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Ethan McCoy lay in the grass, stretched out to his full length. He flung his head back and unbuttoned his shirt, exposing his neck and the pale skin of his chest to the sun. His rolled-up sleeves were already drenched in sweat. Perspiration ran off his forehead, dripping onto the jacket folded under his head in a faux pillow.

Ethan removed the light-sensitive glasses from his nose and wiped the sweat off with a handkerchief. Inhaling deeply, he stared at the sun through unprotected eyes. The scent of Greenfield invaded his nostrils, conquering his throat, lungs, and heart. Inside him the memories were waking up, ignited by familiar feelings from the past.

In the strong light he felt a pain in his eyes, forcing him to close them. So that he might suffer too, he didn't move to escape into the protective shadows. Determined to stay exposed to heat that reached him from the vast distance with such strength, he willed the sun to cause him pain. Wanted it to numb his senses and make him oblivious to any and all experiences—both pleasant and unpleasant. Most of all, he wanted to let go of the internal pain that refused to leave him alone after all these years.

JANUARY RIVER



He wished one pain could soothe another. The physical could annul the emotional. Even as he thought it, he knew it was in vain. He also accepted there was no cure for that pain. At best, it might be blunted some day and become just a painful reminder of his past.

But it would never disappear.

Because if it did, Greenfield would no longer exist. The artificially created grove beside the river in which he now rested, would vanish too. The same for Willy, then Jason, Derrick, and Sarah. Riv and . . . Susan. Could they evaporate, all of them? Did he have the right to ask that?

Or, what if it were possible for *all of them* to remain in their reality where they belonged? While *he*—Ethan—disappeared? Both could be possible only by some supernatural phenomenon. Something that could never happen.

Eventually moving into the shadows, he took off his shirt, shoes and socks and continued with his fantasy. Recalling. Or gathering up the strength and determination to do what he intended. Well, that's what he planned on saying if someone asked him why he was there. So far, nobody had. Nobody knew. He arrived less than an hour ago. He hadn't gone to the town, but had come straight to the river. To the place where everything had begun. Therefore, it only seemed fitting that it be where the beginning of the end transpired. The place where he would insert a period at the end of a life story. If he got lucky, he'd tear out a blank page and start anew. No memories. No past.

Without the bad memories, he could live in peace.

However, if he were honest with himself, that would be equally impossible to achieve.

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JANUARY RIVER



In the still air, the river flowed quietly. Steadily. Innocently. Nothing about it had changed as if nothing happened. Effortlessly and seemingly without concern, the river continued to give life to all around it. But also taking it. . . .

Ethan watched the river and felt as though the river also observed him. Two silent witnesses, side by side again after so much time. Ethan had often wondered what this moment would be like. Would he find the river repelling, disgusting even, carried by the ravages of time and pressured by anxiety heavy as storm clouds? Or would it be seductive like it had been long ago when he was still a child?

Removing the rest of his clothes, he stood on the sand along the riverbank. The sunbeams warmed his naked body—a body weakened and slimmed by an avalanche of past events. He walked into the cold water up to his knees and shuddered. Almost icy. Or was he too hot after basking in the sun?

He barely hesitated before plunging in. He knew he wouldn't be able to resist the temptation. Love between the river and him could not dissipate that easily. As he swam, he wondered if this love would ever dissolve. Would another separation be even harder than the last?

Not far away, a dog gave up chasing a butterfly. Pricking up his ears and staring toward the woods, he searched the spot where his guardian had lain only a moment ago. Except for a heap of clothes tossed on the grass, the spot was empty. Sniffing the air, the dog moved toward the river—slowly at first and then breaking into a run.

Reaching the riverbank, he looked at the water. He gazed at the other bank. No sign of life on the river. Only the nature, butterflies, and the twittering of the birds. He wagged his tail and whined. Then he barked. Soon, he ran up and down the riverbank not knowing what to

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do. His barking became louder and uneasy. He decided to jump and was already in the air when Ethan surfaced, with no way to avoid the collision.

The sound of the dog's whine mingled with a yell of surprise filled the air before it was swallowed and disappeared in the splash of water. The waves rippled its calm surface.

A bit later, the sun warmed their bodies, drying them. Unlike the golden retriever's thick hair, Ethan was already dry as dust. Holding the dog's head in his lap, he babbled to him, "Riv, you big, mischievous, hairy maniac. We could both have been killed. What came over you? Why did you do that?"

The dog murmured away contentedly, positioning his head for Ethan so he could scratch the itching spots. Gone were the uneasiness and worries that made him jump. He enjoyed every one of Ethan's strokes feeling both safe and beloved, and returning those feelings of love and safety in the same measure.

Ethan leaned in and kissed his forehead. "I love you, buddy. What would I do without you?" You are the only one who didn't desert me, he said to himself with sadness.

He closed his eyes. The breeze tousled his brown, but graying hair. For a moment, the welcome freshness of the air invigorated his soul full of melancholy and sorrow.