

Joshua Harmon

From *Quinnehtukqut*

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That July day the feet of men and women crushed the paper-dry yellow grass to powder, and everywhere was dust—dust coating shoes and hems and cuffs, dust rimming fingernails and settling in throats, dust chalking the corners of mouths. Her head half-turned, a woman coughed behind a fist. The horses' hooves and the wagon wheels lifted great clouds of dust which hung in the windless air. Dust whitened the least leaf or pebble. Cicadas competed from the fading foliage. The girl's hand found her mother's; her fingers laced her mother's thumb. Stones and tall men cast the only shade on the barren hilltop and sweat shone on lips and temples. Darkened the hollow between shoulderblades of the men who'd removed their coats and stood, hands on hips, looking at that sparse grass and the pale earth it rose from. The river—even low, its banks cracked mud—gave a sound through the trees. A hawk circled in the sky, though that blue was too bright to look into long. And was not even blue, but a blue that faded into a white haze, a color too faint to notice. Even along the river the corn was starved and skinny, the stalks drooping or dragging limp leaves on the ground. From the woods rose plumes of smoke where dry needles and ferns smoldered, and each day men dug trenches to ring barns and houses—that parched earth lifted shovelful by shovelful, metal ringing on buried stones. Windy Williams sat in the line of shade at Baldwin's store and remarked to anyone happening by that his shoulder ached, an ache he said foretold far-off rain despite the troubling sky. It would be an overnight rain, he said, a drizzle by dusk turning into a downpour on tin roofs to keep the town awake all through the night—to swell the streams and the river by morning. Kill a beetle and it will surely rain. When the swallows fly low over the meadows, it is a sign of rain. By the girl's count it was thirty-four days and the last rain little more than a heavy dew. Each night he had coughed into a porcelain basin, each cough lifting him from the pillow. His hair lay damp, wicked to his forehead. She had stirred honey into

hot water, made him drink before the red-gold coils settled to the bottom of the glass. The windows were closed and the curtains drawn. In the mornings Charlie Chase milked the cows and she tended the horses—their warm breath on her hands, their sidelong eyes as she unlatched the stall door; that oaty reek. She filled the bags with feed, brushed coats, lifted hooves for rocks she prised loose with a blunted blade. Those moments before the sun climbed above the trees she imagined each day would be overcast, that she would not have to squint against the day's increasing light, would not have to tie back her hair and at night peel her damp dress from her skin. The trees at the far end of the pasture would fade, trunks black, in indistinct light, low clouds, needles of rain. Now she squeezed her mother's hand and did not look at the sky. Here came Mr Currier and his wife and sons over the rise, beating the dust before their feet. It was not the dry spell. No. It was not. Even if it had been pouring down buckets every day, her mother said. Even if we'd had to roost in the spruce to keep our feet dry from the rising waters. It is nothing we can place blame on, only something we must accept. She tried not to breathe the dust that stirred and then settled every time she moved, pressing a corner of her scarf over her nose and mouth. Her father had drawn a map when he'd returned. Each night he lit a lamp and sat at the kitchen table; she heard the pencil scratch on the paper, the faint snick of his pocketknife sharpening its point. Every place he named she could not say until he repeated it several times. Even then she hesitated.