

THE STARSPLITTERS

by

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The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Aurora Stone Mehlman, and they evaluated the student's presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

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The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Braden Udall, M.F.A. Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved by the Graduate College.

DEDICATION

To Max and Cher, Gabriel, Moosy. To my grandmother Helen Podgurski, the influence for this novel. To all the grandparents I never met, and my extended family.

Thank you.

Most importantly, to Sahale, my sun, moon, and stars.

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Thanks to Mitch, Rick, and Tony, for patience, time, and suggestions. Also, Brady, for more of the same, times ten.

ABSTRACT

A mysterious letter summons Helen Starbird, and her granddaughter, Laramie, to a dying mill town on the shores of Lake Umbagog. Together, the two women—who leave vastly different lives mired in similarly hopeless ruts—return to the Northwoods. A New Hampshire fire tower where Helen posted during WWII, and the sight of a forbidden romance and life-altering tragedy, pivots from secret to obsession, and getting there progresses from dream to necessity. On the way, they confront private traumas, and volatile forces of prejudice, oppression, and environmental despoliation that have smoldered for centuries. Will they uncover festering family wounds, end the legacy of hate, and so heal their relationships with each other and the forests, or will the past repeat itself? This journey weaves contemporary tensions with brutal secrets that haunt mountains, forests, waters, and bodies, dead and alive.

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If the old woman remembered correctly, that particular morning in early April she'd boiled mason jars and then pressure cooked a batch of sugar-free peach preserves. After the mailman came and went, she shuffled out the front door onto the concrete stoop.

White buds nipped barnacled branches. On the Mendez's lawn, the fragrant magnolia bloomed, the flowers opening like soft white ears. The old woman turned her face to the sky and shut her eyes. New grass smelled of tin and rain.

Helen Anne Shirley had turned eighty-six in November, with no party and no cake, but she fried up two celebratory eggs, yolk and all. Once reedy and sure-footed, nowadays Helen had mobility issues and hunched forward thanks to her dowager's hump. A subconscious habit of pursing her lips and sucking her teeth gave the impression she was angry when she wasn't. At eighty-six, she regularly applied lipstick to her thin lips and chalky powder to the age spots on her cheeks and hands. At night she rolled her thinning hair into foam curlers.

She basked momentarily in the sun's soft touch. If she kept her eyes shut, she could be anyone of the selves she'd been. For a moment, she dreamed the possibilities—her spine did not hurt, her core did not ache with misgiving, and she felt hope, like life itself, nosing up through the dead layers. But a man's sharp holler snapped her alert and she was herself again, desperately in need of a seat to rest her achy knees.

Across Benz Street a work crew scaled a yellow house and their shouts echoed out as they climbed ladders and erected scaffolding. Now the glare was too much. She blocked the sun from her eyes with a hand so she wouldn't trip. Blue veins, pellucid skin. If it kept up like this, she'd be invisible by the time she died, nothing more than a bloody heart and a bag of veins. She squatted, trying to fish up the pink and yellow bagged newsweeklies with a hooked finger.

On her porch, Helen sighed as she eased the mail out of the postbox. While not grand, or fulfilling, spring carried some of the old verve, even here in the suburbs. The oniony scent of ramps teased her from the low nook of the lawn. She fantasized about a quiche latticed with those crispy wild onions, crust toasted to perfection, alongside a glass of sugary lemonade.

Finally back inside, she locked the door, slipped out of the garden shoes, and sat down heavily in her favorite recliner. She began to absentmindedly flip through the mail. Scams and insurance claims. Bills that looked like scams and vice versa.

She stopped shuffling when she came to a postmarked letter. The name written in cursive on the face of the letter nearly stopped her heart.