

## Colonus

by **John Donaghy**

After Father died, Mother did not pine away; hers was not that kind of desolation. She lived for twenty-four more years. During that quarter century she elaborated a glittering vision of her marriage and fixed it in a set of canonical anecdotes which she told us over and over. We were to understand that she and Father enjoyed a passion that could only have developed long ago among people who were more vital and closer to the source of life than our own anemic generation with its provisional, little loves.

On her kitchen table she kept a pile of old letters in tattered and yellowing envelopes: they were all the letters she and my father had exchanged from their courtship onwards. "I don't know what to do with all these," she would always say, "I don't know *who* would be interested in them," and I always said, who knows why, "I'd love to take care of them for you." And she: "I don't know. There's awfully personal stuff in here. Some of these are the letters of a man who is totally *gone* on a woman. Maybe I'll have them cremated with me. And yet I hate to do that, someone might find them very *interesting*."

Within that pile of letters there was a smaller bundle bound with a purple ribbon. These were the letters that chronicled The Argument. The Argument was the central story in the canon, the one that she told us more often than any other: She had been head of pediatric nursing at the Mass General. He was doing his residency there. They had been going together for months. She did not drink and flirt like the other girls. He was crazy about her, and she was crazy about him. He would call her every night at ten. When he was away, he would write to her every day. Sometimes twice. He had to go away for three weeks. He was resting; he had been overworking. But he missed her. He had to give a lecture in Montreal. He had arranged to take her with him; he had arranged for them to share a hotel room. He had acted as though it were a *fait accompli*. He had assumed and had not asked. Well, she was *furios*. She wanted to

know if this was his habit. She wanted to know if he thought she was like other girls. She would most certainly *not* go with him to Montreal or anywhere else for that matter. He was hurt. He behaved as though he were angry. She would have none of *that*. She would not listen to him. They were estranged for days, oh, it might have been two weeks; she heard not one word. Then one night at ten o'clock, the phone call came. She had won. It was a glorious love affair. It lasted a lifetime.

In advanced old age when the multiplying frailties of nature send most people collapsing into themselves, Mother's vigor seemed divorced from her flesh. In her eighties and nineties she became tiny, bowed, seamed with wrinkles, dry as a cricket, but she stacked her own wood and pushed her own reel mower and took as many trips to the landfill as she could. She amazed people with her wit and her activity, and she took so much pride in their amazement that she developed a kind of geriatric bravado. At ninety-three she stood on the very top of her step ladder—the "This Is Not A Step" step—in order to prune her lilacs. The ladder was on uneven ground and it began to tip, "It was going to take me through the kitchen window," she said, "So I jumped." She hit the ground and rolled, breaking nothing but straining her coccyx. She refused the doctor. It only hurt, she said, whenever she tried to lift something heavier than thirty pounds.

I could not help thinking that she might grow in energy as she shriveled in mass until eventually, a century from now perhaps, she'd whirl up into the hungry vortex of herself and disappear. But at the age of ninety-seven she began to fail. Her eyesight grew worse; her hearing began to go; her gait became unsteady; her driving became lethal. She tore out the undercarriage of her car by driving, at speed, into a ditch. She emerged from that accident unscathed, angry and, she claimed, blameless. It would never have happened had the town made that ditch more visible. As soon as the car was fixed, she visited my brother's law offices for a quick consultation. Leaving his parking lot, she stomped on the accelerator rather than the brake. She shot across the road, over the sidewalk and down a stretch of lawn before coming to rest wedged under someone's front porch. Again she was unhurt though this time she conceded that the

incident had quite taken her breath away. Still, it was the sort of thing that could happen to *anyone*.

My brother appropriated her car keys. One of her neighbors, an extraordinarily kind woman, offered to drive her whenever she needed a ride. But Mother did not want to be driven. She did not like the neighbor who seemed to want to become a *friend*. She had gone so far as to send a *birthday* card. God. Mother was *not* going to saddle herself with *that* bit of inanity. Her errands were her own damned business, and she could do them *herself*. She discovered a spare set of car keys, and after a few weeks, when the car had been repaired from its collision with the porch, she drove it to the grocery store.

She left early in the morning so that she would arrive while the parking lot was still empty. She did not like parking lots. When they were busy, they confused her, and because she feared that by the time she was ready to leave, the store lot would be swarming with other vehicles, she parked strategically—nose up to a short, ornamental hedge beyond which she could see, reassuringly, the sidewalk and the street. It was clever of her to do so, she told us later, for when she emerged with her groceries, the parking lot had become a *madhouse*. Cars were pulling *into* spaces and pulling *out* of spaces and driving around *looking* for spaces, bumper to bumper like *salmon* in a *stream*. There were people everywhere walking as though they hadn't a care in the world right where she had to drive. She didn't think it would be quite *safe* to back out into all that confusion. Instead, she put the car in drive and bulled her way through the shrubbery, across the sidewalk, and into two cars which were parallel parked in the street. These were an unexpected impediment. They had not been there when she had chosen her parking space, but she found that if she applied the gas, she could push them slowly outward, and so force her way between them and gain the open road and freedom and, eventually, home.

She suspected that some busybody might have seen her and assumed she was breaking the law. She was preemptive. She called the grocery store. "Hello," she said, "This is Frances Donaghy. I'm afraid I may have damaged some of your lovely plantings as I was leaving your parking lot." When the police showed up on Horn of the Moon, she was a very fragile, very old lady. "The officer was a *woman* and she was *very nice*. She asked if she could bring my car keys to anyone who might keep them for me. I didn't

want to argue, and I won't go into it now, but *apparently* I did more damage than I had *thought*. I told her that it was all right and that I wouldn't drive again."

She never did. She stopped going out. She had no friends to visit and none who would visit her. Occasionally my brother drove her to the doctor, but otherwise she occupied herself at home as she always had when we were young—reading, listening to the CBC, cleaning the house, and brooding on her children. We were the mediators of her image and the guardians of her legacy, and yet, she knew, we were not true believers. She tried and tried to set us straight. She explained to each one of us, many, many times, that we were Superior People because everything she had ever done had been for *us*. Our childhood had been an idyll, really, the rococo dream of Watteau or Fragonard. She painted it for us. She put herself in the foreground as a set of allegorical figures: Wisdom, Discipline, and Benignity in stately dance, draperies billowing under a sky piled high with summer clouds. Her children were two happy little shepherds and two happy little shepherdesses piping on a distant hillside. We, the perfect offspring of a perfect union, had enjoyed a perfect upbringing.

The hardest point to revise was my sister Peigi. Mother had scrubbed and scrubbed her conscience, but some shadow of Peigi's childhood years—years of unbroken rancor and derision, of slaps and blows and hair-pulling and starvation—returned and returned like Lady M's damned spot. Part of the problem was that Peigi, who now lived far away in Oregon, had become very gracious. She had kept in touch. She called regularly. She did her best to see that Mother was as comfortable as she could be, that she was on the right amount of the right medications, that she would be able, if she chose, to die in her own home. Whenever she visited the east coast, Peigi stayed for a day or two on the Horn of the Moon even though the proximity of all those childhood artifacts could give her spells of dizziness and nausea which made Mother worry that she might be in ill *health*. Mother couldn't *understand* it. Peigi had always been such a *robust* child. In fact, we all had been *ridiculously* healthy. We were never sick at *all*.

"Well," Mother said to me one day, "your sister is just a *fantastic* mother, and she has worked very, very hard. Her *boys* are doing well; she has a great reputation where

she works. *Wherever* she's worked. She's really *done* something with her life." This was delivered earnestly, reproachfully, as though she suspected I wanted to accuse Peigi of sloth and bad parenting. "I know," I said. She was silent for a moment of dramatic consideration and then: "You know, I think she must have been bi-polar when she was in high school."

It did no good to point out that bi-polar disorder is not like mono or that Peigi is essentially the same person she always was. "Oh, come *on*. She is absolutely *not* the same person. She is *completely* different. *No* one could have predicted how she would turn out. She needed a *very* firm hand. She calls me every day. I don't know *why*. I suspect it's *good* for her."

This Grand Revision was somewhat undermined by the way she sought, as her widowhood advanced, to reclaim her ancient powers of command. Increasing frailty gave her a leverage she had not enjoyed for decades. She called us more and more frequently asking us to drive up to Horn of the Moon and help her with one thing or another.

We always went, and when we arrived, we discovered that help consisted not so much in accomplishing anything practical as in doing exactly what we were told. She was particular and insistent. She could take over a minute explaining *exactly* how to empty a barrel of weeds over the pasture fence. We were to do what we were asked and not one thing more; we were absolutely *not* to freelance. One late August day, after I had stacked a couple of cords of wood for her, I noticed that the catch on her wood stove door had rusted and seized up over the summer. I got a hammer and was just about to tap it free when she came into the room and asked, "What are you *doing*?" in a tone that suggested she had caught me with my hand in the till.

"I'm fixing your stove," I said.

"That's Pede's job."

"I'm right here. It'll take less than a second."

"You will *not* touch my stove with that hammer. You'll shatter the whole damned thing."

“Fuck you,” I thought graciously and tapped it anyway. Immediately the catch released and the handle was freed.

“See?” I said. “All better.”

“Thank-you,” she said crisply.

Gradually we became specialists, performing only those tasks she suspected we found most irksome. For me it was driving her places, especially to her hairdresser who lived forty minutes away and who, as he worked on her wisps, flattered her so relentlessly that she was compelled to disavow every unctuous word of it with breathless, elaborately artificial modesty all the way home. For Pede she reserved requests that were irritatingly vague or burdensomely trivial or which frustrated action. She might call him late at night to inform him that she thought she was having a medical emergency but that she didn’t want to go to the hospital; he was not to worry, and could he bring her more hand cream in the morning? But it was Betsy who stirred up Mother’s old blood lust. Betsy had always been the most responsible of us, the most easily moved to guilt; her vulnerability made her irresistible.

Mother wanted Betsy to touch her, to bathe her, to drive up to Vermont from Massachusetts to wash her hair. I once arrived at the Horn of the Moon unannounced in the middle of one of these shampooing sessions. Mother was standing at the kitchen sink and Betsy stood over her, gently massaging suds into her scalp, a pitcher of lukewarm water at her elbow. It sounded as though Mother were directing her own waterboarding. She groaned and spluttered, nothing Betsy did was *right*: she was being too *rough*; she was *missing* places; she wasn’t getting all the soap *out*; she wasn’t using enough water; she was using too *much* water; couldn’t she see she was getting soap in her eyes? Did Betsy think Mother had asked her to come all this way to *drown* her in her own *sink*?

Betsy looked at me over the top of Mother’s head and rolled her eyes. Mother did not immediately notice me; she was too lost in whatever was going on between the two of them. It wasn’t until Betsy was gently patting her hair dry with a towel, that she saw me, and then she lifted her head and stared like a lioness disturbed on a carcass. “Now,” she said to Betsy, “Upstairs for a bath.”

Mother's hunger for attention was terrible. She could not find nourishment in the world as it is. She wanted us near her all the time, but as soon as we got close, she erased us. She could eat only the promise-crammed air of her own fantasies. She conjured an illusory empire out of darkness visible: Pandæmonium, palace and city, seat of power to rival the towers of Heaven, the trickster kingdom of narcissism, the old fabric of wind and shadow and wish and denial.

It is a week before Thanksgiving 2012. Mother is ninety-eight years old. It is early in the morning and the sun has not yet risen. The month has been unseasonably warm, but today is raw and windy up in the hills on Horn of the Moon. Overnight the ruts have frozen in the narrow road that runs by her place and gusts of snow sweep down the mountain, through the stunted upland orchards and over her little farmhouse. Today she is paying her bills. She works at the little kitchen table under a dim lamp writing checks and addressing envelopes in her quivery hand. She has boiled a sauce pan of coffee for herself on the woodstove, the door of which she leaves precariously open because she "likes to keep an eye on it". A tinkling mound of coals throws a red warmth across the cobbled hearth and up the back of her chair. By the time the sun has come up she is ready to go to the mailbox down at the end of the drive. She does not bother with her overcoat or her blackthorn stick because they are a bother and because the stick makes her look like a crone.

She goes out the back door because both the heavy front door and the glass storm door stick. She has been having dizzy spells recently. Something the doctor has put her on, something that was intended to keep her heart from racing, makes the damned thing stutter and stop instead. When it stops, she faints. It always gets going again, but when it does, she generally finds herself on the ground. She is crossing through the woodshed with its uneven gravel floor when she loses consciousness, pitches forward and lands hard. When she comes to, she knows she has broken something and she appears to be bleeding from deep cuts on her forearms. Her knees too feel sticky with blood. She gathers the bills from where they have scattered, crawls to the woodpile, hauls herself upright and keeps going. Bleeding, in pain, with the world and its snow whirling around her, she makes her way down the driveway through the

brown and blowing weeds to her mailbox. “They were *bills*”, she explained later, “I was *going* to mail them.”

A neighbor is driving up the hill in his pickup truck. When he sees her, he slows. She’s not dressed warmly enough; she appears to be staggering, and the sleeves of her sweat shirt are soaked with blood. He stops. He puts her in the warm cab, goes inside and gets a jacket for her and then takes her to the hospital. She has a broken pelvis and extensive lacerations on her arms and legs.

Within a few days she is in a rehabilitation facility. It’s actually quite a nice place. It does not smell like a nursing home. It’s quiet, with broad corridors and large, sunny rooms. When I drop in to see her, she is alone. It is odd to see her name plate on the door like a secret that should not be exposed: “Frances Donaghy.” She is lying on her bed before a big window; she looks as though she has been dropped there by a careless hand. Her head is thrown back, canted off to one side. Her mouth is open and dark, the upper lip drawn back from long, ochre teeth. I have never seen this woman before. That scant nimbus of gray hair. That small, high-shouldered bone-cage of torso. The arms loose jointed and thin like the arms of a child or a marionette, the palms upward, a final shrug. The old feeling again; it is not her, it is something else, it is uncanny, it’s a doll, a fetish; it is feathers and bones and leather and baboon-blood paste and teeth of old cowrie shells. “Mom”, I say, and then louder, “Mom.” Incredibly she stirs, shifts. Her sleep has been deep and she is confused, “Pete?” she asks. “No,” I say. “John”. “Oh,” she says, “John.” She struggles into a sitting position and finds her glasses.

She looks at me, and fills up with herself. “I’m glad I have lived so long,” she says even before she is all the way back, as though she were taking up a conversation we had been having when she nodded off. “It has given me a chance to review my life.” I wait and say nothing. “I’ve always been *frugal*. I’ve never asked for a *thing*. I never even asked for a *job*. I would *never* have asked for a job, but they wanted to give me one. And then my nursing classmates made me a class officer. Well, I was *no* more interested in that kind of thing than in . . .” she pauses, unable to think of anything in which she could have comparably little interest. “Even with your father. I *never* pursued him. I was crazy about him of course but I *never* pursued. He pursued *me*. I count

myself very lucky. And here. My God, *any* little thing I happen to say they think is the height of cleverness. The nurses, of course. And the psychologist was in here the other day testing my cognitive function. He gave me three words at the beginning of our conversation and told me to remember them because at the end he was going to ask me what they were—I remembered all but one, and that one I recalled immediately with a hint. He seemed to think *that* was extraordinary. Well, afterwards, he was no sooner gone than he was back again. ‘I forgot my clipboard,’ he said. ‘Ah,’ I said, ‘*forgot.*’ Well, he laughed and he said, ‘Give me a high-five. I guess there are no problems *here.*’”

*I have reviewed my life and discovered that from the day I was born everybody has loved me, wanted me.* An offering from Pandæmonium; an exact untruth.

Thus Mother announces herself to herself, standing at the entrance to the shack she imagines, in her terrible weakness and her terrible strength, is a palace. She is a plucky five-year-old in outsized livery—knee breaches with silk stockings, a frogged and brocaded coat, a cocked hat that comes down over her eyes. “Her most high and puissant majesty,” she declaims “Empress of Life, Queen of all Knowledge and of all Virtue; Singular and Flawless, Tower of Ivory,” and she ushers in something dark and bent, something with crooked little horns, with shit in its burlap pants and lice crawling under its blackened scales.

She died at the age of one hundred and one. When she went into hospice, I found myself afflicted with a kind of tenderness for what had never been. I wanted to read to her. I *needed* to read to her—a compulsive return, perhaps, to the best part of childhood, to the only intimacy that had not been dangerous. I found one of her favorite books—*Cider with Rosie*—a too-charming-to-be-quite-true account of a rural English childhood by the poet Laurie Lee. I thought it might turn her mind fondly backwards. I tried to read to her several times, but she would have none of it. “What?” she’d say. “I can’t make heads nor tails of what you’re saying.” Why did she resist? That she *could* have listened if she chose is certain. After she died, when we were clearing out her room, the nurse—a big, gentle man with a full beard—came to me and said, “I want you to know how much I enjoyed taking care of your mother. Such an extraordinary woman.

You know, I read to her almost every evening. It was so peaceful. She'd listen very carefully and say the most intelligent things."

In her last two months she began to pass in and out of a terrible dementia that whittled her all the way down to her essential hunger. It was a madness that came upon her in fits. When she was in its grip, she'd call us from her hospice room. She wanted us to come visit. It did no good to remind her that one of us had been there earlier in the day or to reassure her that another of us would be there tomorrow; she lived only in the starving *now*. She saw no reason we could not sit by her in shifts, one after another for twenty-four hours every day. She wanted us to bring her things: Kleenex because "They told me here that they will charge me more if they supply it," shampoo because "the stuff here makes my hair fall out," clocks with extra-large numerals because "nothing you've given me is large enough." She could be wheedling and tearful in one moment and choking with fury in the next. Sometimes she would fall into the very center of herself. Then she would believe, as I have always believed in my heart, that someone was missing. She did not know who it was. She was desperate to know, and she wanted us to find out. At the peak of these fits the calls would come every three minutes for an hour or more until the facility, at our request, replaced her room phone with one that had no keypad.

Two days before Mother slipped into her final coma, Pede and I visited her. Her thoughts lay, like Ozymandias, in blocky ruins that communicated a message she did not intend. Pede had brought her a new talking clock, a small box that spoke the time when you pushed a button on top of it. She had broken the old one in her palsied impatience; the new one was bigger and easier to operate; the button on top was so big and so red that it looked like it might launch missiles.

"What's this?" Mother asked when she saw it.

"It's your new talking clock," Pede said.

"Where's the old one?"

"It's broken."

"Oh, it's *broken*?" she looked at the new clock as if it were a large spider. "Then why give it to *me*?"

"No, the *old* one is broken."

"But this *isn't* the old one."

"No".

"Well where *is* the old one?"

"I took it. It was broken. I threw it out"

"It's in my bag."

"No, I *took* it," Pede said. "It didn't *work*. I tried to get you one just like it, but the Society for the Blind doesn't have them anymore. They have *these* instead. They're *better*."

"My bag is on the floor," she said "It's in there. Get it for me."

"I took it home and threw it *out*. It's not there."

We are all silent for a moment and then with an angry bounce she said, "Just get me my *goddamned* bag!"

There was no clock in the bag, and her anger had exhausted her. "Wait a moment," she said, "I have to catch my breath. I can't be talking *all* the time although I know it's good for you." Pede and I looked at one another and kept still.

At last she said, "That *other* grandmother was *quite* a foul-mouthed old lady."

"What other grandmother?" I asked.

"*You* know. *Annie's* mother. *Tay*. That's what I *heard*. I hope I may never stoop to such a low expediency."

Another long silence while we all considered this. Pede grinned at me. Anne's mother, Tay, was widely acknowledged as a kind of saint. At last Mother said, "I was always a *leader*."

"A leader of what?" I ask.

"A leader of mankind," she said and fell asleep as though someone had hit a switch. When she woke up some twenty minutes later, she said, "I am about to deliver my last sermon. I will be dead in *this* many weeks," she held up three fingers and looked first at Pede and then at me over the top of her glasses. "Then I will be alone, alone, alone—flat on my back, staring into the sky with open eyes, seeing nothing. Strangers will walk by me all day long."

One night a few weeks before her one hundredth birthday Mother was seized by twelve violent hours of vomiting and diarrhea. She soiled her nightgown, her bedding, her bedroom carpet. She staggered to the bathroom where she lay until dawn, cold, filthy and wet, huddled on the floor next to the toilet. When the sun rose, she called my brother and asked him to come. She told him it was very important, but she did not tell him exactly what the problem was. When he was done cleaning up, he bought her a new nightgown and some new sheets and blankets, and when he put her to bed, she enjoined secrecy on him. He must tell *no one*, especially not his wife. Then she called Peigi to complain. No one has *ever* passed such a night. She had been *dizzy*; she had had *no* control of her bowels; she had been in *pain*; she had been *dying*. Peigi must not tell a *soul*.

Betsy, hearing of the episode from Peigi, drove up from Massachusetts the next afternoon to see how Mother was doing. She noticed the wood box was empty and offered to fill it. “No. Just leave it,” Mother said.

“Why?” Betsy asked, “It’s going to get cold again. You need it filled and I’m not sure you can manage it yet. I’m here and happy to do it.”

“Ne-ver mind. I have my reasons. You are not to touch a *stick* of that wood.”

When Betsy had gone, Mother called me. She told me that she felt fantastic. She had just awoken from the longest sleep of her life—almost eighteen hours. She asked me to come and fill her wood box for her. I was concerned. She had always taken great pride in filling the wood box by herself, but now she told me that, curiously, she seemed to have lost the strength of her hands. I imagined she was far worse off than she was letting me know. I imagined she feared the approaching cold snap, that she had no stove wood in the kitchen and no strength to fetch it from the shed. I imagined she was nearing the end.

But when, on the following day, I got to her house, I saw that she had not weakened in the least. There was a heavy, dark, antique bureau in her kitchen full of linens and old silver and candles and papers and photographs. It weighed considerably more than she did, but she had dragged it across the lumpy friction of braided rugs in order to get at the dust underneath it and in order to remove a heavy picture that had hung on the wall behind it. I saw that she had removed another large picture as well

from an awkward spot over the sink, and she appeared to have carried them both off to some other room to dust them under better light. I was impressed: Stonehenge, the pyramids, the mysterious power of the ancients.

“Hello?” I called, doubting that she could hear me, but she emerged from the dim interior of the house, swaying stiff-legged into the kitchen doorway. She was very upright, barely five feet tall, and weighing considerably less than one hundred pounds. She was wearing black trousers and a short woolen coat with brass buttons that gave her a tin-soldier, military look. I thought of Hoffmann’s nutcracker.

“Who’s that?” she said.

“It’s me,” I said.

“Who? John? You’re early.”

“Did you move the bureau by yourself?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “It wasn’t much. It was harder getting those pictures down.”

“Good Lord” I said, “Like an ant carrying a cricket’s carcass. For all your faults you’re the strongest damned centenarian that ever lived.”

“For all my what?” she asked. She was deaf, but she also feigned deafness.

“Faults,” I said.

“*What?*”

“I said, *faults*.”

“Oh, *faults*”. She assumed the arch expression that signaled she was about to make a serious joke. “I *have* no faults.”

When I had filled the wood box and rehung the pictures and moved the bureau back against the wall, she said, “Okay, now. For God’s sake sit down and talk to me.” I removed a copy of the *Times* from a chair and sat at the table. She had something particular to say, and she wasted no time in saying it:

“Your father and I always took such delight in you,” she says. “And we were *proud* of you. You never *had* to go to medical school, you know.”

This again. “Mother, please,” I said, “drop it.”

But she would not drop it. “You said such *funny* things when you were small and you were such a *character* all through high school. You made us laugh and whether you believe it or not we were *proud* of you.”

A one-hundred-year old great-grandmother gaslighting a sixty-year old grandfather about events from forty-five years ago. There was something utterly unclean in the way she so relentlessly pried, though more and more weakly, at the heavy stonework of what was and is. And there was something utterly infantile and hopeless in the rage and exhaustion I felt when she did it.

*Let it go*, I told myself. But I said, “You didn’t *seem* all that proud. Do you remember not going to my high school graduation because I wasn’t valedictorian? Do you remember asking, ‘How did it feel to sit among the idiots?’ when I got home?”

“You didn’t need us to keep *telling* you we were proud of you did you?” she pursued. And when I didn’t answer, she tried a new line of attack—“You gave up an awful lot for Jesus.”

“Well, I should get home,” I said and stood up.

“Are you going so soon?” she said. And immediately she was no longer confiding and superior. She may have been acting, and she may not have been, but she seemed frightened. She did not want to be left alone. “Wait a minute,” she said, “there’s something else I’d like you to do for me. These things are driving me crazy.” She held up her thumbs; the nails were long and broken and notched. “They keep snagging on things,” she said, “I have an appointment next week with a podiatrist who will cut *all* my nails, but I can’t wait that long with these.” Her neediness felt like cobwebs in my hair.

She had no nail clippers and so I went into the pantry where she kept her first aid kit in a dim corner under some cupboards and next to an old-fashioned breadbox. I carried it to the window and rummaged through the bandages and rolls of gauze and antibacterial creams and discovered the same small, curved pair of scissors with which, when I was a child, she had cut *my* nails. She moved a standing lamp over next to the rocker on the hearth. “Do it over here,” she said, “where there is light.”

I would have rather not. I did not want to touch her, but I sat next to her. Through the window I could see the falling snow turning the afternoon to twilight. The woods were growing invisible along the far edges of the fields, and the old house was fading into its hillside. We were an aging man and an ancient woman bending our heads together under the yellow light of a small lamp. We were on opposite sides of the same void; we were infiltrated by the same dread. Her hand was small and parched, spotted

and bruised, wrinkled as a sparrow's claw. It was very strange, that dying flesh—twisted, stained,, halfway to mummification. But when I held her hand against my knee to suppress its tremor, there was a sudden bustling far off in the back of my mind—doors opening and closing, running footfalls in the corridors, hurried whispers, heads craning over the banister to see who it was who had returned after all those years.

Her flesh was full of many voices calling to me from many places: memories beyond memory, ghosts of the ancient needs and terrors too faint for words. There in that dim kitchen was the dark stream, the lustral basin, the brazen threshold and the downward stair. Mother wanted me to take her nails down as far as I could, but she feared I would cut her. She was on blood thinners and would not be able to stop bleeding. With each snip she flinched and hissed as though I were hurting her, but when I was done, she kept finding rough places and asking me to cut more. I insisted that I'd taken her nails down to the quick and could not safely go any further, but she did not want me to stop *touching* her. And when at last, desperate for the upper air, I stood and put the scissors away and shrugged on my coat she asked, "When will you be back?"

"Not for a couple of weeks," I said.

"No," she said, "You'll come back sooner. You cannot get away so easily."

**John Donaghy** spent twelve years teaching and coaching at a secondary school and twenty-six more serving as an adjunct in both the English Department and Institute for Writing and Rhetoric at Dartmouth College before he mustered the courage to drop it all and become a writer. At the age of sixty-seven he received his MFA from the Rainier Writers Workshop in Tacoma, WA. He lives in New Hampshire with his wife who is also a writer.