



*Paper Mill Press*

## Parting Words

Stephan Walke

Beside the dry loaf of rye is a note. The awkward scrawl was written with calloused hands. A couple honest lines of thanks and a few quick instructions for the morning. You see, he's gone to market and there are some things to be done in the barn before I carry my bag to the end of the lane and point my thumb southward. On the bottom of the note he says, "It's not much, but it might help on a bus ticket back if you need." He's referring to the crumpled twenty beneath the paper. I'm suddenly saddened and touched by his sincerity. The reality of trying to make a living growing vegetables alone at the age of sixty puts a weight in the silent, morning air. It's a weight held by every object in the house. By everything on this patch of land. Unrepaired machinery and uncovered wood is sinking into the earth by the back gates under the gravity of fading vigour. This weight he will no doubt feel when he returns from market and sees my feeble reply on the back side of his note. He will know, just like I know, that despite my promise, he won't see me again.

He will boil hot water and pour it over course granules of instant coffee, look at the maple through the laced curtains on the kitchen window. Then, there will be boxes to take from the trailer to the cellar. Not quite empty. The goats and chickens will need feeding and the fire in the greenhouse should be started. It's getting to be that time of year. Today's earnings from the market will need to be counted and a tally of sales written in the right column.

In another week snow may come. It will cover the garden, hiding the top sides of cabbage, kale, and carrot greens. The rows on the back field will be capped with white, revealing perfectly parallel lines of dark earth at their borders. A transition begins into the November world of black and white, perforated only by red brick, or the yellow of cut-off corn stalks protruding from below.

And I will be gone, carrying this place in my notebook as if I knew just what it entailed. As if I knew what winters alone felt like, reading almanacs and mystery novels and planning next year's garden. Never watching funny movies for the fear of hearing myself laugh out loud in an empty house. I'm another young hand coming

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through. Gone again in a few weeks. He has grown used to the feeling of watching them come and go. He knows just what to write on small paper.

If you asked him, he might say that it's much like the sun, or the crop, or some analogy drawn in the cycle of things that grow. Young seeds finding their way through rock and soil, trying roots in unknown places. I'm not sure about this. It's time to go, that's all. So I walk down the lane feeling the weight of my pack in my shoulders. The sensation of having all I need so close is a comfort in the wide prospect of new places. Guilt in leaving. Excitement in going. Freedom in a lack of commitment comes through the clouds and turns the dying leaves brighter shades in late autumn.

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