silence do the rest. It ~~were~~was more effective when it came from someone who loved you.

“What does that mean?” June asked. “More than I know.”

“Means what it says.” Roz looked out the steamed window toward the harbor, where nothing at all could be seen. “Eat ya chowder.”

June ate her chowder.

* * *

Sam Beaulieu came by at four, when the diner had emptied out and Roz was running a mop across the floor. June heard the cruiser before she saw it, the particular crunch of tires on the crushed-shell lot, and she looked up to see him come through the door in his tan uniform and his county jacket, taking off his hat as he came in.

He had been a tall, gangly boy with a cowlick and an earnest way of listening, and he had become a tall, lean man with graying temples and an earnest way of listening. They had sat next to each other in Mrs. Dyer’s chemistry class for a year, and he had once, very seriously, helped her dispose of a bottle of Boone’s Farm that neither of them had been old enough to buy. That had been nearly twenty years ago. He looked at her now across the ~~diner~~diner as if he were checking her against a photograph.⁵

Editor • comment 5

Continuity check: June was ten in 1971 (the menu 'exactly as it had been in 1971'; Roz's hair 'when June was ten'), so a high-school chemistry class would be about ten years before 1987, not nearly twenty. Adjust one or the other?

“June.”

“Sam.”

He came over and, after a moment’s hesitation, hugged her, briefly and carefully, the way a man hugs someone at a funeral. He smelled of wool and cold air and the coffee in the cruiser.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” he said. “I’m sorry I had to be the one to call.”

“I’m glad it was you. You were very clear.”

He seemed to take this as the compliment it was. He dug in his jacket pocket and brought out a key on a loop of tarred marline, the knot worked into a small hard monkey’s fist. June knew it at once. Her father had tied that knot at the kitchen table one winter, showing her how, and she had never gotten the hang of it.

“The shack,” Sam said. “I locked it Saturday after they took him. Didn’t seem right to leave it open with everybody coming and going. Didn’t touch anything inside. It’s all how he left it.”

She took the key. It was heavier than it looked. “Was there any reason to lock it? Other than people coming and going?”

Sam looked at her a moment. It was, she thought, exactly the look she gave people who asked questions that were a little too good.

“No,” he said. “Just seemed right.”

“All right.”

“He’d been working, I think. Glasses were out. The ledger was on the desk.” Sam turned his hat in his hands. “I put it back on the shelf with the others. Didn’t want it to get wet if the roof leaks.”⁶

Editor • comment 6

Just before this, Sam says he “Didn’t touch anything inside. It’s all how he left it.” Is it on purpose that he contradicts himself here? If so, it’s a nice clue, and June might notice it. If not, one of the two lines may need adjusting.

“The roof always leaks.”

“Ayuh, that’s what I figured.” He smiled a little, then stopped. “The doctor was sure, June. Dr. Pelletier. Heart attack. Walt had been having some pains, Roz says. Hadn’t told anybody else.”

From across the room, Roz’s mop paused, then went on.

“Thank you, Sam,” June said.

He put his hat back on. At the door he turned. “You’ll be around a few days?”

“Through the weekend. Maybe a little longer. There’s the house, and the shack, and his papers.”

“Well,” Sam said. “If you need anything.” And then, as if he had not quite decided to say it until it was already out: “It’s good to see you home.”

The bell rang behind him. Through the window June watched the cruiser back around and go up Water Street, its taillights blurring red in the fog until they were gone.

She looked down at the key in her hand, the tarred marline and the hard little knot.

“He’s a good boy, Sam,” Roz said from behind her. “Always was. Divorced, ya know.”

“Roz.”

“I’m just sayin’. It’s a small town. Ya hear things.” Roz wrung the mop out into the bucket with a vigor that suggested she was wringing out several other things at the same time. “Ya goin’ down there tonight?”

June looked out at the harbor. The light was going, and the fog was turning from white to blue to the color of pewter, and somewhere out in it the bell buoy clanged.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “After.”

“Good,” said Roz. “Tonight ya eat supper, and ya sleep. There’s time enough for the rest of it.” She leaned the mop against the counter and stood a moment with her hands on her hips, looking at nothing. “There’s always time enough in this town,” she said. “That’s the trouble with it.”⁷

Editor · comment 7

Lovely closing line for Roz.