Welcome to Pennacook

HARD TO BELIEVE IT HAD BEEN FIVE YEARS SINCE the crash. Ray hadn't needed the BAC test to guess who had caused it, or what. In the immediate aftermath, DCF plopped Patrick with a kindly foster family, the Rosenbaums of Waltham, who gave him a new clarinet and a Star of David necklace that he wore ever after. Ray had just turned 18, and he made a decision that felt both rash and fated: he withdrew his pending college applications so he could take care of Patrick, who was then only 11, through the rest of his childhood. He quietly wrapped up high school that spring and bade farewell to his friends, mostly honors kids who in the fall would disperse to the country's four corners. His grief made it awkward, and that summer they mostly avoided him. By mid-August the death benefit on Mom and Dad came through, but they sold the mortgaged house at a loss and that consumed the bulk of the death benefit. Finally, in October, he packed up the Buick and pulled out of the driveway in Dunstable for the very last time.

He stopped by Waltham to check in on Patrick and play catch on the Rosenbaums' lawn.

"This, little brother, is going to be the shortest, strangest episode of your life."

"Shortest" was a promise he'd made to himself, to get Patrick back as soon as possible. By "strangest" he meant being a foster kid. He whipped the baseball at Patrick. It landed in his glove with a snap.

"I'm fine," Patrick said. "It's nice."

Patrick threw a wild one and Ray chased it down the road. He knew from the Rosenbaums that there was more to this story. But since he didn't know what to say, he copied Patrick and acted stoic.

He crisscrossed the state looking for a cheap, new town with schools that Mom would've called "halfway decent," a job for himself, and not so many reminders of all they had lost—lost, and in the case of Dad, escaped. He was living in his car and in roadside

motels, eating canned food for dinner and cheap pastries for breakfast. His days began early, when the sun was enshrouded in mist and diner lights were popping aglow for the morning crowd. He picked up coffee at gas-station convenience stores, and it sent icy jitters through his blood as he waited for the Buick to warm up. The Buick rolled through hills and valleys, and Ray found that he was enchanted, for the first time since he'd been a young kid, by the autumn colors and the smell of burning leaves. Gliding off an exit to another old mill town, he felt a very broad affection rise up inside of him, like a person who has returned to a native land after many months among foreigners. Things that had been only background—a chain restaurant, a postal jeep, a river running through a town center—suddenly became beautiful and hopeful to him. His burdens greater than ever, he somehow felt relieved, as if he'd decided to lower his ambitions.

But one Friday during Indian summer he made the regrettable decision to sleep in the car in a woodsy roadside spot in East Sturbridge just as the raucous parking lot of King Henry's Faire emptied out. Goths on Harleys, rowdies in pickups, scandalized families in sputtering sedans: each in turn paraded behind Ray as he attempted to sleep and gagged on the fumes. The next morning his lower-back muscles had some kind of bruising that would not be denied and he was all out of food and cash. He rose up from his blankets—only to lock eyes with ruddy King Henry himself. The King spanned an entire highway billboard, flaunting his smoked goose leg with the giant splintering tendons as if to hector Ray personally for his predicament. Unexpectedly, even disappointingly, the King's gruesome ad made no usage or punctuation errors for Ray to deflate. Mom, an English teacher who gave Ray his faith in words and books, had loved that snoot's game.

Back north, Pennacook didn't even make his good-schools list. But the state road was convenient enough, ran right up to the town center in fact, and a magazine said the place "could have potential." Somewhere between an orange-juice spill on his map and envying King Henry his dripping royal drumstick, he decided to give the small town a chance.

At first there didn't seem to be much work for the likes of Ray. What they'd soon call the Great Recession had just unmasked itself to the world, but it seemed to have gotten a head start here. He parked the Buick and walked the mall's length. The Pennacook Mall was dying, a caged-up, ribbed-concrete monstrosity with drained fountains, two feuding anchor stores—both part of larger chains plunging into bankruptcy (a fact their sales posters touted)—and nothing but one pizzeria between them to spice the shadowy air. Back in the car, he crossed over to Worcester Road and passed three Chinese restaurants and Jack's Four Lounge (additional Chinese restaurant? No, the little sign said: eighteen-and-over strip club that served only juice). Farther down he drove by a pine-doored cave called The Penalty Box, a bar. There were very few help-wanted ads in windows and plenty of helpless-looking able-bodied men walking around alone, some with their heads aimed skyward. Outside a gas station a kid in overalls stared into space like a figure in a Hopper painting. The women seemed to have gone into hiding. He cranked the window: the *air* was stale, a sneaker bouquet.

Town center held more promise. The Truble Cove Plaza and its optimistically immense parking lot interrupted a long line of dilapidated grand colonials, once inhabited, as Ray would later learn, by the pig-farm kings of Pennacook's heyday. Ray slammed the brakes for crossing boars and scoped out the plaza. He noted a large, well-lit supermarket, two restaurants (at least one of them Chinese), a ghostly storefront labeled only "T.A.P.S.," and a hardware store. A converted Pizza Hut at one end of the lot served as the Pennacook Walk-In, a medical clinic. In the hardware store a bearded, sleepy-eyed clerk pondering a German X-rated comic book said the store was going out of business, but he pointed Ray a couple of doors down to the supermarket, one of two Bounty Bags in town. Also in Pennacook, the chain's main warehouse was full up, but the large store in this plaza always needed an early-morning guy to set up the deli, a "real trouble spot," and they were willing to pay a premium for someone who actually showed up dry for the gig.

The clerk sized up Ray and elaborated, a little mysteriously, "It's a chain with a certain appeal for—how shall I put it? A person in need. Loyal in a crisis. Catch my drift?"

Ray didn't but nodded anyway.

"Owns half the town," the clerk added. He tilted his head. "More than half, actually."

Or, he continued, Ray could sub at Andrew Johnson High, just across the river. He sat up on his stool, visibly warming to his advisory role. "That is, if you're a thinking man." He looked Ray over again. "Or boy."

He tapped his temple with an index finger, licked it, then, as if for Ray's further enlightenment, used it to flick to the next page of his comic book where three nude blondes with red lips flared up grinning. In the real world their ballooned-out cartoon proportions would have tipped them over. Then, much like the men on the street and the Hopper figure at the gas station, the clerk leaned back and gazed out the window to space, as though some fantastical object (alien saucer? bamboo airship?) hovered overhead.

"What are you staring at?"

"The sky."

"Why?"

"In case it falls."

"What are you going to do then?"

The clerk shrugged. "Duck, I suppose. Hope it doesn't go down all the way."

For a flashing moment Ray saw the words emblazoned on a sign at the town's border, as if written just for him. "Welcome to Pennacook! *Duck and Hope*."

But the clerk was right about the teeming supermarket. They took him right in.

"You look hungry," observed Stan Martini, the chipper store manager, eyeing him with a curiosity that seemed to extend beyond Ray's appetite. "Tell you what. I'll throw in a ham sandwich."

"Deal."

They shook on it, and with the solemnity of a childhood bonding ritual, Stan presented Ray with a maroon-and-white Bounty Bag clip-on tie. Stan was surprisingly young, had about a decade on Ray, who knew from the first they'd be friends of a sort. Ray folded the tie neatly, hatching a new vision of himself as a dedicated supermarket guy.

The next day he turned down a shabby tract-house rental, settling instead on a Rockport Lite Cruiser. "The Rock," as Patrick later dubbed it, was a travel trailer that Ray could buy outright for $18,900 of insurance money, nearly the last of it. It was powered by propane and replete with queen bed, double bunks, kitchenette, booth, and shower-bath. They moved it right into a lot at the Liberty Mobile Home Park in Pennacook's Oakhurst neighborhood. The Rock was the only trailer in Liberty. The other units were mobile homes, most of them double-wides, laid out neatly in a grid. Liberty proved a friendly neighborhood where people walked around and had events and kept tidy yards. The Rock was technically hitch-able to the Buick for regional excursions, and in a moment of very low self-knowledge he had purchased it in part for that very feature. But The Rock went nowhere, inspiring Patrick's nickname.

Little had changed since they moved to town, except for one thing that he'd noticed. Instead of staring up to the sky, Pennies were more likely to be found looking down at their devices.