

THE DISAPPEARANCE

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Chapter 1

He calls it running toward the light. He is jogging along the bend where the big gray rock rears up on his right flank. Now the road straightens, tunneling between close-standing sugar maples on either side. Leafy branches nearly touch overhead; they form a canopy that shelters as it darkens. It is early morning; after a night of spring drizzle, miniature dots of moisture cling to leaves and tree trunks. The sun, peeping above Miller's Needle to the east, angles a shaft of light through the tangle of elderberry and sumac up ahead, just beyond the passageway through the trees. Tiny specks of crystal shimmy in the cool air, as the light goes to ground in a splash of gold.

He is only a few hundred yards from the end of the road, and if he has run many miles, he often slows to a walk here to enjoy the whisper of a breeze on his arms, the pleasurable ache as muscles in his calves contract. But not on the rare mornings when light hangs suspended in the air. No matter how far he has gone, he must speed up, must run toward the light, knowing its ray is the balm that will quiet and soothe. But though he can run toward the light he can never arrive. At the point of illumination the beam has vanished, leaving an instant of warmth as he peers ahead toward another shaft of light, descending like a ladder between now and before.

It is always the way it looks in the late afternoon sun that defines The Hollow to Joshua Sandler, as if a deep golden hue, taken from an inexhaustible supply, has been spread over the grass with wide and silent rollers. The sun rarely strikes that side of the lawn to the west of the house full on. Two massive sugar maples with gnarled trunks and a vast spreading canopy of leaves block the direct light. In mid-summer the leaves are dark green and large as a man's hand, too dense for the sun to pierce

The trees stand by the side of the road, and by coincidence or design, the needlepoint that hangs in the downstairs bathroom depicts just such a house, also with two trees in front of it. On that

needlepoint is embroidered the motto, "Let me live by the side of the road and be a friend to man." Sometimes in the grip of the black despair, rage and fury that take hold of him after Daniel's disappearance Joshua wants to rip the framed needlepoint from the wall, stomp on it, break it into shards. Once or twice he does take hold of it and twist it this way and that as if to mash everything in his bare hands—the frame, the glass, the fabric and most of all the words.

The house in which the needlepoint hangs in its glass frame is like the picture in the needlepoint: a massive but graceful colonial, close to the road, which is how they were placed in those days, before paved driveways and Jeeps with snowplows. The house sits on two and a half acres of lawn, healthy, sturdy grass nourished by the snows of winter and the ample rainfall of spring and autumn. Before the disappearance, Joshua liked to stroll barefoot on the large expanse of lawn to the west of the house, where the late afternoon sun bathed it in a golden green. He is a man who is always on his way to or from someplace, always finishing up one task and thinking of the next, but at this hour his heartbeat slows as he makes a circuit of the property, moving from light to shadow and back to light, the rays of the sun dissolving whatever is bitter or discontented within him.

What you notice first about Joshua is his springy hair; it is the color of dark sand with specks of carrot and seems to be constantly in motion. Then, the orange freckles that populate his face, the thin lips and the brown eyes that are always bubbling, often with mirth, sometimes with anger. His hands are large and competent, which becomes evident as he slings a basketball from right to left before putting it on the floor, darting to his side and rising like a high-board diver, straight up, heels together, pupils narrowed to focus on the basket. He can shoot from either side but the left hand is stronger, and a tad steadier. In a pickup game he is pure energy; once you know this you can understand why Joshua in the office or in someone's living room gives this impression of someone about to leap out of his work clothes and cut to the hoop in nothing but his underpants.

The house is in the Town of Smithfield, not in Smithfield proper but in The Hollow, a tiny hamlet of 60 souls about two and a half miles northwest of the town to which it belongs. Smithfield itself has 500 residents spread out over 50 square miles. Bordered by the other hill towns—Northway, Woodfield, Cooperville—it is an insignificant geopolitical entity at the far edge of Adams County in western Massachusetts.

Yet despite this small size, and the fact that Smithfield has only a general store, a hardware store, a garage, a town hall and a church, the residents talk of The Town as if it is a giant force in their lives. They complain that The Town has stopped using salt in winter (state regulations, a bunch of Boston politicians who couldn't find their asses in a snowstorm) and the roads are often rutted ice from January to the middle of March. They grouse that The Town has yet to replace five of six white cement posts, knocked over when Billy Parsons smacked into them with his dad's truck; the posts serve as a guardrail where Route 33A veers sharply left, to reveal the vista of an eroded hillside plunging into the Northway river.

Besides the icy roads and the knocked-over posts, there is also the matter of the public street lamps, two on the main street in Smithfield, one on Old Route 57 in The Hollow; they're no longer being lit at town expense: the budget won't allow it. Things aren't the way they used to be, the old-timers complain; every year the taxes go up but we get less for our money.

Joshua and Nathalie have had their own run-in with The Town; nine years ago Joshua had demanded that the town selectmen put up a sign at either end of Route 57 at the turnoff into The Hollow, warning motorists to go slow, that young kids were playing in The Hollow.

"Oh, there's no need for that," said Carl Puckett, president of the selectmen. "There's never been a sign like that."

"Well there sure is a need for one now," said Joshua. "There are four kids all under the age of five and if one of them wanders off a lawn and onto the road and gets smacked by a car roaring by at 50 miles per hour it's going to be on your head."

Pause. Puckett was, and still is, a very wide, upright man whose neck seems to merge into the hump-backed mass of his torso.

Joshua was holding the phone in a perspiration-laden fist; he'd been out whacking weeds and trimming the rough grass at the edge of the raspberry patch.

"On my head? On the parents' head," said Puckett. "We're not responsible for watching your kids."

"Do you want to have an argument after a child gets hit by a car about whose fault it is, or do you want to spring for a few dollars now to see that the accident doesn't happen?"

Another pause, then Puckett said, "You haven't lived here long enough to be making requests like that."

He might have said, you people from New York haven't lived here long enough, but it didn't matter; Joshua heard the omission as if it had been spoken.

"I'm not aware that the laws are written one way for people whose grandparents lived here and another for those of us who moved in a year ago."

After that conversation he wrote a letter. When he got no answer he called again, and when Puckett told him the same thing he wrote another letter with a copy to his lawyer, a genial but sharp-minded fellow in Colledgeville. A month later, one day in April, a long-haired kid drove up in a pickup truck and hammered two "Go Slow Children" signs into the ground, one at either end of the road through The Hollow.

The Hollow is nestled in a jog of Route 57, the main east-west route. Coming west from Smithfield, you turn right onto Main Street, which the old-timers called Old Route 57, you drive through the village on a half-mile loop and then rejoin Route 57. Along the way you pass a collection of two dozen houses dotted on either side of Main Street, as well as straggling up on both sides of the intersecting road, Northway Road, which meets Main Street a quarter of a mile from either end of Route 57. Northway Road climbs steeply from the intersection of Main Street and after a hundred yards it enters a pine grove; at that point the asphalt ends, and turns into a narrow brown dirt road, snaking steeply past state forest land, like a cart track in the Carpathian Mountains.

Joshua and Nathalie's place is one of the oldest in The Hollow. Heading west on Main Street, you pass the group of houses in the center of the village, then some woods and a bridge. Just beyond the bridge in a graceful curve of a shallow, fast-flowing stream, stands their house. Built in 1805, or so the brass numbers over the front door proclaim, it is a federal style colonial; on either side of the front door are very long clapboards—15 or 16 feet long, stiff and knotted with age, like a farmer's fingers that have known too many cold mornings.

Dan disappears on a Thursday in August 1993, six days before his 14th birthday and almost exactly one year since his Bar Mitzvah at a synagogue in Mamaroneck, New York. There is no place to have a Bar Mitzvah in Smithfield. On Main Street in Smithfield, opposite the town hall sits a Congregational Church; in The Hollow there is a separate Congregational Church, to which the minister drives at 11 a.m. on Sunday to conduct a service identical to the one he has presided over an hour earlier in Smithfield. The old ladies come down to church from their homes on the Northway Road or on the Hawes Hill Rd., a rugged dirt road at the other end of The Hollow. They dress in lilac and pink, with a sprig of lily of the valley in their white hair.

The day Dan disappears, Joshua takes the Jeep to Smithfield to buy some things at the Smithfield Hardware—100 feet of agricultural fencing, 14 four-foot metal posts, nails and a new wire clippers. He wants to replace the rusted chicken wire fence that's become an eyesore along the back of the lot. The property ends at the river bank, and the bank plunges down quite steeply through brush and low-growing weed trees, willow and poplar, to the rocks and sparkling water of the Northway River. Joshua loads the back of the Jeep with three barrels of kitchen garbage and household trash, including a huge wooden storm window that must weigh 25 pounds, even missing half its glass.

At the last minute Nathalie decides to come along. She's been kneeling in her garden, watering petunias and coleus and geraniums at the edge of the vegetable plot. The Big Boy tomatoes are staked as high as Joshua's chest, they have sinewy trunks that are an unnatural green, a green that seems to exist only on tomato plants or in

drawings of frogs in children's books. It is nothing like the green that the kiss of the sun lays down on the side lawn in the long shadow of the maple trees, all golden and smelling of clover.

She comes skipping up to the Jeep as he is about to put the key in the ignition. Afterwards Joshua pictures the way Nathalie lay her arms on the driver's side, his door, with her slim fingers resting on the opening where the window slides up. Her arms are tan, her fingernails caked with dirt. Thinking of her face, how sun-washed and care-free, is about the worst memory he has of that day.

The day is warm, pleasantly warm. The air is dry. Even at noontime the sky is the blue of outer space, of daydreams.

"I'm coming."

"To the dump? I mean, the compactor?"

Since the mid 80s, dumps in small towns in Massachusetts--those sprawling, smelly, picturesque dumps--have been replaced by compactors, green boxcars into which you slide your garbage by pushing it down an incline. A solid waste disposal company collects the compacted garbage and transports it to some other state. Going to the dump used to be an adventure; going to the compactor is like a trip to a crematorium.

"I'll go with you to the hardware store. Then I'll walk down and see Terry. I made him some brownies yesterday.

"He's doing poorly, isn't he?"

"He'll be happy for the visit. And the brownies."

Nathalie darts inside and calls to Daniel, who is up in his room, and he yells down, "Okay, mom, see you later," and that is the last time either of them speaks to him.