

Fiction

Outcomes

By [Nathan Blum](#) October 26, 2025



On his first day back at Winslow College’s climbing wall after the long winter break, Nolan checks the belay sign-up sheet and sees that someone named Heidi Lane has written her name in the seven-o’clock slot every weeknight for the entire month of January.

Sure enough, at seven exactly, a short, narrow-nosed girl with a shiny brown bob hustles in through the gym’s double doors. She’s wearing bluejeans and duck boots and fuzzy white earmuffs around her neck like headphones.

“I made a New Year’s resolution,” she says. “This is going to be my new thing.”

“Some people find it hard to climb in jeans,” Nolan says.

“I do everything in jeans.”

“What else do you do?”

“Like, besides school? Nothing. That’s why I made this resolution.”

In the gear room, there’s a harness and a pair of climbing shoes meant for older children. They fit Heidi perfectly. While he tightens her waist strap, she lifts her

elbows and stares right at him, unlike most new climbers, who tend to look up or off to the side.

“All right,” she says, waddling toward the wall. “How does this work?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re saying I just go. I just get on up there.”

“Some people try to stay on certain routes. That’s what those colored strips of tape are for, next to the holds. But, for now, maybe just use any holds you want. That’s called the all-you-can-eat buffet.”

She starts fast, faster than he would have advised, and with a kind of right-left rhythm. There’s something Spider-Mannish about it, and he wonders if maybe that’s what she’s thinking of.

She’s about twenty feet above him when her left hand slips from a crimp and she falls back. Distracted by his thoughts, he’s less ready for it than he should be. There’s some slack in the rope.

Her scream is surprisingly low-pitched, almost gruff. He clenches his bottom hand and braces himself. She drops about two feet before the rope goes taut and her shoulder smacks against the wall.

A hot shame flushes through him as he watches her kick around for a foothold. It was a small error on his part, but he knows that first climbs are important and there’s a good chance she’ll be looking for a new New Year’s resolution.

“How do I get down?” she asks.

“I’m really sorry about that,” he says.

“How do I get down?”

“You don’t have to come down if you don’t want. You can keep going up.”

“I want to come down.”

“All right. Just lean back and I’ll lower you.”

“No fucking way I’m leaning back.”

He pulls the rope tighter with one hand and draws the slack through with the other.

“Feel that? I’m holding you.”

“I don’t even know you.”

“I’m Nolan,” he says. “I’m a freshman. I’m from around here.”

“Like, Winslow the town?”

“China. One town over.”

“I’ve seen signs for that,” she says.

Finally, she sits back in her harness and removes her small, bony hands from the holds. He lowers her as steadily as he can.

Once her feet touch the ground, she stands completely still, facing the wall. She stays like that for a while.

When she turns to him she has a strange look on her face.

“That was my bad,” he says.

“No, this is good,” she says. “This is great. This is why I came. This is what it’s about.”

“That’s called a whipper. When you slam into the wall like that.”

She looks up at the little bell hanging from the ceiling. He looks up at it, too, because he doesn’t know where else to look.

“I have lived a very horizontal life,” she says.

He thinks about this for a moment. “I guess we all do.”

She walks toward him, dragging the rope behind her, and raises her arms. “Now take this shit off me,” she says.

He carries the equipment back into the gear room and takes his time spraying the shoes with deodorizer. He assumes she’ll be gone by the time he’s done.

Instead, she’s standing a few feet from the doorway, waiting for him.

“Do you know who’s belaying tomorrow night?” she asks.

“Me,” he says.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Sounds good,” he says.

An hour later, Joe Rollo, whom everyone calls Trainer Joe, comes around to lock up. In the summers, Trainer Joe runs Winslow’s youth-sports camp, where Nolan has worked as a counsellor for the past three seasons. Before Nolan’s senior year in high school, Trainer Joe told him that if he got a scholarship to Winslow he’d approve him for the maximum number of work-study hours at the rec center, and he kept his word.

“Closing time,” Trainer Joe says. “I hereby order you to vacate the premises. Fail to comply and I’ll have to report you to the rec-center supervisor.”

Trainer Joe played defensive end at Orono. When they first met, Nolan was intimidated by the way Joe’s muscles bulged beneath his golf shirts. Then, one day, Nolan saw him put a Band-Aid on a little girl’s elbow. She had fallen on grass; there was no wound. Still, Trainer Joe deftly peeled the Band-Aid from its wrapper and smoothed it against her skin.

“Tell the supervisor to drive safe,” Nolan says. “That rain’s probably frozen by now.”

“I’ll be sure to let him know,” Trainer Joe says.

Soon it's completely dark and the rec center is lit only by the murky green haze of the emergency lights. Nolan boulders around for a little while. When he feels himself getting tired, he drags the big blue bouldering mat into the gear room and closes the door behind him.

Instantly, he is plunged into total darkness. He fumbles around for the battery-powered lantern hanging from the nearest hook and turns it on. The room sways in the tinny, blanched light.

He drags the mat to the far corner of the room. Then he pulls the bungeed-up sleeping bag from its cubby and unrolls it and lays it out on the mat.

He has a bed in his dorm room, but it's all the way across campus and his two roommates, who are both from Vermont, have turned the place into a kind of all-night weed-smoking den with an open-door policy. He knows he could drive home, too, if he wanted. His house, his childhood bedroom, is ten minutes down China Road. His parents and two younger sisters would be happy to see him.

But he likes it there, in the gear room. He has always felt a little uncomfortable out in the regular world. In the back of his mind, he is always waiting for the time of day when he can be completely alone, reading or doing his homework or something. Every winter, his family pulls a small wooden ice-fishing hut onto Togus Pond; he'll get up early just to be in there. The one window is usually covered with a thick blanket to keep the heat in. He likes to sit in front of the stove, drinking coffee from a thermos and watching the algae-green glow come up from the holes in the ice. Knowing that for the next however many hours he'll be alone, setting the hooks and dropping the lines and generally doing everything exactly the way he wants to, exactly the way he was taught.

He turns off the lantern. In the pitch dark, he takes off his pants and crawls into the sleeping bag. Slowly, his eyes adjust, and he can see the dim green line under the door. Lying there, he wonders if he should have come up with his own New Year's resolution. But he doesn't know what it would be. Sure, he could try to change something about himself. But he's not sure that changing anything would change anything. He has never really understood how people become who they become. For the most part, it seems like there's not much you can do, and things just happen. He has a feeling that Heidi Lane would disagree with him.

The next night, she wears leggings and makes it to the top. She rings the little bell with a kind of rage. As soon as she touches down, she wants to go up again. Her face is red and her arms glisten. He offers her a pinch of chalk from his pouch.

“Looks like cocaine,” she says, peering in.

“It’s to keep your hands dry,” he says. He has never seen cocaine.

On Wednesday, she does three laps. On Thursday, she does the green route. He learns that she’s a senior, which surprises him, and that she’s an economics major, which, for some reason, doesn’t surprise him. He gets the sense that she lives a busy, high-stress life filled with exams and reports and interviews, and that she will live that way forever.

“I’d like to be classified as an intermediate,” she says on Friday, as she steps out of her harness.

“I’ll take it up with the committee,” he says.

“My forearms are killing me. Look. I swear I didn’t use to have these bulges.”

“I see them.”

She looks him right in the eyes. He has a hard time reading her expression, but he feels that there’s something he’s supposed to be reading. If only he could look at her for long enough, he might be able to figure it out. But it’s difficult to look at her because she’s looking at him.

“You’re pretty good at this,” she says, and by the time he thinks to ask her what she means she’s halfway across the gym, moving toward the double doors with the smooth speed of someone who knows exactly where she’s headed.

He goes home for the weekend. On Saturday night, his sisters have a basketball game. They’re both on varsity. A senior and a sophomore. It seems strange, almost

wrong, that they are so old. He used to play two-on-one in the driveway with them. He never went easy on them. At first, that was because they would giggle louder if he was really trying. Then it was because they got too good. The backboard was made of old, waterlogged wood, so, no matter how hard you shot the ball, if you hit the right spot, it would bank softly into the hoop.

Now they're both being recruited to play at Orono or maybe even somewhere out of state.

Before the game starts, a few of his old teachers and some parents of his friends come up to him and ask how college is going. Every year, one senior from China High receives the William C. Bergill Scholarship from Winslow College, and last year it was him. Nolan had his picture in the *Kennebec Current* and was given a round of applause during graduation.

"Going really well," he says.

He sits with his parents near the top of the bleachers. Since China is playing Winslow Academy, some of his mother's former students are there. She teaches second grade to all the professors' kids at the elementary school near campus. When they see her, their eyes go wide, and then they blush and turn away, as if she were an ex-lover. She smiles and says their names, though it's too loud in the gym for anyone but Nolan to hear her. He has never understood how she can remember so many names.

His father is the chair of the social-studies department at a private high school outside Augusta. Here, though, he is just a dad. He even stands up and complains that the refs aren't calling fouls on the Winslow girls.

"They have enough going for them as it is," he says when he sits back down.

For some reason, Nolan has a hard time focussing on the game. He's watching, but he's not really taking anything in. Soon the halftime buzzer goes off and all the players sit on the white plastic folding chairs lined up alongside the court.

"Tell us something about school," his mother says.

“Yes, great idea,” his father says, tapping him on the knee. “How are those neo-bohemian roommates?”

Nolan looks at the scoreboard. China is up four. Yet somehow he knows, he is certain, that they are going to lose.

“Honestly, I don’t see them very much,” he says. “I’ve been spending a lot of time at the wall.”

On Monday, he gets there a little early and asks Trainer Joe to belay him while he tapes up a new route. Before he clips in, he tears a bunch of strips from the roll of yellow tape and sticks them to the belt of his harness.

“My daughter’s got one of those,” Trainer Joe says, pointing to Nolan’s waist. “A tutu.”

When Nolan gets down, he pastes one more yellow strip at eye level and writes “heidi’s lane” across it with a black Sharpie.

While he waits for her, he sits on the blue mat and reads an article for his education class titled “Self-Fulfilling Prophecies in the American Classroom.” Apparently, studies show that teachers’ assumptions about students have a bigger effect on their outcomes than the students’ effort or intelligence does. So, if teachers have preconceptions or doubts or subconscious biases, it could be those very preconceptions or doubts or biases that end up proving them right.

“Solution = assume every single student has incredible potential,” Nolan writes in the margin. He knows it’s probably not that simple. But part of him believes that it wouldn’t be all that hard to look at a classroom full of kids and tell himself, over and over if he had to, that they were going to turn out great.

He watches the double doors for a while. A group of guys from the football team file in and head toward the locker rooms. They’re all wearing the same gray-green zip-ups, and most of them have mustaches. They look startlingly like sea lions. He has never actually seen a sea lion, but he has seen harbor seals.

He checks the time.

Last week, Heidi showed up every night exactly at seven.

At eight-fifteen, when she still hasn't appeared, he puts her harness back on its hook, surprised, more than anything, at the sting of the disappointment coursing through him.

The next day, when he arrives for his shift at the wall, Heidi is already there, sitting cross-legged on the mat.

"I had presentation prep last night," she says, standing.

He feels his heart beating in his chest. "How'd it go?"

"I'm a strong public speaker."

"I believe you."

"I saw the new route," she says, looking at him. He sees a flash of acknowledgment in her eyes. As if she were now sure of something.

She has a little trouble with the sloper near the top, but eventually she clears it and rings the bell. As he lowers her down, she kicks and swings from the wall like a seasoned spelunker.

"It's starting to snow," she says, pointing her small, sharp chin toward the window.

"About time," he says.

"How late do you usually stay here?"

"Late."

"How late?" She unclips and faces him.

They stand like that for a while, looking at each other. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Trainer Joe leaving through the double doors in his big puffy coat.

“Some nights I sleep here,” he hears himself say.

She nods. “You know, I had a feeling.”

He opens the door to the gear room and clicks on the lantern. She slides past him. In the corner are the wrinkled sleeping bag and the green Winslow hoodie he’s been using as a pillow.

“Just on the ground like that?”

“I bring in the mat.”

“Show me.”

She stays with him that night. He doesn’t admit that he’s a virgin, but he has a feeling she can tell. From the beginning, she gives him clear instructions about where and how to touch her. At one point, she grabs his hand and says, “Try there,” and he remembers saying pretty much the same thing to her when she was up on the wall. With the lamp off, it’s very dark, almost too dark. He has to turn it back on so she can fish a condom out of her wallet. When he turns it off again, he can’t see a thing. He finds her shoulders, which are small and smooth and spherical, like baseballs, and moves on from there. The mat compresses under their weight, and he keeps having to shift around and change angles. “Yes, yes,” she says quietly into his ear, and this positive reinforcement is what brings him to the end.

“See?” she says afterward. “The horizontal life can be nice.”

“Thank you,” he says, because that is all he can think to say.

“Now where’s the bathroom in this place?”

“Out by the treadmills,” he says.

Later that week, he shows her how to belay. He demonstrates feeding the slack through the device, always keeping at least one hand on the rope. She's skeptical at first and asks questions only in the hypothetical.

"Let's say you're up on the wall, and I'm down here belaying you like this."

"That's what's going to happen," he says. "Like, in two minutes."

"What if today was just a theory day?"

"Today is a do day."

"What if you fall? What if you land on your head? Or on a plexus?"

"I'm not going to fall. You'll be holding me."

"But you weigh more than me. So, if you go down, I'm going up. That's just physics."

He lifts the anchor line from the floor and clips it to her harness. "Now you weigh as much as a building."

"My dream come true," she says.

He clears Heidi's Lane without a hitch. Then, cheek on the ceiling, he asks if she's ready to lower him. She says she doesn't know. He leans back and lifts his hands.

"What's a plexus?" he asks when his toes touch the ground.

On Friday, she stays with him past closing again. This time, as they sink down into the darkness of the gear room, his excitement becomes almost too much to bear. It's a kind of pain. She laughs at his urgency.

"Slow down," she says.

Afterward, as they lie in the dark, he feels a different kind of affection wash over him, something deeper and quieter, almost ominous. He wants to tell her, to express, in some way, what he is feeling. But he can't find the words.

She sits up. "You have a car, right?"

"Yeah."

"I want to learn how to drive."

"You don't know how to drive?"

"I'm from Manhattan," she says, as if that's all he needs to know.

On Sunday, he drives them through China and heads south on Route 202. They pass all three of his old schools, one after the other, in opposite order: high, middle, elementary. For some reason, the buildings look unfamiliar to him. As if he were seeing them through her eyes.

"Now I can say I've driven across China," she says.

"There's also a Denmark," he tells her. "And a Norway. And a Poland. And an Egypt. My dad makes his students do this thing where they compare and contrast the real place with the one in Maine."

"So your dad's a teacher?"

"My mom is, too. There's also a Paris."

"The whole world is here," she says.

He pulls into the parking lot behind the town hall and they switch places. The lot is empty and bordered on three sides by mounds of blackened snow.

Soon, she is driving around in slow, oblong loops like a skater alone on the ice. The sun is low and almost bloody. She stares straight ahead, both hands on the wheel, humming to herself. He feels as if he were watching her from somewhere else, or from far in the future, living in a kind of memory.

When the sun goes down, they get out and meet each other in the back seat. This time, the same wild need comes back, but he does his best not to let it take over. At one point, he has to reach across the center console to turn down the heat. He understands that, from now on, every time he gets into his car, he will think of this night.

“So how did I do?” she asks later. “With the driving.”

“Really good.”

“That’s it?”

“You’re a fast learner,” he says. “But I knew that already.”

“I guess now I have to find another thing to teach you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I feel like that’s sort of what’s going on here,” she says.

In February, Heidi can climb only a couple of nights a week. She’s working on her honors thesis, something that’s optional at Winslow.

“In my mind, ‘optional’ usually means ‘mandatory,’ ” she says.

“I’ve noticed that,” he says.

One night, he meets her at the library after his shift. He finds her at a long wooden table on the second floor with a thermos of tea and a bag of popcorn. He sits across from her and takes out his folder and notebook and tries to get some work done, but it’s impossible to focus with her there. He’s supposed to be doing research for a paper about the effect of school start times on student outcomes. Everything, it seems, has an effect on student outcomes. Instead of reading through the materials, he keeps looking up to watch Heidi sip and chew and turn pages and write tiny, straight letters in her spiral notebook.

Eventually, she raises her eyebrows at him.

“What’s your thesis about?” he asks.

“I’m looking at the factors that keep people from investing their money. And what can be done to change their minds.”

“Why do we need to change their minds?”

“Because it’s mainly rich people who are taking advantage of the market. They know that if you do it the right way you make money. So they’re getting richer and everyone else is losing out.”

“And what’s the right way?”

“You put as much as you can in a moderately aggressive mutual fund and you let it sit for thirty years.”

“Get rich slow.”

“Exactly. It’s unsexy but it’s the truth.”

“And how much better is that than just having it in a regular bank account?”

She tilts her head at him. “A lot better.”

“Interesting,” he says.

That Saturday, Heidi drives them to the KeyBank in downtown Waterville. She goes about fifteen under the speed limit the whole way but otherwise does everything right.

“So, you have almost no expenses,” she says, pausing at a stop sign for the full three seconds. “And you’ll be working at the rec center around twenty hours a week for the next three and a half years.”

“I’ll probably keep doing the day camp over the summers, too,” he says. “What I have now is mainly from that. And from shovelling snow.”

“You have savings from shovelling snow?”

He looks out the window. “There was a lot of snow.”

He has never really spoken to anyone about money before. When he was growing up, his parents used to refer to money as “doll hairs.” Once, when he was little, he asked them why the big houses on Togus Pond were occupied only in the summer. “Because some people have a lot of doll hairs,” his mother said.

The meeting with the financial adviser takes twenty-five minutes. In addition to opening an investment account, Nolan signs up for a credit card.

“I’ve always wondered what those little glass rooms in the bank were for,” he says afterward.

As Heidi drives them back toward campus, he skims through the documents in his new KeyBank folder. What shocks him most are the ten-, twenty-, and thirty-year projections. It’s not just the estimated amounts but the dates themselves. The years. They seem fake. The idea that what he has done today will serve some other, older version of him, someone he doesn’t yet know, stirs up a kind of dread. It’s not so much the feeling that something bad is going to happen but that something very good is going to end.

“Use the credit card whenever you can,” Heidi says, leaning over the wheel to look left, then right, then left again. “But pay the balance in full every month. That’s how you build a good credit score.”

“Got it,” he says, trying his best to keep the pit in his stomach from changing the sound of his voice.

Soon they arrive at her off-campus house. He gets out and meets her by the hood of the car.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” He lifts the folder. “Thanks for this.”

“Hey,” she says.

He looks up and realizes that she already understands. She has known, maybe for a while, that at some point this would come up—this question, and then, right behind it, the obvious answer. She’s a senior, graduating soon. He’s a freshman. There are other reasons, too, though they aren’t as clear to him, would be harder to name. Seeing in her eyes the same sorrow that she must see in his, he senses another kind of lesson being shared between them, a lesson that he knows will stay with him for the rest of his life. But, in the same moment, he decides not to learn it, because the future is not here yet, and they still have the time they have left.

Eighteen years later, Heidi opens an e-mail from Winslow College’s alumni office and learns that Nolan Everett was one of two teachers killed in a school shooting outside Portland, Maine. Three sixth graders were also killed.

She is home alone in Montclair, New Jersey.

She tries to read the e-mail again but keeps having to start over, the words no longer meaning anything, letters on a screen. *Dear alumni*, it starts, and then it’s as if she were falling: *heavy heart, Winslow community, thoughts and prayers, William C. Bergill Scholar, beloved teacher, memorial grant to pursue a master’s in education or a related degree, gifts can be made by mail or online, donor-advised fund, I.R.A. charitable rollover.*

There’s something unreal about it. Maybe she misread, or clicked on the wrong thing somehow; maybe she is dreaming. And yet already she can feel another part of herself begin to weave the information into her life, to slide the truth into sequence. To make it seem as if, somehow, this was always the way it was going to go.

Because she did, in fact, see the headline yesterday. A notification on her lock screen, recommended news. She even tilted her phone toward Brody and said, “Another one. In Maine.” Her husband is a doctor, did time in an E.R. in Newark. He understands what these things are like. The carnage, the bodies, the parting automatic doors, the wild-eyed parents stumbling toward the reception desk.

“Fuck this,” he said. Referring in general, she guessed, to the way the world had turned out.

But she didn’t read past the headline. She didn’t click the links. She had stopped clicking the links a long time ago. She didn’t think she knew anyone near Portland.

And this morning she let her son and her daughter go to school. Thinking herself rational, instead of insane.

She is in her home office. Beyond the desk is a window, latched shut, no curtains yet. Across the driveway, a line of thin but sprawling trees, their leafless branches like the veins in lungs. Aside from the desk and the small bookshelf behind her, the room is bare. “The no-go room,” her kids have started calling it. “Mommy’s on a meeting.” Clients tell her she has good lighting. Maybe that’s why they moved out here, to a suburb where they know almost no one. For good lighting. And, of course, for the schools.

She makes a noise, low and wheezing. Just to hear something, just to have something else in the room.

The computer screen, left idle, has darkened. She twitches the mouse and it bursts with light again, the message unchanged, his name still there.

She dumped him. Did it right before she went home for spring break. There was still snow on the ground. Dumped is the wrong word, of course, because they were never really a couple, not in any articulable way. It had lasted only a few months. She was graduating. It had to be her who cut it off. Why? And what if she never had? But she had. To save them both from the inevitable pain—that was what she told herself.

She was so sure of everything back then. She thought she knew exactly how her life would turn out. And, for the most part, she was right. She has become the person she thought she would become. A financial adviser, married mother of two. The things she was wrong about are minor. She thought she'd never leave the city. She thought she'd have her own practice, help everyday people set themselves up, rates on a sliding scale. Nurses, servers, delivery bikers, construction workers, teachers. Instead, she works for the biggest wealth-management firm in the country.

But Nolan was something she never expected. She remembers, all at once, her first time on the wall, the moment she thought she was falling to her death. She feels it now again—her blood hot, her heart lurching in her throat. Flush with the present, alive and nothing else. Later, in that dark supply closet that smelled like sweat, it was the same thing—she lost all sense of herself, said outlandish things, ordered him around like some kind of lazy dominatrix. When she came, he didn't know, or couldn't tell, and in the pitch black she felt a great weight lifted, as if everything beyond their bodies, even the future, had vanished.

She has kept these memories close. There's something different about them, the way they don't fit neatly into her history, the way they still make her heart race. As if they were unfinished. As if someday she might return to him.

Her final months at Winslow were a blur. She did a lot of schoolwork. She went to parties, had unmeaningful sex. She hated feeling guilty, so she didn't. She avoided the rec center, stared straight ahead when she walked across the quad. Magna cum laude. Phi Beta Kappa. At her five-year reunion, maybe she cupped the glare from the window, scanned around the empty climbing wall. As if he would still be in there, where she had left him.

She opens a new tab. The keys type themselves. Two teachers. His name again: a sixth-grade English teacher. The other teacher a young woman, barely out of college—an instructional-support specialist. And three children. She does not want to know their names. She reads their names. She does not want to know who did it, what happened, how it happened. She scrolls down, learns.

What she cannot accept, cannot believe, is that there might come a day when even this news slips from her mind.

She returns to the e-mail. There's a link to the donation page at the bottom. Money—is that really how this is going to end? With money? He had some funny name for money, something his parents made up. She can't remember. She clicks.

The slow drip of getting to know him. He didn't know his own secrets. One day, after she had been walking past the kind-eyed, hefty rec-center manager for weeks, Nolan mentioned, offhand, that they had known each other for years and spent their summers working together. "Him?" she said. "The guy at the front desk?" He had been there from the beginning, in his green golf shirt, lanyard dripping from the pocket of his slacks. There was some funny name for him, too.

And then there was that morning on the pond. She'd had no idea what was happening, where they were going. It was a Sunday. Sunny and freezing cold. He picked her up and drove them away from campus—south, or maybe east. It was the first time in a while that he hadn't let her drive. In five minutes, they were somewhere else entirely. Hills, farms. She could barely look out the window—it was too bright-white. Then he parked, and she followed him down a ramp to the edge of a long, frozen clearing.

"This is Togus Pond," he said.

The hut, she remembers, was on big, rounded skates, like a catamaran. The chimney was made of metal. Inside—it's as if she were there now—was dark, pulsing, cavelike. The front half had plank floors. In the back, down a little ledge, was a row of small, circular holes in the glassy ice. What she couldn't believe was the way the water glowed. Moss-green, almost neon. She has told Brody about this before: how she went ice fishing with an old college fling. How, in the dark hut, the water beneath them gave off light. There was something eternal about it. Like the northern lights. She has never seen the northern lights.

Nolan made a fire in the iron stove. Soon it was so warm they had to take off their coats. She could tell he was happy. He wasn't smiling—nothing so obvious as that. Just something in his posture, the pride in his eyes. There were a few short, skinny fishing poles in the corner. A baggie of rubber minnows swimming in what looked like olive oil. He showed her how to bait the hook, drop the line, jig it around, jerk the rod when she felt a bite, reel in. And eventually, not by magic but by the opposite of magic, it all happened exactly as he'd said it would.

The fish came thrashing up through the hole—as if it had been drowning and had finally found air. He grabbed it with a bare hand and held it in front of her face. It was long and thin, speckled like a leopard, toothed like a terrier.

“This is a pike,” he said. “Good first fish.”

That was his way. He didn’t overexplain, didn’t push. He just named things, waited, watched, trusted.

“You’re a good teacher,” she told him.

She had thought, in her ignorance, that he was going to put the fish in a cooler or something. Instead, before she even knew what was happening, he crouched and lowered it back into the watery circle in the ice. It looked as if he were reaching through a kind of portal, into another realm. The fish had stopped its thrashing, and for a few seconds, even after he’d let it go and lifted his wet-haired wrists from the water, it remained completely still, not yet knowing that it was free. ♦

Published in the print edition of the November 3, 2025, issue.

Nathan Blum has contributed to *Ploughshares*, *Colorado Review*, and other publications.