

Dear Daniel,

A person has to have lived a little to appreciate a survival story. That's what I've always said, and I promised that when you were old enough, I'd tell you mine. It's no tale for a child, but you're not a child anymore. You're older now than I was when I got lost in the mountain wilderness.

Five days in the freezing cold without food or water or shelter. You know that part, and you know that I was with three strangers, and that not everyone survived. What happened up there changed my life, Danny. Hearing the story is going to change yours.

It's hard to know when a son's ready for the truth about his old man. The night of your middle school graduation was the first time I *almost* told you; then it was your fourteenth birthday, and fifteenth, and every birthday after. You had a right to be told, but it's never been that simple. To understand about the mountain, you need to know what came before.

Remember last spring when we were visiting colleges? We were on that dark gravel road just outside of Bloomington and I nearly hit the deer. Remember we

had to pull off at that truck stop because I couldn't stop shaking? The deer was safe, and you didn't understand why I was so rattled by the close call. Later, when I was calm, driving down the highway toward home, you asked me if I'd ever killed anything—accidentally or on purpose. You'd given me the perfect opening in the perfect setting—we always have our best talks in the car.

You were ready. I wasn't. That night I realized I was never going to be able to tell you the whole story—not face to face. If I had to watch you take it in I'd have edited, censored, lied, anything to avoid seeing your pain. But there's no point in telling half a story, is there? Or worse, one that's only half true.

So I wrote it down. I typed it out as it came to my fingers because that felt like the most honest thing to do. It's longer than I thought it would be—shorter somehow too. As for the timing of all of this? With you starting Indiana State? When you're older you'll see that there isn't so much a good time or bad time for things, appearances to the contrary. There is just *a* time. Anyway, it'll be good for you to read this while you're away at school. You'll need some time to absorb it, and some distance from me.

The day I got lost with the others—that fateful November day—was the one-year anniversary of Byrd's accident. It was a tough year, and I didn't think it could get worse. Then Frankie, my father, got drunk on Halloween night and killed a young couple with his car. My best friend was gone, my father sent to prison for vehicular manslaughter. I was on my own—no one

## THE MOUNTAIN STORY

to keep abreast of my plans. Not that I would have told anyone about my trip to the mountain anyway, because on that cool, grey afternoon, which was also the day of my eighteenth birthday, I had decided to hike to a spot called Angel's Peak to jump to my death.

No one else knows that part of the story. Not even your mother.

My fellow hikers have been with me, in one way or another, since we were lost together all those years ago, walking alongside me when I'm out with the dogs, quiet when I'm reading in bed, guiding me with whispers when I can't find my way, looking over my shoulder the whole time I was typing out these pages. I'll miss their haunting.

When you were a little boy you'd study me in quiet moments and ask if I was thinking about the mountain. I almost always was. You asked if I ever dreamed about it. I did. Still do—especially now. Sometimes I wake up in a panic. Sometimes I wake longing for old friends.

Your mother? She's always said she didn't need to know all the gory details. Still, we both knew this day would come, and once you're finished this, she'll have to read it too. I'm afraid I've caged the mountain story for so long it'll die in the wild. Mom wishes it already had.

Here it is, Danny. As you read this, remember our family motto—there will be sway.

Love,  
Dad

