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Cold, Hard Water

An explosion of light rips me out of deep sleep. Behind the flash is a deafening boom. The sky sparks again, a fused web of tearing lines. Wind jumps in, straight on from the west, driving hard rain against the house. I crank the window closed but not quickly enough—the bed and I are drenched. I hear tiny pings against the glass.

Damn. I look at the date on the clock, June 8, 2005. Not now.

Maybe if I go back to sleep, I'll find I'm just having a nightmare. I curl into a ball at the foot of the bed and squeeze my eyes tight. If I can't see it, maybe it isn't true. I pinch my ears closed between my forefingers and thumbs. Maybe if I don't hear it. But it just grows louder, harder, and faster.

I sit up and peer out the window trying to see how big it is, but it's completely black outside, then blinding light. The sound is huge now, thumping, bouncing, and rolling off the steel roofs of the outbuildings and echoing between them. Loose metal on equipment is banging and slapping. Small branches are pelting the glass of the window and the wall of the house. I slide out of bed and find Martin standing at the open kitchen door.

Light spills out onto the deck and illuminates the hail. He takes my hand. We would have to shout to talk. The hailstones are hitting the deck and ricocheting, flat three-inch saucers with rough, serrated edges and opaque white centers. I feel a sharp burning on my leg, look down at my calf, and see a long scratch. Blood wells up along the line.

The sound changes from a wide thumping to a hammerhead

pounding, and the hail becomes perfectly clear, smooth balls, as big as a B-size potato. They hit and bounce upward, fall and bounce again. The pounding beats in the thought of everyone and everything exposed to the storm. Laura and Adam in their first year starting out, did they ever think about hail when they were dreaming about farming? The pounding says think: think about the baby birds in their nests with only leaves for a roof. Think about the Hmong family down the road; sometimes they sleep overnight in plywood shacks alongside their vegetable plots. What about the twin fawns that bed down in the bush willows? Are they crying?

A hailstone is just hard, cold water. I love water. I need water. I imagine water flowing and plants drinking. More than half of my body is water. What happens when I am cold and hard? I think about winter and snow and trees sleeping. But this is June and everything is growing. I don't know what purpose hail has.

The deck is completely white now. No wood is showing. I can see Meagan's and Sarah's lights on. Their cabins have metal roofs; the sound inside must be terrifying. I wish they were up here in the safety of the brick house. It is impossible to travel between the homes. I can only wait until it is over.

Martin makes a nest of blankets on the floor, and we crawl into it. His arms are calm strength. I imagine the parent birds with their sheltering wings wrapped around their babies. If only we could together be a shield around our fields. I remind myself that we've survived storms before. I say, "Remember the one-hundred-mile-an-hour, straight-line wind that blew out of Saint Peter?"

We had been doing routine spring work—I was in the greenhouse, Martin was fixing tractors—when it raced in. In just a few short minutes it knocked over four of the biggest bur oaks on the farm, three-hundred-year-old trees that had previously survived prairie fires and lightning strikes. And then it left, just blew out and on east as abruptly as it came.

"Remember July 23, 1987, when it rained eleven inches?" Martin says.

I will never forget that image. The clouds were dense and black and boiling in deep cups shaped like the bottom of an egg carton. We had our heads bent to the ground planting broccoli so we didn't notice it coming until the light changed and Bobby Mueller Junior said, "We're going to get floored." We tried to finish the row, but the rain came down in one solid sheet instead of drops. We had to just leave the equipment in the middle of the field. Everywhere was instantly running mud. We couldn't drive or even see the ground. All we could do was trudge with tiny, careful steps through the muck toward the house, holding hands in a line. We put the kids in the middle. The lightning and thunder were right there, we didn't dare stop, and we were fools to be in it.

That was the storm where I gained a true understanding of the word *saturated*, when soil has absorbed water to its full capacity, and what happens when it simply can't take any more. I wonder what happens when people can't take any more?

"Remember, that broccoli turned out gorgeous," Martin says.

That's true. It was also the last broccoli we harvested off that land, before it was destroyed. It seems so many storms ago now, safe to talk about, but neither of us is willing to talk about this storm. I have a specious superstition that if we pretend the positive, then everything will be fine. As long as we don't verbalize our fears, maybe they aren't true. But I know we are both thinking the same thing: our crops are shredded, we will spend years catching up financially, it is a complete disaster. Or maybe we aren't thinking—just feeling. I can't tell the difference right now.

"Tell me about your hail disaster in the '70s," I say. Maybe there is encouragement in the story. This is an unspoken rule of our relationship; we take turns being the discouraged and the supporter. Only one of us goes down at a time.

"It was 1977, my fifth year farming. I thought I had enough experience and market developed to expand production and take more risk. I went to the Rosemount bank and borrowed $25,000 at 11 percent interest to purchase tractors and equipment. It was the perfect

spring, gentle rains and no late frost, plenty of sun. Everything looked fantastic. Ten days early for the most part. I was just getting into the harvest, had been picking zucchini for a week, the tomatoes were starting to turn pink, when we got hit. The only crops that survived were underground, potatoes, beets, and carrots."

"You must have replanted."

"It was too late in the season. Remember? We paid off that debt in '88 with the drought assistance check." Martin hands me earplugs and adds, "We better get to sleep; the crew will be here early."

He drops right off. I can feel the deep fall and rise of his sleep—breathing against my chest. It used to be the other way around; he was the one who stayed awake thinking about the crops. My mind is stuck repeating the same words. We should have quit last fall. Quit while we were ahead. This is followed with, now we're in the clear for another twenty-five years. Lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place.

But I know that is not true. The big oak in the front yard has been hit seven times. I picture the fields as they were last night on our ritual evening walk. Rows of broccoli and kale with dark green leaves broadly touching in the aisles, fields of sweet corn in different stages, from just emerging—the teeny spike, powerful with the strength of new growth, bursting through the soil—to knee-high plants, melodramatic leaves furling out of the center whirl. It only makes me feel worse.

I decide to think about seeds germinating and visualize the moment when the hypocotyl emerges from the seed coat. I see the radicle shooting down. Then lateral roots with tender white hairs spinning out, searching for water and nutrients. I picture the cotyledon slowly cracking open and the first foliage leaves emerging.

The image changes. I am the seed. My legs become a radicle. My arms spread into laterals. Fine root hairs grow off my limbs. The pounding rain softens the closed kernel of my mind and opens it up into the center of a giant blue sky. Air floods in, opening it more.

My intelligence stretches in the sunshine. Pale green leaves of new understanding sprout above my cotyledon.

And then I am deep—in dreamless sleep.

We both awake as the sunrise is starting. It is absolutely still. There is no rain or hail or wind. The birds are not singing. We lie without moving, eyes locked. Like the truth is in the silence if only we listen, or maybe each other is just the safest place in the world. After a while I gesture my head toward the window. We pull on yesterday's work clothes, walk down the stairs and out the door without shoes. The sky is deep, clean blue and cloudless, brimming with calm and peace. Our kitchen garden is a raised bed, nestled snug against the house. We stand next to it, translating what we see into the scale of destruction that we know is in the fields.

The earth is soggy and beaten, speckled with bits of green leaves and pockmarked with craters where the hail hit. Yesterday a proud line of fresh sweet beets ornamented the garden; all that is left now are ragged sawn-off roots, old-blood red against the black soil. The bed of dense romaine lettuce is shredded; the fleshy cores stand in the center of minced leaves. The Spicy Globe basil is simply gone. Martin grabs the camera, and we move toward the fields.

The top layer of soil is loose, slick mud; underneath, the ground is compacted hard from the driving rain. We keep our balance low and slide our feet instead of step. The first field we come to holds the broccoli and cabbage seedbeds. These are outdoor nurseries where we produce field-grown vegetable transplants. Last night it was a dense, green sea of vibrant leaves, pulsing with life. I was so proud. They are my responsibility and were the best we'd ever grown. Now the seedlings are jammed into the soil in a tangled, muddy mass. I pull out a plant and wipe the mud off on my shirt to look closer, but I can't make out roots from stems, stems from leaves. I can't tell if it's alive or dead. I always knew if we kept farming, sooner or later this was inevitable. We were just gambling as to when.

I try not to think about money, but my mind is making calculations of the harvest we had projected months from today. Two hundred thousand plants, minus 25 percent margin for general field loss, at a very conservative average of a dollar per plant, is somewhere around $150,000 dollars. This is just two crops out of fifty acres of mixed organic vegetable production. I think of my grandmother repeatedly reminding me as a child, "Don't count your chicks before they hatch." I was already banking these, and it's not just the money. People were counting on this food.

Normally, Martin and I vie for who talks the most; we are both passionate and excitable, and silence is rare between us. But we are in a bizarre state, taking in information but not processing it, not drawing conclusions, not making decisions, and not sharing thoughts.

I still don't hear any birds. We slide from field to field. I can see the mud packed like clown-sized clogs on Martin's bare feet and splattered on his legs, but I don't feel it on myself. The sun has risen above the tree line and is throwing long rays of morning light. We come to a field that yesterday hosted tidy rows of bushy, green tomato plants. Now there is a naked chain of three-inch stems, bare of any leaves, a line of short nubs. I realize what feels so surreal. The hail has not only destroyed the foliage, but their shadows have been erased as well.

I dig up a tomato and find the root ball is pulsing thick with fine, white hairs. New lateral roots have sprouted and pushed deep. Above ground there is nothing but a stripped stem, but below, in the soil, they seem very much alive.

We keep moving. The kale as a whole looks battered. The leaves are torn, and many of the centers are gone. They'll grow back, but the leaves will be small, limp, and scattered, not a crisp, round crown perfect for bunching. The cabbage is the same. Where the hail hit the center, the meristem, which would have grown into a main head, is sliced off. Now instead of a big, solid cabbage, these plants will grow only a cluster of loose-leaved chouchou, miniature French delicacies, of no value in our market.

Cabbage is our workhorse, but I didn't realize I was emotionally attached to it. The touch of Martin's hand on the small of my back brings tears to my eyes. He whispers in my ear, "Mon petit chouchou."

Nothing could be more romantic than "You are beautiful my little cabbage," but there is nothing endearing about this hail. I can't take the camera out of its bag. Pictures would make this permanent. I want to be able to forget.

The sweet corn is twisted and pushed into the mud. The leaves are mostly gone. Now it's Martin's turn. I can see many of the plants will recover. He can see only the loss. I dig a plant out of the mud and show him that the core is still intact. "They will stand up and grow again," I say. "In two months you'll be out here harvesting by the truckload." He just stares.

We come to the cucumbers planted inside of slotted row tunnels. The plastic has a few holes punched in it, but for the most part the tunnels and the plants look unscathed, calm and composed. Last winter we spent $5,000 on equipment to lay these tunnels. I argued with Martin when he proposed it. It was an awful lot of money for an implement we would use for one week of the year, even if it would make harvest two weeks longer. But now, first season in use, it has just protected $14,000 worth of crop from destruction. Finding these obvious survivors perks me up. "We'll be swimming in cucumbers."

The crew joins us. I realize they are even more shocked than we are. Their loss as employees is less financial than ours as owners, but they have been working hard all spring. They are emotionally invested. Farming is tactile work, and they made the beginner's assumption that the reward for their efforts would be a bountiful harvest. We've at least experienced crop loss before and knew the gamble. Sooner or later hail of this magnitude was likely to happen. I always say after we finish planting a field, "It will be a gorgeous crop—if it makes it." They always laugh, but I don't think they understood until now. It's not a joke. It isn't real until the food is on the table.

I know in my head that many of the plants will grow back. The

roots are strong. The soil is fertile. I tell myself this can somehow be a positive experience for the crew. But I don't believe it. Right now I just feel like we are hung. It is impossible to make any decisions until we know what will recover. Ideally we'd all just go away for a week; when we returned, things would look so much better, but I need to stick around to water the greenhouse. I tell them, "Take the day off. Go to town and have some fun. I'll call and give you a report."

They just look at me. Everyone hangs around, reading, napping, and taking brief forays into the fields to look again. When we see each other, we laugh and make jokes, then wander off. We aren't comfortable together, but we don't want to be apart.

Meagan and I walk over to see Laura and Adam in their incubator field. We find them holding hands in a bed that was salad mix. Now there is nothing. I look at them and remember Martin and me in the first field we planted together. How proud and accomplished we felt. How in love we were, with each other, with the land, with the plants and the work. I imagine how they must have felt yesterday, before the hail, and how devastated they must feel now. They look at me and open their mouths, but nothing comes out.

"Congratulations, you are real farmers now," I say. "It looks much worse than it is. In a week you'll be amazed. Even this lettuce will grow back. The roots aren't damaged. As long as the growing tips are intact, they will grow new leaves. They'll come back even stronger than before." I'm happy I have them to encourage. I say it all over again because they look like they don't believe me, but really, it's myself I'm trying to convince.

I know this is true. Why can't I feel it? Why don't I believe it?

Maybe helping them see the humor in it would help. "Do you know the Mark Twain quote?" I ask. They don't respond. " 'Everyone talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it.' " Just deadpan. "Hail is like a thief in the night—stealing without warning. But unlike a quiet thief, this one rolled in with full announcement."

Meagan says, "I can tell when you are stressed, you laugh a lot."

"Gallows humor," I say.

This is just wrong. June is supposed to be bursting green and lush, the bounty of the universe in full evidence. This is squalor and violence. Instead of spring-fresh, the air is a stench of decay and rot. I can intellectualize. No one is hurt. We won't starve, go broke, or lose the farm. Many plants will recover. But when I stop distracting myself and notice how I feel, I am vulnerable and exposed, like I have been beaten by a merciless sky and left to survive on my own wits. I know this is just emotion, but I feel completely isolated despite so much support. I look for reality. I know it's out there somewhere. I can't see it. I don't understand the purpose. Maybe there is none. Maybe hail just exists.

A few days later we are working on wagons outside the greenhouse, reseeding broccoli plants to replace the hail loss. "Hey, the birds stopped singing," Meagan says.

I look up. The tree leaves are hanging limp. "It's really still."

"Too still," Sarah says.

The sky looks fine, blue with a few puffy, white clouds. We keep seeding. Then Meagan points and says in a low, slow voice, "Look—west."

A dark, black mass is foaming over the edge of the western horizon. Within minutes the sky is split. Half is brilliant blue, a glorious June day. The other half is dense, airless black, like a curfew curtain, blocking all light and racing toward us. Day switches to dusk as the face of the cloud hits with an explosion. Flats leap off the wagon, spew soil in our faces, and disappear on the wind. The greenhouse plastic snaps violently.

Racing toward us across the neighbor's field is . . . I don't know what it is. It looks like a vertical black wall. We duck behind the wagon as it slams us, a barrage of spinning, pelting, cutting soil. As quick as it hits, it's past, a narrow wall of dirt, racing across the fields.

But the wind doesn't leave with it. It's screaming, a howling tempest. I fix my eyes on the Oak and pray. Please don't take the Oak.

Anything but. We can buy another house, sheds, and tools. We can't buy a three-hundred-year-old oak. Please.

Sarah shouts, "God! It's a twister coming!"

I grab the wagon tongue to steer while Meagan pushes. Sarah throws the pack shed door open, then shuts it as soon as the wagon of transplants is in. We are being battered with sticks and grit; the wind is whipping our hair in our faces. It takes all our focus to stay on our feet. We have no caution for ourselves. There is only the immediate task, the plants and farm to be protected.

We push the last wagon in, and the wind drops to dead still. The cloud blows off, and the light returns. Not a drop of rain. The whole thing didn't last more than five, six minutes. Beyond a few things flying off, I don't think anything is even damaged.

We each go off in different directions to recover alone. I don't know which end is up, if my roots are down, or even in.

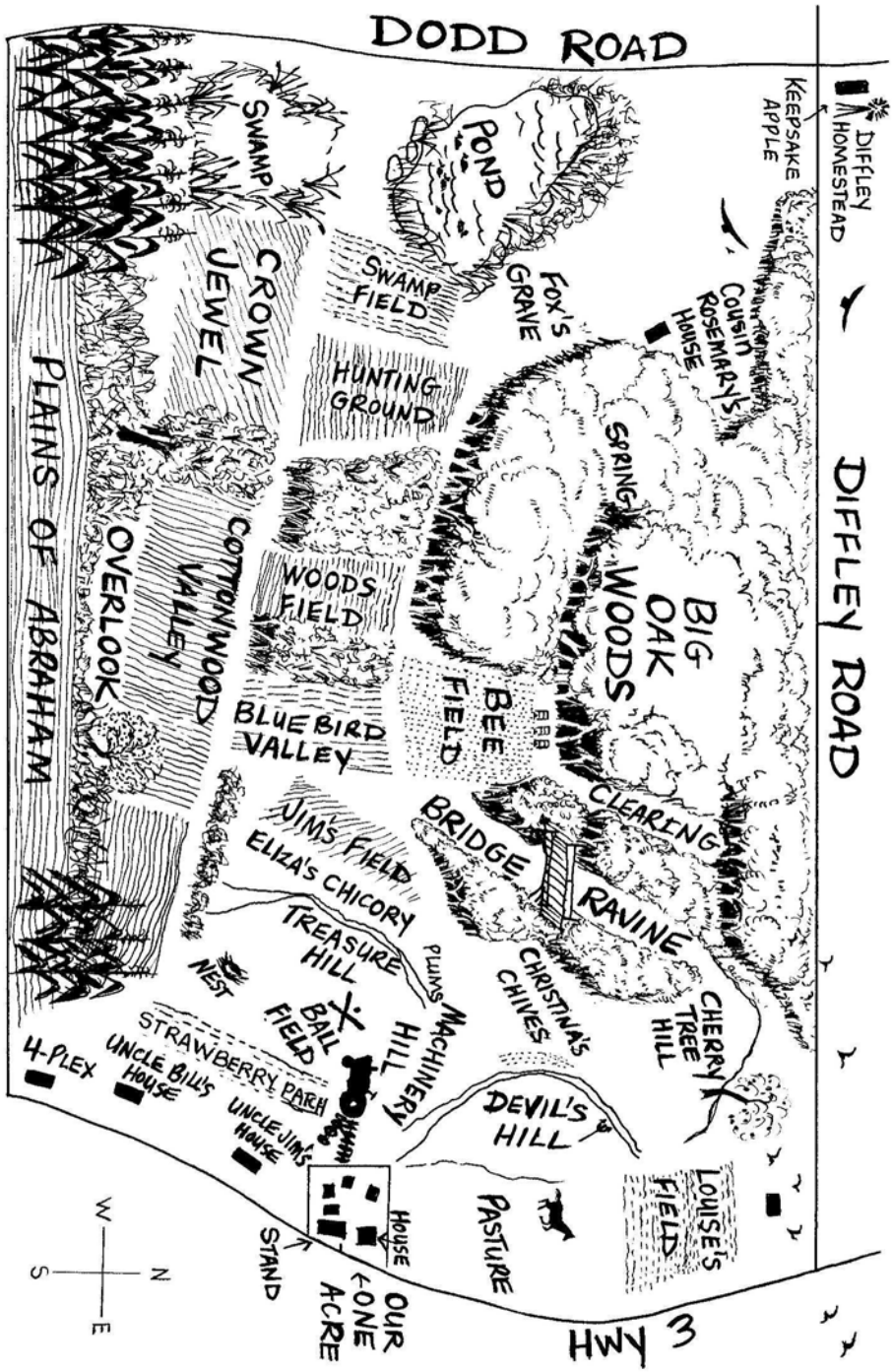
All spring I have been showing the crew roots in the greenhouse. "Lush, verdant tops are pretty, but it is the roots that count. If you have outstanding roots, you'll have healthy plants and high yields." Now these roots are being tested. They are the only thing that can pull these crops through, and it's not just the plants.

I think about my own roots. A line of women sprout in a garden row: my mother squatting between vegetables, weeding; behind her my grandmother, forking hay to draft horses; then great-grandma on a wooden kitchen chair, her misshapen feet soaking in a basin of hot water. They continue in a chain, this generational sequence of strong women who gave birth in succession. Women who nurtured and fed life. Women who grew and prepared food.

Not only their lives but also their losses are evident. The challenges they endured. It is an endlessly long row to hoe. I recognize square shoulders on some, muscular thighs on others, a certain stubborn set of jaw, short, sturdy bodies, and wide hips. Some have brown hair and brown eyes, others are blonde and blue, many are gray and stooped. But all of them are familiar. All of them I appreciate as parts of myself.

It is in their hands that they are every one and all the same. Their hands are my hands, small, experienced, strong. The old ones are heavily veined and marked with spots. A few are missing fingertips. There are scars. The young have smooth skin but calloused palms. They reach out with no hesitation. They know what they are looking for, and they know what they are doing. I look at my own hands. I grew up, and they didn't. They are surprisingly sturdy for as delicate as they look.

It doesn't take long before it comes to me. Lots of bad things have happened in my life, and I've always recovered, always come back even stronger. My roots are deep in fertile soil. It won't be the first time they'll pull me through. Somehow I just have to remember this.



The fifth-generation Diffley family land in Eagan, Minnesota, circa 1985.

My Name Is Tina

My earliest memories are in the garden. Some people say the kitchen is the hearth of their family, and ours is important, but it is between the lettuce and carrots that my mother is most free.

Our spring ritual is following Dad, our feet bare, stepping into his big prints as he steers the rototiller. Birds hop around us pulling worms. Fresh earth spills the first smells of life. He is whistling, happy in his temporary role as family yeoman. Even Mom takes her shoes off and drops her winter cloak of serious. I assume this is how the world works, how people live. Everyone grows plants to eat.

My name is Tina. Not Christina as some people think. My brothers call me Tienie Wienie, and when my mom is mad, she shouts Tinamarie—in one fast word. But really, it's just four letters—tiny, like I feel—Tina. I'm the fourth child of six and in the first grade. We live in a Wisconsin hamlet with a lilac hedge, pear trees, and a catalpa with honey-tipped, orchidlike blossoms. The kitchen garden is out back. Just down the road, across from the church, my parents have a bigger garden where we grow sweet corn and winter squash.

I love elderberries. They grow wild under the trees next to the fields. When I wake up in spring, I smell the flowers before I even open my eyes. When they come ripe, my little sister and I snap them off the bushes and help Mom make jam. I can put one berry in my cheek and keep it there, giving taste, all the way from lunch until supper.

My favorite thing in the whole wide world is rain. When I sense it coming, I go out to the field behind the lilacs, lie faceup on the open