

the gate

A NOVEL

DANN A. STOUTEN



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Dedicated to the people I love, the people I've lost,
and the God who's promised to prepare a place where
all of us can spend eternity together with him.

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And finally I thank God for his grace, for my family, and for the way that each has shaped my life. Words fail to express my gratitude.

lost



Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

J. R. R. Tolkien,
The Lord of the Rings

1

The ad on the internet intrigued me. I'd been looking at cabins and cottages when the picture of an old inn caught my eye. I couldn't be sure, since it had been over forty years since I'd been there, but for the life of me, it looked like the cottage my family rented every July when I was a kid. The ad said that it was being used as a supper club. It claimed that the food and the view were heavenly and that it could be booked by the week or purchased outright. For a few minutes I studied the pictures in the ad and let my mind play with the possibilities.

Across the front of a huge screened-in porch were fieldstone columns, spaced about four feet apart, lined up like soldiers. The outside was covered in white lap siding with moss green-colored wood shingles tucked inside each of the peaks and the portico. The window trim and doors were painted in a darker green accented with red trim, and from the pictures, it looked to be well maintained and ready for occupancy.

The property was listed by a guy named Michael DeAngelo from Paradise Realty. The ad said, "Angel's Gate—the back door to God's country," and I noticed there was an open house scheduled for the weekend.

I showed the ad to Carol and said that this was the kind of place our grandkids would want to come and visit. We didn't have any grandkids yet, but I wanted to be prepared.

"You know I've given this some serious thought," I said. "And I've decided that I want to be the fun grandpa. I want to take them fishing and teach them how to swim, and sail, and roast marshmallows on a stick. And having a cottage would help in that department."

"Maybe you should go check it out on Friday when the girls and I go shopping in Chicago," Carol said. "You've got the week off anyway."

I had scheduled a week of vacation so that Carol and I could get away for a few days. I'd been under a lot of stress at work, and I needed a break. But when our daughter Kelly heard we were going shopping in Chicago, she thought it sounded like fun, so Carol invited her to go along. Then a few days later, Carol talked to our two other daughters, Tara and Kate, and somewhere along the line, Chicago became an all-girl getaway, and I got the boot.

They thought my Outback would be better for carrying packages, so they left me with Carol's Volkswagen. It was kind of girly—robin's egg blue with a dove gray convertible top. I pretended to be embarrassed to drive it, but to be honest, I was just as happy. It had been a while since I'd been up north, and I was going to put the top down and get a little sunshine.

The idea of spending a little time alone sounded pretty good to me. I'd been burning the candle at both ends for too long, and a few days with nothing to do and no one to worry about sounded like heaven.

I'd lost a lot of people I loved in the last year, and death has a way of layering up on you. It has this cumulative effect. It's like putting rocks in your knapsack. You hardly notice the first one, but the more you add, the more it starts to weigh you down. You

still might be able to hobble your way along, but the people who care about you can't help but notice that something's wrong.

That's where I was. Carol kept asking me if I was all right, and I kept saying, "Sure, I'm fine. I'm just tired." But we both knew better.

Especially with what happened earlier that week.

It was a Tuesday, about ten in the morning, and I didn't see it coming. My cell phone rang, and the voice on the other end of the line said, "We've got a problem, bro!"

I recognized the voice, and the words were ones I'd heard many times before. It was my brother, Ben. He had a knack for getting into trouble, and I was the first one he called every time "we" had a problem. Today was no exception.

The two of us owned a used car lot together, but there had come a point in my life when I felt like God was pressing me toward something else. I'd dropped out of college during my senior year when I saw the chance to make some real money in the car business. It was a decision I'd always regretted, so finally after ten years I went back to school. It took me about a year to get my undergraduate degree, and during that time I continued to work with Ben at the lot. When I entered the doctor of psychology program at State, Ben sort of took over the business, and he'd been running it ever since. I still went to the auction once in a while, and I tried to cover Ben when he went on vacation, but Europa Motors was his baby now. For the most part, Ben ran a clean house, and there were certain lines I wouldn't let him cross, but he had a habit of sticking his toe over the line when I wasn't looking. This was one of those times, and I hadn't been looking.

We owned the lot, but Old State Bank owned the cars. They gave us a line of credit called a "floor plan," and our limit was 250 thousand. That limit was one of those lines that Ben liked to cross, but usually he was able to sell a car or two before the bank realized we were over. The bank knew it happened, but as long as it didn't get out of hand, they'd usually look the other way. The

vice president in charge of the auto group was Jake Vander Molen. He'd been with Old State for thirty years, and even when things got a little hairy, I could usually talk him off the edge.

"You've got to call Jake," Ben said, "and tell him to get that new checker off my back. I'm doing the best I can. It ain't like there are a lot of buyers out there. The market's soft. It's been soft for over a year. They're just going to have to float it for a while."

"Calm down," I said. "Tell me what's going on, and I'll see what I can do."

"Like I said, they got this new checker. Said his name was Larry. He's nothing but a kid in a suit, and he was playing hardball with me. He said he'd jerk our floor plan if we'd didn't get things under the line by next Friday."

"Okay," I replied. "So sell something. Wholesale something if you have to."

"Don't go all big brother on me! We're in a little deeper than that. Our cash flow has been running downhill for a while now, and you're blind if you didn't see that. And, well, I did what I had to do. I sold a car or two and used the money to pay some bills, and I guess I didn't pay off the bank."

"A car or two?" I asked. "The bank doesn't usually get that upset about a car or two."

"Okay, it was seven cars and a pickup, but I always intended to pay them off. I just needed a little time. We always get caught up, but when I told this Larry that we were good for it, he said, 'God may give you grace, but not Old State.' I'm telling you, that kid was a whisper away from me smacking him. I wanted to take him out back and teach him some manners."

"Like that would do a lot of good," I said.

"Sky, if you'd have been here, you'd have felt the same way. You've got to call Jake and fix this."

When Ben was little, my given name, Schuyler, was too much of a mouthful, so he shortened it to Sky. Now that's what most everyone calls me.

I hung up and called Jake, but the news was worse than I thought.

"Listen, Sky," Jake said. "You know I've always liked you and your brother. We go way back, and your old man was always straight with me too, but my job's on the line with this one. The home office sent Larry out here to clean up some of the paper. The bank got hurt in the mortgage meltdown, and now they're dotting the i's and crossing the t's on everything, including floor plans. I pulled a loan on the sticks in your office for twenty, shuffled a few things around, buried a couple bills due from the Chicago Auction, and ignored a couple more from Grand Rapids, but that's only going to buy you a month or so."

"You put my office furniture up as collateral without talking to me?" I asked.

"It was that or shut you down, so you better just thank me and then get down here and sign the loan."

"Why didn't you take the loan out against the lot?" I asked. After we paid off our loan years ago, we signed up for a line of credit using the lot as collateral for exactly this sort of thing.

"Your brother took a major loan on the lot last year, and property values have dropped some since then. You know that. You co-signed, remember?"

"Oh, I guess so," I said, knowing that Ben must have signed it for me. Like I said, he had a habit of sticking his toe over the line. "So tell me, Jake, how bad are things looking?"

"It's pretty bad, Sky," Jake answered. "Your little brother's been upside-down since he and Mary Alice got divorced. Why he let her have the house and all I'll never know."

"You know Ben," I replied. "If Mary Alice mentioned their kid, he melted like a snowman in August. There's probably more to it than that, but that's what I know. Anyway, I'll get a handle on things and get back with you, and I'll get down there tomorrow to sign that note. And Jake . . . thanks. I appreciate you covering for us."

I drove over to the car lot to find Ben sitting with his feet

up on the desk talking to Donny. Donny was our lot boy. Ben always said that if Donny was a girl he'd marry him. He never questioned anything you said, never gave you any back talk, and did whatever you told him to do.

Donny was thirty-six, and to put it gently, he was slow. He was a wiry little man with slicked-back, jet-black hair. He had on his typical costume: blue jeans cuffed up too high, red high-top Michael Jordans, and a white T-shirt with our logo on it. Chest high, the T-shirt said "Europa Motors" in bold, black block letters that were set in a multicolored band of international flags that ran all around the shirt.

"Hello, Mr. Sky," Donny said.

"Hey, Donny! Would you take this ten-spot and run over to the 7-Eleven and get us all a Coke?"

"And E-Z too?" he asked. E-Z was Ezekiel, Ben's boy, who was out in the wash bay waxing a black Audi A6. We called him "Easy," but with Donny's southern drawl, it came out "E-Z."

"Of course, get Easy one too, and a candy bar if he wants."

When Donny was out of earshot, Ben looked at me with his head tilted, flicked his longish dishwater-blond hair out of his eyes, and asked, "You don't like him much, do you, bro?"

"Listen," I said. "This isn't about Donny and you know it. I called the bank to clean up your mess, and I found out you took out a loan and signed my name on it."

Ben looked like he'd been pulled through a knot hole. There were dark circles under his eyes, he hadn't shaved, and his gray stubble made him look like an older Sonny Crockett from *Miami Vice*. He was wearing a crisp, yellow madras plaid shirt with a polo player on the pocket, khaki pants, no socks, and blue Dock-sides. For the first time ever, I noticed that my younger brother was getting old. He took a long, deep breath, and for a minute he looked down at the floor and slowly shook his head. Then he looked up at me with stern, steely gray eyes and squinted like Clint Eastwood in those old spaghetti westerns.

“It had to be done,” he began, “and you weren’t around to do it. It was when you were in Florida last year, and I didn’t want to spoil your vacation. I meant to talk to you about it, but something always came up. First Mom died, then Grandma Great Kate, and then Mary Alice and I separated, and I guess I haven’t had my mind on business much.”

“Well, you better get your head in the game, or you’ll be selling sporting goods at Walmart.”

“Are you threatening me, bro?”

“No, I’m not threatening you, I’m telling you how it is! If I didn’t back your play down at the bank, you’d be going to jail tomorrow instead of going to the auction.”

Just then Donny and Easy came in with the Cokes, and even though there was a lot left unsaid, we let it slide.

Easy asked if there was anything good on the presale sheet for tomorrow’s auction, and Ben said he had his eye on a few cars, but for sure he had to get the casket gray Tribeca for a customer from up north.

Ben took a deposit on the car on an “if,” which is to say he had it sold if he could find a car that fit the customer’s parameters. The Tribeca was close, so he was going to bid it to the nines. Of course, when he described the car to the customer, he told him the color was old world pewter. It worked that way with every color. If we were selling it, it was executive silver, but if somebody was trying to sell it to us or trade it in, then it was garbage can gray. Ben was a master at coming up with these names. Black was midnight pearl if we were selling it and a tar pit dust magnet if we were buying it.

“The old man could sell ice cubes to Eskimos,” Easy said with a grin.

Looking at him, I couldn’t help but think that Easy was looking more and more like Ben did before the accident. He was tall and handsome, with long, blond, curly hair, a muscular build, and a mischievous smile. Easy was going to be a sophomore this

fall, and already the girls were falling all over him. Like his dad and his grandfather, he was a natural athlete. He was the starting guard on the Indians varsity basketball team, and he could pull up and hit the three anytime. On the basketball floor he'd earned the name "Big Easy," and even now, everybody knew he had a scholarship in his future. Easy wanted to play football, but Ben had talked him into golf.

"It's something you can do the rest of your life," Ben had maintained. "Sports are great. They'll teach you about teamwork and winning and losing, and you need that, but they don't last." It was the same reason Ben wanted Easy to play tennis in the spring.

"How long until you turn sixteen, Easy?" I asked.

"Bout three months."

"Just think," I said, "then you'll be able to drive . . . legally."

We all laughed. Easy had been driving cars around the lot since he was ten, and for the last few years, Ben would send Easy and Donny if he needed a runner to pick something up at the auction or the body shop. Donny said they were a team, and he even had a name for them. He said they were "Slow and Easy," and after a while, the name stuck.

We sat and talked for a while, and then Donny and Easy went back out to the shop.

"Listen, Ben," I said. "You have to sell some cars, that's a given. But turning a few car deals isn't going to be enough and you know it. I've bought you a little time here, but that's all I'm going to do. The ball's in your court now. I don't know what you're going to do, but you'd better do something. I'm not bailing you out again even if it means we lose this place. I'm as serious as a heart attack about this, little brother. Somehow you've got to inject some cash into this place. To be honest with you, short of a miracle, I don't see how you're going to do it, so if I were you I'd start praying, and I'm not kidding."

As I walked out the door Ben said, "Don't worry, bro—Slow and Easy and I'll get it done. And as for the praying, I'll get that

done too. I've already been talking to God about this. We just need a little time to work things out, that's all."

I needed a little time too, a little time away from all this. I looked at several cottages, but my mind kept coming back to the old inn. Why was I so intrigued by this place? Was it really the same place that had pinned so many warm memories to the soft places of my heart? Would such a place do the same thing for my children and grandchildren? Curiosity and nostalgia beat my thoughts back and forth like a tennis ball until I finally gave in.

"Maybe you're right," I said to Carol. "While you're gone, I think I'm going to take a drive up there and check it out. It's a short drive, only a few hours."

"You should!" Carol replied with that little grin that said she didn't believe me.

"I'm serious!" I insisted, and the conversation ended.

That was Tuesday night, and by Friday I was sure she'd forgotten all about it. I loaded her luggage in the car, kissed her good-bye, and went back inside, and there on my dresser was the ad for the inn with the directions to get there.

Did Carol do that? I wondered. Or did I inadvertently hit PRINT the other night?

I couldn't be sure. Either way, the idea was growing on me, and after lunch, I started meandering my way up north.

I stopped in North Bay and got lost in Barnes & Noble for part of the afternoon, and then I went out to the state park and took a long walk on the beach. There's something soothing about the rhythmic melody of waves slapping against the shore, and as I walked, I also began to unwind. Little kids were building sand castles, and an old woman in a big straw hat dozed in a lawn chair.

It was about six thirty when I got a couple of Coney dogs at the Dog'n Suds. I walked out on the pier and watched the sunset as I ate my supper. An old man in a pair of tattered bib overalls

and a T-shirt had a couple of nice perch in a bucket, and he and I struck up a conversation about the weather.

“It was a gorgeous day,” he said. “But with the wind kicking up like that and those dark clouds rolling in, it’s a sure sign of rain.”

He began reeling in his line and picking up his gear, and I slurped down the last mouthful of my root beer float and made my way to the car.

I got back in the Beetle as lightning flashed across the darkening sky. I pushed the button to put the top up and started driving north again. I had intended to stay at a little hotel about a block from the highway, but as I pulled off the exit, I noticed that the neon sign said “No Vacancy.” I could backtrack about twenty miles to the Holiday Inn in North Bay, turn around and take my curiosity home with me, or try to find Angel’s Gate before dark. I chose the latter.

I made my way north along Oceania Drive, then I turned down Old Mill Road and began looking for the little two-track road that led back to the cottage. The pitter-patter of raindrops on the roof and the swish-slosh of the wipers lulled me along.

A lot had changed since I was a boy, but I’d occasionally recognize an old landmark. The building for the Chuck Wagon Restaurant where we’d get greasy burgers and strawberry malts was still there, but it was a laundromat now. The big rock and the flagpole still stood like sentinels outside the general store, and the baseball park with the broken backstop was still across the street. The road turned from blacktop to gravel just past the old iron bridge, and I knew I was getting close.

About three miles down the gravel road, I passed a row of mailboxes and turned down a two-track road that ran next to the old cemetery. There were two red brick columns on either side of the drive joined by an arch. Tucked in the weeds to the right of the drive was a Paradise Realty sign, and I was confident that I’d found Angel’s Gate. The road ran parallel to a low brick wall capped with concrete that had a black wrought-iron fence on

top. The little two-track path was not well-traveled, and I crept along carefully, expecting to see the old cottage at any minute.

The rain had intensified, the road was in worse shape than I expected, and before I got ten yards in, I splashed through a huge puddle and found myself up to the running boards in mud. I was stuck and unable to move. If I had been in my Outback, this would just be a momentary inconvenience. With its all-wheel drive, I'd bounce right through this, but in Carol's Bug, I knew I was in trouble. I tried my best to rock the car loose, but it was no use. The mud was a foot deep and as slippery as a wet goldfish.

I thought about calling for a tow truck, but there were no signal bars on my cell phone. I tried again to rock the car loose, but I was stuck like a Dutchman with his finger in the dike. I finally turned off the ignition and watched the headlights slowly fade to black. I was hoping to see a light or some sign of life, but no. There was nothing I could do but wait until morning, so I cranked the seat back and closed my eyes, and eventually the rhythmic drumming of the rain drowned out my frustration and lulled me to sleep.

It had been a long time since I'd spent the night in a car, and in the morning my foot was asleep, my back was stiff, and my mouth tasted like night crawlers. I had only two choices: I could go back the way I came in, or I could continue to follow the two-track and hope it ended somewhere with a phone. It was a good five miles back to the laundromat, so I decided to walk where the road would take me. I took off my shoes, rolled up my pants, and sloshed my way through the mud.

As I walked, I noticed that what I had thought was a cemetery was really more of a botanical garden. There were flowers and fruit trees, blueberry bushes, ornamental grasses, and neatly trimmed shrubbery all placed in little clusters within a well-manicured lawn. Rocks, bricks, and scalloped metal edging encircled the clusters, and the

*There's nothing
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more I looked at the garden's beauty, the more a pattern began to emerge. Looking more closely, I could also see that vegetables of various kinds were scattered amidst the flowers and fruit trees, and the variegated heights and colors were very pleasing to the eye. If this was part of the Paradise Realty property, it lived up to its name!

About a half mile into my walk, I began to get little glimpses of the cottage peeking through the trees. It seemed bigger and newer than the place I was looking for, but I hoped that maybe they'd let me use their phone. As I got closer, I noticed that there was a gate in the fence reminiscent of the entrance to the cemetery that I saw last night.

A lot of people get bogged down with the busyness of life.

Two stone columns formed an arch over a heavy wooden gate. I tugged on the handle to the gate, but it was bolted and locked from the inside.

The road twisted its way down past the lake, so I walked out on someone's dock, dangled my feet in the water, and washed the mud off myself. The sun was breaking over the tree line, and it cast a long silver reflection on the rippled water. It was going to be a beautiful day.

I sat there for a few minutes enjoying the view. When I stood and turned around, I realized that someone had opened the gate, and there was a sign that said "Paradise Realty Open House," with Michael DeAngelo's picture on it.

Before I could say anything, Michael came walking through the gate and caught me by surprise. His presence seemed to fill my space, so I took a step back. He was tall and thick and athletically built, with longish black hair that flowed back from his widow's peak, like Tom Hanks in the movie *The Da Vinci Code*. There was a whisper of gray in his sideburns as well as his neatly trimmed mustache and goatee.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you. There's no need to be frightened. I'm Michael, and we've been expecting you."

“Oh, yes, you’re the agent. I recognize you from the picture.”

A good salesman always makes you feel like he’s on your side, and Michael was no exception. There was something charismatic about him. His words were soothing and persuasive, and you got the impression that he meant what he said.

Gathering my composure, I walked through the gate and up the sidewalk and knocked on the screen door.

“Well, come on in, Scout. We’ve been waiting for you,” said a man from inside.

At first I wasn’t sure he was talking to me. No one had called me that name in almost fifty years. Scout was the nickname my mother gave me as a toddler because I had a habit of breaking loose and running out ahead of everyone else unless she kept a firm grip on my little hand. It was not an admirable trait in her mind, and eventually she hooked a short piece of clothesline to my belt to rein me in whenever she took my sister and me shopping.

It must be a coincidence, I thought to myself. He probably calls every guy “Scout” or “Sport” or something like that.

The voice of the man who called me Scout sounded familiar. It was slow, deliberate, and deep, like Gregory Peck in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but the man himself looked more like Paul Newman. He was tall, lean, and weathered, with steely blue eyes and short, cropped gray hair that receded slightly. He wore faded blue jeans, white Converse tennis shoes, and a green T-shirt that said “Save the Whales” on it. His shirt had the white dust of flour on it, and from the looks of him, I made him out to be the cook.

The screen door closed behind me, and I was standing in the kitchen. The room was filled with the alluring smell of freshly baked sticky buns. There was something familiar and yet foreign about this place. If it was the place of my memories, it had undergone an extensive remodel somewhere along the way. I’m not saying that it felt like home, but it was the kind of place you

wanted to come home to. Then again, sometimes you can feel right at home in a place you've never been.

As I looked around, I saw flour, sugar, cinnamon, baking soda, and a bag of crushed walnuts scattered in disarray atop the counter, along with bowls of varying sizes sitting next to a mixer with beaters still covered with dough.

A block of butter, a pitcher of milk, brightly colored aluminum glasses, yellowed bone china plates, and an assortment of silverware were set on the table. The table itself was made of tubular chrome with a slate gray Formica top. One side was shoved tight against the wall, and three matching chairs were tucked neatly under the other three sides.

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The floor was wooden and worn. White beadboard went about five feet up the walls and was capped with a shelf that served as a plate rail. Above it, black-and-white photos leaned against a royal blue wall. The cupboards were white with glass doors that displayed an eclectic assortment of dishes and glasses. The appliances were white and rounded, bulbous, like the ones out of the fifties, although they appeared to be new.

"Come on in," the man said, motioning toward the table with his head. "I'll be frosting those sticky buns in a minute, and the milk is cold and fresh. I'm telling you, it's a little taste of heaven."

"You're in for a treat," said Michael, who had followed me in. "Ahbee bakes his cinnamon rolls from scratch, like everything else he makes."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I feel kind of foolish. I appreciate the invitation for breakfast, I really do, and I'd love to see the place—in fact, I came for the open house—but first I need a tow truck. You see, I got stuck in the mud last night, and I ended up sleeping in my car. So right now, all I really want to do is use your phone, okay?"

"Sure," answered Michael. "That's understandable. You don't need to explain it to us. We know what happened. People come

knocking on our door all the time when they get stuck. We help them. We're always willing to help. But right now I'll bet your mind is buzzing with questions. Am I right?"

"Well, yes," I answered, somewhat puzzled. "That's exactly right. I'm a little confused. I know word gets around fast in a small town, but do I know you? Were you expecting me? What's this really about?"

"That's your department," Michael said to Ahbee. "You're in charge of ideas and answers. I'm just the messenger."

"Oh, there'll be lots of time for explanations later," the old one said, putting his hand on my shoulder. "I'm so glad you're here."

I wanted to ask where "here" was, but he never gave me a chance.

"Your room is ready," Ahbee continued. "Michael will show you where it is in a few minutes, but let's eat first. Sit down, sit down, you must be starving."

They each pulled out a chair while motioning for me to do the same, and for a moment we sat and smiled at each other in an awkward silence. Then Michael folded his hands, bowed his head, and said a word of grace. He thanked God for the day, for the food, and for my safe arrival, and when he said "Amen," the old man said, "You're welcome."

How odd, I thought to myself. I was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable. Something about all this was one bubble off plumb. But then it dawned on me: this was Carol's doing! She must have gone online and booked a room for me without telling me. That's so Carol. She loves to surprise me, and she knew more than anyone that what I needed was to get away for a few days. Sure, that must be it. That's why these two were expecting me. Little by little, the pieces were falling into place.

As I looked up, my eyes caught the old man's gaze, and for a moment it was as though he had peeked into my very soul. Clearly he knew much more than he was letting on. There was wisdom in his years, but I sensed that it was something that would have to be pried out of him a little bit at a time.

Without saying a word, Ahbee flipped the cinnamon rolls out of the pan, turned them nut-side down, and began frosting them with a cream cheese icing and serving them.

"I've heard of open houses where they baked a loaf of bread so the house would smell like home, but I've never heard of one where they served breakfast. It's a nice touch," I said, taking a bite of my cinnamon roll. "Homey—and it kind of makes me feel like I belong here."

"You do belong here," said Ahbee. "We have everything ready for your stay."

"Do I know you?" I asked again. "You look so familiar to me. Have we met before?"

"I imagine I do," Ahbee replied with a wry smile. "We've met many times." As he poured me a glass of milk, he said, "I knew your parents quite well. In fact, your father and I had quite a talk on the day you were born."

"You look to be about his age," I responded. "Were you and Dad friends when he was young? Have you known him a long time?"

"We're very close. Your grandmother introduced us when he was only a young boy."

"It's funny that he never mentioned you. Were you from the old neighborhood on College Avenue?" I asked.

"Oh, I know the old neighborhood very well," he replied. "And I'm sure you've heard your dad speak of me."

I began to get a little annoyed with what seemed to be an obvious evasion of my questions.

"Listen," I said. "I appreciate the hospitality, and the sticky bun was great. Actually, I've never had better. You were right, it tasted like a little bit of heaven. But this is the strangest open house I've ever been to. It's like I woke up in Neverland! Just where in the world am I, anyway?"

"Well, that's the point, isn't it?" the old man answered. "You've gotten away from it all here. Like the sign says, 'You're in God's country now.'"

“God’s country?”

“You know, heaven,” he said with a sincerity that was hard to deny. “And I’m opening my house to you. At least a part of it.”

“And that makes you—”

“I Am,” he interrupted.

I couldn’t help but hear an echo of Exodus where Moses asks God his name and the Lord replies, “I AM WHO I AM.” My preacher likes to throw a little Hebrew into his sermons, and I remember him saying that God’s answer was the Hebrew verb “to be” twice repeated. According to him it can be translated “I am,” or “I was,” or “I will be,” or any combination of the three. In some ways, it was both an answer and a refusal to answer. It’s both open-ended and open to interpretation.

It was like God was messing with Moses by speaking in riddles, and I was beginning to feel the way Moses must have felt.

“Look,” I said, “I don’t know if this is some kind of game, or who you people are, but maybe I should go check on my car.”

With that, I got up and walked out the door.

*When God told
Moses that he was
the great I AM, in
some ways, it was
both an answer and
a refusal to answer.*