

*The Dharma of
Duluth*

By
Konnie Ellis

Also by Konnie Ellis:
The Ice Dancer

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

In memory of my father,
Karl Egil Haldorsen

*The Dharma of
Duluth*

part 1

In the Beginning
There Were Bears

one

DULUTH, MINNESOTA IS THE City of Bears and Lilly is ready for another bear.

“Why not?” she says, hanging up the phone. She calls to her niece in the next room where Sarah sits in the lotus position combing her hair. Sarah saunters into the kitchen, curious at the excitement in her Aunt’s voice.

“What’s up?”

“There’s a bear up a tree in Leif Erickson Park. We need to leave right away.”

Lilly is revving up the engine of the 1979 Toyota by the time Sarah gets to the driveway. She ducks down to slide into the passenger seat. The old orange car vibrates as they make the turn out of the driveway. Lilly drives down the center of the road, with both hands firmly on the steering wheel.

“Watch the road Lilly. There’s a car coming up.”

“Okay. They’re trying to coax the bear down. You can’t tranquilize it in a tree. Not if it’s up too high.”

Sarah was relieved when her Aunt gave up the motorcycle. Still, she doesn’t like her jerky driving and the sudden stops to look at flowers in someone’s yard, or a cat sitting on a porch step. Once she braked to an abrupt dead stop just to tell a woman who had stepped outside to get her morning newspaper that she liked the color of her purple bathrobe. Said it was a royal color, a spiritual color. That’s how Lilly met Lulu, whom they’ll meet at the park. She’s the source of the bear news.

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Lilly pulls into the SuperOne parking lot across the street from Lake Superior and the park, happy to find her favorite parking spot available. She doesn't like congested parking lots or driving around and around to find only a small space that you have to maneuver into. They dash across London Road and cut through the rose garden toward Leif Erickson Park. Lilly slows down beside a hedge of roses, rummaging in her big yellow sunflower bag for her mini clippers so she can cut a few roses, which she insists is merely pruning, and helpful to the gardens. She stops beside a rose bush thick with corral blossoms, but Sarah talks her into waiting until after they see the bear, so they won't wilt, telling her she really shouldn't clip like that in a public garden. Lilly insists she only takes the ones that are ready to go; ones the gardener would cut that day anyway, yet she puts the clippers back in her bag.

When they reach the hilltop, Lilly starts to jog, holding her sari daintily as she dashes gracefully down the hill. Sarah lopes along beside her aunt until they find Lulu in the small crowd gathered below the treed bear near the old Viking ship. "What are they doing? I can't see," Lilly says, as she digs for her glasses. "Okay, there he is. I see him. Way up there. Ahh, poor thing."

The bear clings to the trunk of an old willow, its left back leg wedged inside the cleft of a heavy branch. He is already large, a two-year old. Lulu heard it on the radio, not long on his own and away from his mother. Lulu tells how they stay with their mothers for their first two years, learning the skills they need to survive on their own. It's in the fall when they come into town looking for food. Before hibernation. Usually they stay on the edge of town, overturning garbage cans or eating ripe apples from the trees. They hardly ever wander all the way down to the lake.

Lilly, Sarah and Lulu and the others, including a police officer who is getting instructions on his cell phone, cluster near the trunk of the tree, craning their necks looking up. The

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officer keeps his eyes on the bear and occasionally looks over his shoulder for the guy from the zoo. The officer is a young man from Minneapolis who is unfamiliar with the ways of bears, and is much more nervous than the rest of the crowd of Duluthians.

In the park Sarah is listening to several conversations at once. A woman is telling how the bear followed Chester Creek all the way down to London Road, and a young boy who lives nearby thinks it's the bear he saw last weekend eating crab apples in Mrs. Meyer's yard.

"My knees were just plain knocking together," a woman in jeans, carrying a gardening shears, tells no one in particular. "It came right through the Mr. Lincolns and headed for the French pinks." Sarah asked if she had ever seen the movie 'Edward Scissorhands,' but she hadn't. Said she was a volunteer at the rose gardens. A distinguished old man wearing earmuffs tells the gardener to put the shears away because the bear might fall on them. Hearing his comment, everyone steps back. The bear lets out a little moan, like a sad baby.

Lilly steps up to the officer and tells him it probably won't come down until they all leave, thinking he should just tell them all to disperse, and step back out of sight himself, but before anything comes of this the zoo man arrives. They all turn to see two large men hustling across the park lawn, one in a red jacket, wearing a hat that says Happy Zoo Year, and the other in full fireman's gear.

"Everybody back. Let's get this baby down." The zoo man swaggers toward the tree, and Sarah is glad someone who seems to know what to do has arrived, as the rookie cop had made her nervous with his air of uncertainty. Backing away, she reads the back of his jacket: "Fireworks at the Duluth Zoo – Happy New Year! Happy Zoo Year!"

"They must hate that," Lilly says. "The poor animals, having to put up with fireworks when they should be sleeping. They're probably scared to death. If I weren't going to India I

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would organize a protest. I'll write a letter to Mayor Ness before I go," she says, looking from Sarah to Lulu as they back up the hill away from the tree.

Sarah remembers how she liked the bear houses made of stone at the zoo with their sharp angles and cubist shapes and how the bears would amble out of their caves and dive into the moat. They seemed proud, and oblivious of human spectators. Her Dad had told her how the bear house was a WPA project, with a design well ahead of its time.

They find a spot half way up the hill and Lilly takes three supermarket bags from her purse for protection from the dew, and they settle down on the grass.

"It's like a play," Lulu says, chuckling to herself. Most of the crowd has gone, though a few people have parked themselves on the benches at the top of the hill.

"I can't believe I'm actually here," Lulu goes on. "This is wonderful."

Lilly agrees, it is like a play. Sara leans back on her elbows.

"Such a view, the bear in the tree, the park, Lake Superior. I just feel so lucky. It's a good day for bears," Lulu says, stretching her legs out straight. "A good day for us anyway, maybe not so good for the bear," she reconsiders.

Lulu's favorite story is about the time the mountain goat escaped from the zoo and she heard the entire chase and capture back when she had a scanner. Lilly has heard many times how the patrolman kept calling for help while sitting on the goat, which he had finally tracked down at the top of Enger Tower hill. Lulu had been as relieved as the patrolman who was sitting on the goat, when help arrived and they could finally get the goat back to the zoo.

Sarah shudders, horrified that an animal could escape from the zoo. As a child, she had nightmares about the lion getting out of the Duluth Zoo and stalking her on her way home from school.

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“Shhh,” Lilly shushes them. “He’s singing. One of them is.”

Coming from below the tree, in a clear baritone, they hear “What’ll I do, when you – are far a-way – and I am all alone.” Lilly hums along. “It’s the zoo man. He’s singing to the bear. Calming it down.” They all lean forward to see what will happen. The zoo man shoos the rookie and the fireman away. They walk backwards and step behind a bush. Zoo man continues singing, though more quietly now, and slower. A rifle is visible at his side. The bear has come down a good foot.

Zoo man joins the others behind the bush and keeps humming. The bear stretches its neck and looks around the park. He looks down below the tree, and appears ready to move. Yes, the bear is coming down. He struggles to release his back foot and kicks it free out into the air, then slides down the tree so fast that Sarah leaps to her feet, ready to run. Lilly and Lulu rise, arm in arm.

As soon as the bear touches the ground, zoo man steps out and shoots the tranquilizer gun. A hit. The bear runs forward, and Lulu, Lilly and Sarah are half poised to scoot up the hill but remain standing, glued to the scene in front of them. The bear staggers, takes a few fast steps toward the bush, stands still and wobbles, then falls over onto its side, out cold. For a moment, time seems to freeze over the bear as though an unseen photographer just clicked the shutter of a big old-fashioned black box of a camera, capturing forever the scene of the fallen black bear on the green grassy slope of Leif Erickson Park beside Lake Superior. A black bear on the grass, sinking, dying, receding, deep into the primitive past of the onlookers. Three seagulls fly overhead, squawking their way out over the lake at the same time a noisy truck rumbles down the hill, bringing the scene and the people back into ordinary time.

The truck bounces down the hill and stops within yards of the bear, and a man in gray sweats steps out carrying a black bag. He walks calmly but briskly to the bear and squats down

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beside its head. After resting a hand on the bear's side, he strokes the bear's fur and beckons to the truck driver. The driver backs the truck up to within a few feet of the bear. He spreads a large yellow tarp next to the bear and the four men hoist the heavy, limp bear onto the tarp. Sarah remembers when her dog died, how its head was limp like that. They pull the bear along on the tarp and up into the truck where they slide him into a cage. The sound of the lock clicking shut is audible across the grounds of Leif Erickson Park. "Is he okay?" Lilly calls out to the men, breaking the silence. "What are you going to do with him?" she hollers down the hill.

"Yes," zoo man calls back across the steep expanse of the grassy hill. "He's okay. He's going back to the woods."

All three women sigh in unison and watch the truck with the bear drive away and out of sight. They gather up their bags and purses and start down the hill toward the lake just as a two-person camera crew appears from the local TV station. Intentionally, they slow down in order to pass behind the TV camera to listen to the woman talking into the microphone.

"And moments ago, in this very tree..."

"We can watch it on the news," Lulu whispers. "Oh, I'm sorry, you don't have a TV, Lilly."

"Don't be sorry. And Lulu, we saw it live."

"Well, I know, but somehow it seems more real on TV."

Sarah laughs and feels her shoulders loosen and relax. Lilly and Lulu climb down the bank to the lake in an almost reckless manner and both seem almost rowdy, as they maneuver over an old driftwood tree stump. They both want to skip stones and start hunting for good flat skipping stones as soon as they reach the beach. Lilly skips her stones five and six times over the surface of the water, a real pro. Lulu's rocks plunk hard and sink. She doesn't seem to mind. Sarah skips a perfect flat oval stone three times, her best attempt.

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“You’ve got to get down low. Use your wrist,” Lilly explains as she flings another stone out over the lake with one hand while holding her sari out of the way with the other. Both Lulu and Sarah try again, but both attempts are sinkers.

“We try too hard,” Sarah says, but now she’s enjoying her sinkers too. She feels like she’s throwing away her troubles.

“Oh let’s eat, Lulu says, heading for her large basket-like purse. She sits on a big flat rock and takes out a thermos of coffee and a Tupperware container. They find more or less comfortable seats on the large flat granite rocks and Lulu passes out plastic cups of coffee and big wedges of banana bread.

“This is the life,” Lulu says, taking a large bite of her bread.

The sky is robin’s egg blue and the water a multitude of blues, splashing and hissing against the shore, washing over the sand and small bright stones of the beach. Sarah slips off her shoes and socks and steps into the shallow sandy section of beach. As usual, the lake is freezing cold, but she doesn’t mind and finds it refreshing to stand in the cold water as she sips warm coffee. Sarah is not entirely surprised to see both Lilly and Lulu removing their shoes and socks. She steps up to lend a hand to Lulu, who takes tiny steps down from the rock and into the water. Lilly wades right in. The women stand in a row looking out across the water of the lake so wide it seems to have no other side, to have no end. Sarah looks down at their bare feet in the clear icy water and sees six feet, pearly white as fish.

“Sharks!” Lulu yells, and turns toward shore. “Ouch, ouch, ouch! Brrr.” She tiptoes out of the water and plunks down beside her purse. Dabbing at her feet with an embroidered white handkerchief, she wiggles her pudgy toes.

“Oh, I just love today,” she says.

Lilly and Sarah walk slowly out of the water, fascinated by their now red feet. From the ankles up their legs are white, a

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distinct contrast to the rosy red of their feet, as though they had been sunburned.

BACK IN THE CAR, Sarah holds the sweet pilfered coral and pink roses in her lap. She had been uneasy in the rose garden while Lilly calmly snipped roses and Lulu wandered about humming and poking her nose into the blossoms like a hummingbird. Sarah felt like the lookout at a bank robbery, while Lilly and Lulu were perfectly at ease with their rose rustling. As usual, life with Lilly is a challenge to Sarah. Or maybe it's just plain Duluth.

The women are quiet on the ride up the hill. When they drop Lulu off she smiles after them from her porch and waves with a rose. Lilly drives slowly up the steep hill, and as she turns into her narrow driveway, Rhapsody in Blue comes on the radio. They sit and listen to the Gershwin.

The music washes over them. They haven't sat like this since listening to the monologue on *Prairie Home Companion*, a few weeks ago, just after Sarah moved in with Lilly. Morgan had left for Brazil and their Park Point house was in a state of serious renovation. Then Stephen called out of the blue.

"Well, tell me about Stephen," Lilly says during a quiet section. "Will you see him tomorrow?"

"I think so. At least I told him I would. Just a walk at Chester Park while the leaves are still colorful." How unfair it seems to her that Stephen's wife is dead. That she died so young. Sarah tenses up, afraid. Lilly is critical of her seeing Stephen, or maybe she's just being critical of herself. Anyway, it's just a walk. She's glad Lilly is quiet, just sitting with her hands on the steering wheel listening to the music. Sarah needs to think things through. Stephen was on her mind when they were standing in the lake. How odd that he would just call like that, out of the

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blue. He was going on about a book he's working on, something about religious statuary. He's still teaching art history in Minneapolis and said it was the perfect job for him. It was good to hear his enthusiasm, after his loss, though he did not sound quite natural. Maybe he was nervous, calling her.

"Well, let's go in," Lilly says. Her aunt steps inside with the stolen roses and Sarah lingers in the backyard and watches Lilly bustling around in the kitchen. The backyard needs raking; a job for another day. And then there's India. Maybe she should go to India with Lilly like she's been pushing for. And why not now while Morgan is working on his research projects in Brazil and their Park Point house is being restructured. Just the idea of India is enticing. She has always wanted to go to the land of tea and spice, spirituality, monkeys, tigers, the Taj Mahal, crowds and cows and colorful saris and exotic festivals and music. Sometimes when she takes a bath in the evening she pours aromatic oils into the bath water and lights little candles so that when she turns out the light and steps into the dark oily water, she imagines herself stepping into the mysterious waters of the Ganges.



THE NEXT MORNING, LILLY FINDS herself in need of a good potato curry salad, her recent invention. She stands at the kitchen sink holding a potato up toward the light, looking it over as she might a piece of sculpture. It's a Yukon gold, and smooth. She holds it delicately, as if it might come to life if she were to be too rough. Lilly's dark hair is streaked with white and held back with a headband that sparkles above the porcelain sink. The deep creases of her dimples make her seem friendly even when deep in thought. Although no longer a young woman, Lilly is attractive. Wearing an apron over her sari and grey wool socks

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she half skates and half sashays across the floor and hangs her apron beside the beaded curtain of the pantry.

She likes living in her younger sister's house, which is now officially her house, and from the outside a typical Duluth hillside house. But the inside is a bit of India, the country she had written about as a student back in high school that inspired a visit to India where she met her now-dead husband. They had worked on a Peace Corp project together, fallen in love and produced a musician son, Devi, acclaimed sitarist of Bollywood movies who has yet to visit Duluth. *From Duluth to Delhi* was Lilly's first published travel article and now she is as much at home in Duluth as she had been in Delhi.

After her sister died, now some five years past, Lilly moved to Duluth. It seemed the logical solution at the time, coinciding as it did with the accidental death of her husband in India. Her eyelids flutter ever so slightly as she recalls the afternoon of his death by a runaway bus with faulty brakes. So senseless. So sudden. And here too in Duluth, this city built on a steep hill, brakes are a serious matter.

Sarah saunters into the kitchen, accepting the potato her aunt hands her to peel. Lilly smiles and continues to gaze out the window at Lake Superior. Since she's been staying with her aunt she often finds Lilly in a pensive mood in the mornings. Sarah examines the potato, looking for the Buddha her aunt says you can find in every potato. This one has mismatched eyes, a bulgy nose, and a sprout just beginning to grow out of what might resemble an ear. She prefers a potato to be a potato and peels several, dropping them into the cold water of the pot. Lilly has started to hum. She adds a sprig of rosemary and several garlic cloves and talks about suffering; the suffering of mankind, the suffering of the Buddha, the suffering of Jesus, the suffering of potatoes, and the varied forms potatoes are capable of assuming. Sarah brushes a peel from her wrist. She feels like a potato today,

lumpy and grey in her old sweat suit and bare feet. She would just as soon have rice. Nothing to peel there.

The kitchen smells of rosemary. Lilly fusses with her spice jars, aligning her favorites: cumin, cardamom, paprika, turmeric and rosemary. She's concerned about Sarah seeing Stephen today, though she is sorry his wife died. And now Stephen is staying with his cousin in Duluth while he works on a book on religious icons. She doesn't see why he can't do that in Minneapolis, or does he just come to Duluth on weekends? So much death these past years. Too much loss. Lilly knows it's not her place to tell Sarah what to do, even if Sarah's brilliant husband, Morgan, spends most of his time in South America living in trees. She likes Sarah's husband, but he is rarely around; usually he is off somewhere doing research. She admires his scientific work for the good of the planet, though she can't see what good he does for his wife. At least Morgan is rich and Sarah has no money worries, even though that luxury has kept her somewhat childish, somewhat immature.

"Where do you get your saris, Lilly?" Sarah asks, touching a pale orange silk shoulder.

"On line. SarisRyou. I'll show you tonight." She recalls the day she bought her laptop from a young man who worked in the produce department at the Kenwood SuperOne. She had reached for some parsley and he almost misted her arm and they had started talking. He brought it up out of the blue, how he had this laptop for sale and he'd give her a good deal. He wanted the money so he could go to Mexico. Said he couldn't face another winter in Duluth. She bought it the next day and never saw the young man again. Lilly pictures him in sunny Mexico, strolling a sandy beach and thawing away his too many winters in Duluth. The computer worked fine, and she found it easy to use and taught herself to send e-mail to Devi in India and how to shop. She's even started writing again.

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“Didn’t Morgan buy you a new computer?” she asks Sarah, as she turns the heat down under the potatoes.

“It’s still in the box. I’ll wait until the house is done. I’m on vacation from computers. At least for a while,” Sarah says.

two

AT CHESTER PARK, SARAH CHOOSES the path that follows the old bobsled trail through the woods to the ski scaffold. It's warm for a northern Minnesota October day. She's wearing a baggy black sweater and Stephen has on a pale fisherman's sweater that would make him invisible in a field of wheat. They walk briskly into the world of trees, far from the cares and duties of their daily lives, and as they walk they slow to a leisurely pace, until they are walking as drifters, seemingly without a care in the world. A confetti of bright leaves fall as they walk: red maple, honey birch, and tiny yellow leaves land in their hair and on their shoulders like miniature goldfish. Sunlight flickers over the forest floor of freshly fallen leaves, gray-green thimbleberry thickets, red-leafed raspberry bushes and hazelnut shrubs.

The only sound is the wind high in the treetops, plus their own voices as they climb the meandering hills through the forest toward the base of the ski scaffolding. The ski jump is visible from many locations in Duluth, but here in the woods they are so close that the trees block their view. As they reach the clearing the ski jump's sudden looming presence gives it a monumental appearance, more like a giant outdoor sculpture, and here in the fall, with no snow, no skiers, and no other people it seems a strangely large item to be in such a private location. Stephen points out two crows squawking at the top of a tall pine at the edge of the clearing. Now that they've stopped

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walking they are self-conscious in this beautiful and private place. Their silence is almost embarrassing below the raucous cocky crows. They stand awkwardly apart beside the ski jump's high curved slide.

"My father jumped from here," Stephen says. "He jumped on a dare. "He'd never jumped before but once he said he'd do it, well, he was committed, and he did it. Jumped. Right here." Stephen's smile turns to a grimace as they look up the steep slope of the ski jump above them. Looking up at the slide, it doesn't seem like something anyone would actually do. How could a person intentionally push oneself down a dangerously steep slide covered with snow while standing on skis – sticks really, just a couple of well-fashioned boards, at least back then when his father jumped. At this close range ski jumping seems like a bit of fiction for the insane.

Sarah climbed the ski scaffold as a child. She and her friends had summer picnics on the landing on top of the ski jump where they sat cross-legged and munched graham crackers and sipped Coke. She had loved sitting on the wooden ski platform on a warm summer day looking out over the wide blue expanse of Lake Superior, and onto all the little rooftops scattered over the green hills of Duluth. She had thought you could see the whole world from the top of the ski scaffolding.

She and Stephen walk to the edge of the hill from where the skiers soar out into the sky in winter, their arms aerodynamically straight against their sides. She remembered that Stephen's father died when he was young and that his father made cigars in their basement. Maybe he made some of the cigars her father smoked. Funny, she hadn't thought of that before. She imagines his dad looked just like Stephen, a picture of confidence, with curly blond hair, flying out over the hill on skis, a lit cigar in his mouth. How great it must feel, flying through the air on skis, jumping out into the unknown. Into the air like a bird. Like a crazy bird.

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They both sigh.

“Landing was the hard part. They had so little room. Just that small space on the other side of the lake,” Stephen says.

They look down over the steep grassy slope to the small blue lake below, formed by a dam on Chester Creek. Red maples and yellow birch on the hills opposite the ski jump mirror themselves in the lake, inviting the eye deep into where the trees appear to grow downward, while glistening hypnotically on the water’s surface.

“You’d have to be crazy,” Sarah says, curious, yet shuddering at the thought of actually ski jumping down there. Stephen raises his eyebrows and looks as if he’s about to speak, but then says nothing. “I meant I would have to be crazy,” she laughs, becoming more aware of her old friend of long ago, remembering, fascinated once again by Stephen’s subtle charms – his smile. She always thought of his lips as a trumpeter’s lips because of their sculptural qualities and the thought lingers, making her grope for another thought, a safer thought. After all, here she is, a married woman, out in the woods with an old flame from her college days. But they were adults, reasonable people who shared a reasonable friendship, retained over the past ten years through Christmas cards, and once she even had lunch with Stephen and his wife. She liked her. Shifting her weight toward the balls of her feet, so near the ledge which is pure straight down, a jello-y feeling in her stomach makes her wobble forward for an instant before regaining her balance and stepping back. Disoriented, she is surprised at Stephen’s firm hand on her arm.

“You okay?” Stephen asks, releasing his grip on her arm.

“Sure. It’s just the height. I stepped too near the edge. I was blurry.” She doesn’t know what she means by that and he doesn’t ask. But what was he thinking. Was he thinking about those long ago days with her? Or about his father? Does he picture his father here? His father’s jump was successful, but

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perhaps Stephen saw that jump as a take off point from which his father flew out into the air, departing from this world on skis, jumping straight out of his life into the other world from this very hillside.

She always saw her own father's departure as from a boat. They were both in Oslo, and she saw her father off at the dock. She was staying on in Oslo, and he gave her a handful of paper Kroner, boarded the Bergensfjord and sailed home to America and back to Duluth, Minnesota. The scene of her father sailing away on the ship is how she pictures his departure from this earth. He looked so dapper in his trench coat, so happy and confident as he boarded the boat. They had waved to each other for a long time as the boat moved away from shore, and she watched the ship until it became small and left the Oslofjord. For Sarah, that was her final image of him, even though she saw him many times again back in Minnesota before his death. How beautiful, this final exit she had chosen for him. For her, he is always a happy sailor at sea. It was on her own return to Duluth that she met Morgan, who had been backpacking in Norway after completing a fellowship year in Geneva.

"Well," she says, and starts walking toward the base of the big ski jump. Stephen follows and they talk about skiing and skating as kids, remembering the horror of frozen feet. The agony after skating or skiing in subzero cold when they would sit with their feet beside a heat register, waiting and dreading the awful pain that would come as their toes thawed out.

"Horrible pain. We probably really were close to frost bite," Sarah says.

"I can't think of anything worse. Well, that's not quite true. I can deal with physical pain," Stephen says.

"It's been two years now, since your wife died?" Sarah asks.

"Two years and two months," Stephen says quietly.

She doesn't know what to say. If he wants to talk about it, she'll listen. They walk closer to the ski jump and Sarah spots

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an old wooden ladder at the base of the scaffolding. They look at each other. “Want to climb?” she asks.

“Sure,” he says stepping forward. A bit surprised at how eager he is, Sarah starts up the old wooden rungs, though the steps look like they belong on the wall of an antique store. Stephen follows once she is high enough to make room. They climb until the ladder is blocked by a wire gate. Backing down, they are both exhilarated by the climb and at the possibilities of life, if they can climb an old wreck of a ladder like that. They walk to the high end of the ski jump and examine the newer stairs to the top and conclude the old ladder was indeed a relic from the past. The skiers used to climb stairs while toting their skis from the landing area by the lake up to the slide, where the ladder led to stairs that followed the edge of the slide straight to the top. The new stairs are out of reach above a metal gate.

They leave the ski jump and cross the clearing toward the path through the woods, now walking a little closer to one another. Stephen talks about his life in Minneapolis and the book he’s writing on religious symbols and how he’s been visiting churches, looking at stained glass windows and statuary. He says he’s been coming to Duluth on weekends for several weeks now. He likes to write on his cousin’s balcony overlooking the lake. Sarah listens with surprise. When she was in college he never expressed an interest in religion. Rather the opposite, she had thought, though she did recall that he had been an altar boy as a child. Somehow she connected his being an altar boy with the other experience she knew of his youth, how he had helped his father make cigars in their basement. Cigars seemed religious to Sarah. As a child she watched with intense interest when her father lit a cigar. First the wooden match, then the inhale, and finally the exhale of blue smoke swirling up into the air. Even today she loves the aroma of cigars. Had Stephen now turned religious after the death of his wife?

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“Jeannie and I always talked,” Stephen said suddenly. “I miss that. She was religious. Quite spiritual, but in her own way.”

Sarah pictures a sort of smoking and no smoking area in Heaven, wondering how it would work if you had once smoked but then you quit. Which section would you be in? Would she want to smoke again? Now she can't abide the smell of cigarette smoke, but still finds cigar smoke enticing.

“When someone dies. It changes you,” Stephen says. “I mean that's obvious, I know, but you become an entirely different person. Like you've fallen into a mirror and come out the other side and suddenly you're an alien.” Mainly it's being alone, he knows, but keeps the thought to himself. He does find the actual church buildings helpful, comforting. When he is listening to the pipe organ on a Sunday morning, he likes the way the sun shines through a stained-glass window. It helps. Sometimes.

“Well, it's beautiful here on a day like this, with all the bright leaves on the trees,” Sarah says, thinking of how their fathers could be smoking cigars somewhere in the land of the dead. Wishing you could still burn leaves in the fall, like when she was a kid. That good smell of burning leaves. She feels sorry for Stephen but not too much so. His shoulders seem to sag and shrink in his big sweater as he walks along thinking of death. She's feeling jaunty. She can't help it. It's such a blue-sky day. Perhaps she has a faulty soul. Still, she feels guilty. Jeannie died of lung cancer and had smoked since she was eleven or some crazy really young age.

They stop at the top of the old bobsled run. The wooden runway is long gone, but its pathway is still clearly in use. They walk down the old trail until they come to the bridge over Chester Creek, which is running fast and clear, splashing and bubbling below, past boulders and under a large fallen birch. The wood of the bridge is dark and wet, saturated from last night's rain. Sarah feels the bridge bounce beneath her feet as they walk across. She stops in the center and bounces the

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bridge intentionally, at first startling herself at what she's doing, and then frightened by how her slight weight makes the bridge bounce considerably, perhaps dangerously. Stephen's quick laughter is the laughter of his devilish past and Sarah glances down at the fast moving water of the river, rather than at Stephen, as they cross to the other side of the bridge.

His laughter, like water.

Leaving the bridge, they pass the soccer field that borders the clay tennis courts where they once played together that summer when Sarah was a sophomore in college and Stephen was working on his master's in history. The high fence surrounding the courts is covered with a scarlet curtain of ivy.

As they near the gate, Stephen's off-hand comment about what dreadful courts they were, shocks Sarah. To her, the clay courts were sacred grounds, beautiful and idyllic, surrounded as they were by the hilly northern forest, and with a view of the blue lake below the ski jump. She had loved the clay courts then and she did so now, even though they were no longer maintained and had in fact gone to seed. She had loved running across the soft red clay, so smooth and earthy against the tread of her tennis shoes. The red clay of the court connected her to the earth, and gave her an energy to leap through the air after a tennis ball. She knew tennis players criticized clay as being slow, but it was the extra second, that feeling of time happening that she loved; watching the ball cross the court, the sensation of slow motion and an awareness of space, of depth, as the ball moved through the air. She stood still, remembering how it was, how the ball seemed to float through the air toward her racket, floating through the summer air.

Now here she is, standing in the middle of the old clay court of weeds, chamomile and quack grass poking up through little bumps of soil, and Stephen is standing there waiting for her. Morgan rarely waited for her. If she stopped to adjust her shoe he wouldn't notice she had stopped until he got to the car

The Dharma of Duluth

and even then might not notice until he started the engine. He expected the world to follow him, to keep up. Usually she did.

Stephen was left-handed and a good player. Still, she won plenty of games, though rarely a match. She should have taken lessons, should have developed her serve. Realizing those games, those hours on the courts she had loved were perhaps a trial for Stephen and not a counterpart to her own pleasure at all, she feels the skin on the neck hot with embarrassment. She hadn't been good enough. Yet at the same time, she wanted to leap into the air and shout out loud: The clay courts are still here. Yes!

They walk through the gate from the higher court to the lower court.

"I thought you liked the courts, Stephen," she said, still struggling to comprehend his flippant criticism of the courts where they played every day that summer. "I loved these courts," she says quietly, shuffling her feet down to dig her shoes into the clay, to savor the clay, to reconnect with the past. When they reach the lower gate, Stephen steps through and locks the gate with a click of metal on metal. Sarah is locked in.

"Gotcha," he says through the gate.

She laughs and rattles the gate, playing along, but thinking maybe she liked playing tennis better than she liked Stephen. He opens the gate, says it wasn't really locked anyway, which of course she knew. Walking away from the courts toward the lake, they stop at the sound of a loud rhythmic tapping in the vicinity of the caretaker's house, the old warming house where skiers and skaters warm themselves by the wood-burning stove each winter.

Stephen spots it first. A rare pileated woodpecker, tall with a high red-tufted crest. They watch as it hammers away on the wood of a shed behind the warming house.

Gun shots. Two repeats.

Startled, they whirl toward the explosive bang of the shots, followed by the crackly laugh of an old man standing by the side door of the caretaker's lodge.

Konnie Ellis

“Just scared ’em. Damn crazy birds make holes in my shed.”

The old guy walks toward Sarah and Stephen with a rifle slung over his shoulder, humming softly to himself. A thin man, he puts considerable energy and motion into each step, yet his progress is so slow they quickly meet him halfway down the drive.

He squints at Stephen and Sarah. “Birds, spiders, snakes. They all try to get inside. Sign a winter.” He takes a crumpled red handkerchief from his pocket and blows his nose. “Leif Larson, pleased to meet you,” he says, extending a gnarled hand. They introduce themselves.

Sarah asks about the courts as they walk toward the warming house. Leif tells how his brother-in-law used to take care of the courts and rolled them smooth after a rain with a heavy, barrel-sized metal roller. “It’s over there now, that roller is, by the wood pile. Keeps the snow from drifting over the wood. See that stack of birch there?”

“Nice. Fine birch logs,” Sarah notes.

“Well, Jake moved to the cities. Got a job making ice. Some kind of truck he drove back and forth over the ice, making new ice. For the rinks. He liked smoothing things out. My sister said he hated even a little wrinkle in his sheets; he’d get up and tighten the sheets, stretch em real tight, military-like. A bit off, if you ask me. Always was. He could whistle good though. Whew, he was always wanting to get on *A Prairie Home Companion* and do his whistling, but then he died. Just up and died.”

Leif grabbed his gun and aimed back at the shed, but this time he didn’t shoot, just said the word “Bang” and cackled again.

“So, it was nice meeting you Leif,” Stephen nods his head, as Leif’s hands are occupied with the gun.

“Yes, goodbye Leif,” Sarah adds, backing away.

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“Right over there, the road by the lake, right where you’re headed. Three nuns. I shot straight over their heads. They come down from St. Scholastica sometimes. Couple summers ago. I don’t do that anymore. Well, well. Pleased to meet you both. Have a nice day. Real nice day,” Leif stands with the rifle on his shoulder and watches as Sarah and Stephen walk down the dirt road toward Stephen’s car.