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THIS IS THE story of Bob Burgess, a tall, heavyset man who lives in the town of Crosby, Maine, and he is sixty-five years old at the time that we are speaking of him. Bob has a big heart, but he does not know that about himself; like many of us, he does not know himself as well as he assumes to, and he would never believe he had anything worthy in his life to document. But he does; we all do.

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AUTUMN COMES EARLY to Maine.

By the second or third week in August a person driving in a car might glance up and see in the distance the top of a tree that has become red. In Crosby, Maine, this year it happened first with the large maple tree by the church, and yet it was not even midway through the month of August. But the tree began to change color on its side facing east. This was curious to those who had lived there for years, they could not remember that being the first tree to change color. By the end of August, the entire tree was not red but a slightly orange yellowy thing, to be seen as you turned the corner onto Main Street. And then September followed, the summer people went back to where they had come from, and the streets of Crosby often had only a few

people walking down them. The leaves did not seem vibrant, overall, and people speculated that this was because of the lack of rainfall that August—and September—had endured.

A FEW YEARS EARLIER, people entering the town of Crosby from the turnpike's exit would drive past a car dealership and a donut shop and a diner, and also by large run-down wooden houses whose porches held things like bicycle tires and plastic toys and coat hangers and air conditioning units that had not been used in years, and in one of these houses a middle-aged man named Ricky Davis lived. He was a large man and frequently drunk and could often be seen leaning over the rail of his side porch with his pants halfway down showing his huge bottom, crack and all, to the folks driving by, and those who had not seen this before would turn their heads to watch with a sense of wonderment. But then the town council had voted to put in the new police station at that spot, and so Ricky Davis and the house he had lived in were now gone; it was rumored that he was living out near the old fairgrounds in a Hatfield Housing unit.

WHEN YOU GOT into the middle of the town you could see a large brick house that stood a little off Main Street. After the clocks were set back in November, making it dark earlier, the few folks driving by, and those who might be strolling on the sidewalk across the street, could see into the windows of this house, yellow from the lamps turned on inside, and Bob Burgess and his wife, Margaret Estaver, might be observed cooking together in their kitchen until they tugged their cur-

tains closed. People knew who they were, and in a way not fully conscious there was a sense of safety that came from this couple living right here in the middle of town: Margaret was the Unitarian minister, and she had her following. Bob had been a lawyer in New York City for many years in his younger days, but nobody held this against him, probably because he had grown up in Shirley Falls, forty-five minutes away; he had returned to Maine almost fifteen years ago when he married Margaret. He still took occasional criminal cases in Shirley Falls and was known to keep an office there, though he had mostly retired by now. And also—people spoke of this quietly—Bob had suffered a tragedy in childhood: He had been playing with the gearshift of the family car and it had rolled down the hill of the Burgesses' driveway; people in town understood that the car—and therefore Bob—had killed Bob's father, who was checking on their mailbox there.

OLIVE KITTERIDGE, who was ninety years old and living in the retirement community called the Maple Tree Apartments, knew this about Bob Burgess and she had always liked him, she thought he had a quiet sadness to him, most likely from this early misfortune. Olive did not particularly care for Bob's wife, Margaret. This was because Margaret was a minister and Olive did not like ministers—except for Cookie, who had married her to her first husband, Henry. Wonderful man, Reverend Daniel Cooke. And wonderful man, Henry Kitteridge.

The pandemic had been hard for Olive Kitteridge—hard for everyone, really—but Olive had endured it, day after day in her little apartment in this retirement community, yet when they stopped allowing people to eat in the dining room and

started bringing their food to them instead, she thought she would go absolutely batty. By the end of that first year, though, with her vaccinations and then later a booster, she was able to get out a bit more, someone might drive her into town or take her down by the water. But the real problem was that during the pandemic, Olive's best friend, Isabelle Goodrow, who lived two doors down from her, had taken a bad fall and—of all the awful things that could have happened—had been moved "over the bridge" to the nursing home part of the place. Now Olive went to visit Isabelle every day, reading her the newspaper from front to back. But it had been hard, and it still was.

OUT ON THE end of the point of Crosby, high up on a cliff that looked over the (mostly) roiling waters of the Atlantic Ocean, lived a woman named Lucy Barton, who had arrived with her ex-husband, William, two years before, escaping New York City during the pandemic, and they had ended up staying in town. There were mixed feelings about this: The natural reticence toward New Yorkers was part of it, but also housing prices in Crosby had gone through the roof exactly because of folks like this Lucy Barton, who had decided to stay in town, and anyone from Maine who had been hoping to move into a nicer house now found that they could not afford one. Lucy Barton had grown up in a small town in Illinois and had lived in New York City her whole adult life; she had never even been a summer person in Maine before arriving here with her ex-husband. Also, Lucy Barton was a fiction writer, and that made people have different feelings; mostly they would have preferred her to go back to New York, but nobody seemed to have anything bad to say about her; and except for her walks along

the river with her friend Bob Burgess she was rarely seen. Although she was sometimes observed going through the back door that led up to the little office space she rented above the bookstore.

ON MAIN STREET THERE were HELP WANTED signs or HIRING NOW signs in most of the store windows, and along the coastline a few restaurants had to close because there were not enough people to work in them. What had gone wrong? There were different theories, but it would be fair to say that most inhabitants of Crosby did not know. They only knew that the world was not what it had once been. And most of these people in the town of Crosby were old, or almost old, because this is the way the population of Maine had been for years. Some said that this was the problem, that there were no young folks to take these jobs. Others argued that the unemployment situation was happening not just in Maine but all across the country; some speculated that it was the opioid crisis, that people weren't able to pass their drug test in order to work. And then others claimed that the younger generation was at fault; Malcolm Moody's sixteen-year-old grandson, for example, had come to visit for three days and was playing videogames on his iPhone constantly. What could you do?

Nothing.

AND THEN IN October the foliage exploded, shattering the world with a goldenness. The sun shone down, and yellow leaves fluttered everywhere; it was a thing of beauty. The days were cold and at night it rained, but in the morning there was

the sun again, and all the glory of the natural world twinkled and nestled itself around the town of Crosby. The clouds that were low in the sky would suddenly block out the sun, and then just as quickly the clouds would part and it was as though a bright light had been turned on and the sky was blue and bright again with the yellow and orange leaves floating quietly to the ground.

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A THOUGHT HAD taken hold of Olive Kitteridge on one of these days in October, and she pondered it for almost a week before she called Bob Burgess. "I have a story to tell that writer Lucy Barton. I wish you would have her come visit me."

The story was one that Olive had been reflecting on with more and more frequency, and she thought—as people often do—that if her story could be told to a writer, maybe it could be used in a book one day. Olive did not know if Lucy was a famous writer or not quite a famous writer, but she decided it did not matter. The library always had a long wait list for Lucy's books, so Olive had ordered them from the bookstore instead, and she read through them, and something made her think that this Lucy might like—or could possibly use—the story Olive had to tell.

SO ON THIS particular autumn day, the yellow leaves of the tree seen through Olive's large windowed back doorway were quivering to the ground as she waited for Lucy Barton to show up. Olive, sitting in her wingback chair, saw two chickadees and a titmouse at her feeder. She leaned forward and spotted a

squirrel. Olive rapped her knuckles against the window, hard, and the squirrel scurried away. "Hah," said Olive, sitting back. She hated squirrels. They ate her flowers, and they were always bothering her birds.

Olive found her glasses on the small table next to her and picked up her big cordless phone, which was also on the table, and pressed some numbers on it.

"Isabelle," said Olive. "I can't come visit you this morning, I'm having a visitor. I'll tell you about it when I come see you this afternoon. Bye now." Olive clicked the phone off and looked around her small apartment.

She tried to imagine the place through the writer's eyes, and Olive decided it was all right. It was neat, and not cluttered with hideous knickknacks the way so many old people had in their homes, tabletops crowded with photographs of their grandchildren, such foolishness. Olive had four grandchildren, but she only had a photograph of one of them in her bedroom, a small photo of Little Henry, who was not so little anymore. And in the living room on her hutch she kept a large photograph of her first husband, Henry, and that was enough. She looked at it now and said, "Well, Henry, we'll see if she's responsive."

AT FIVE MINUTES before ten there was a light knock on her door that faced the hallway, and Olive yelled out, "Come in!"

In stepped a small woman who looked meek and mousy. Olive could not stand meek-and-mousy-looking people. The woman said, "I'm sorry I'm early. I'm always early, I can't seem to help it."

"That's fine. I hate people who are late. Sit down," Olive

said, and she nodded toward the small couch against the wall across from her. Lucy Barton came in and sat down. She was wearing a blue and black plaid coat that went to her knees and jeans that Olive thought were too tight for a woman her age; Lucy was sixty-six, Olive had looked it up.

The sofa was a stiff one, Olive knew this, but the woman somehow—the way she sat on it—made it appear even stiffer. And she had the strangest things on her feet, boots with long big silver zippers right up the front of them. Olive could see the small ankles and the tight pants that were tucked into them.

"Take your coat off," Olive said.

"No thank you. I get cold easily."

Olive rolled her eyes. "I would hardly say it's cold in here."

Olive was disappointed in this creature. A silence fell into the room and Olive let it sit there. Finally, Lucy Barton said, "Well, it's nice to meet you."

"Ay-yuh" was all Olive said, swinging one foot back and forth. There was something odd about this woman: She wore no glasses, and her eyes were not small, but she had a slightly stunned look on her face. "What are those things you've got on your feet?" Olive asked.

The woman looked down at them, sticking her toes straight up. "Oh, they're boots. We went to Rockland last summer and I found these in a store."

Rockland. Money. Of course, Olive thought. She said, "There's no snow on the ground, don't know why you need boots."

The woman closed her eyes for a long moment, and when she opened them she did not look at Olive.

"So, I hear you're with us in town to stay," Olive said.

"Who told you that?" The woman asked this as though

really curious to know the answer, and she continued to look slightly bewildered.

"Bob Burgess."

And then the woman's face changed; it became gentle, relaxed, for a moment. "Right," she said.

OLIVE TOOK A breath and said, "Well, Lucy. How are you liking our little town of Crosby?"

"It's quite a change," Lucy Barton said.

"Well, it's not New York, if that's what you mean."

Lucy looked around the room and then said, "I guess that is what I mean."

Olive continued to watch her. For a few moments there was only the ticking of the grandfather clock and the slight whirring sound of the refrigerator in the alcove kitchen. "You told Bob that you had a story to tell me?" Lucy asked. She slipped off her coat then, letting it stay on her back, and Olive saw a black turtleneck. Skinny. The creature was skinny. But her eyes were watching Olive now with a keenness.

Olive swung an arm lightly toward the stack of books on the bottom shelf of the small table beside her. "I've read all your books."

Lucy Barton did not seem to have any response to this, though her eyes briefly dropped down to the books on the shelf.

Olive said, "I thought your memoirs were a little self-pitying, myself. You're not the only person to come from poverty."

Lucy Barton again seemed to have no response to this.

Olive said, "And how does your ex-husband William feel, being written about? I'm curious to know."

Lucy gave a small shrug. "He's okay with it. He knows I'm a writer."

"I see. Ay-yuh." Olive added, "And now you're back with him. Together again. But not married."

"That's right."

"In Crosby, Maine."

"That's right."

AGAIN, THERE WAS a silence. Then Olive said, "You don't look a bit like your photograph on your books."

"I know." Lucy said it simply and gave a shrug.

"Why is that?" Olive said.

"Because some professional photographer took it. And also my hair isn't really blond anymore. That photo was taken years ago." Lucy put her hand through her hair, which was chin-length and pale brown.

"Well, it was too blond in the photo," Olive said.

A sudden slant of sunlight came through the window and fell across the wooden floor. The grandfather clock in the corner kept on with its ticking. Lucy reached behind her and took her coat and placed it on the couch next to her. "That's my husband," said Olive, pointing to the large photograph on the hutch. "My first husband, Henry. Wonderful man."

"He looks nice," Lucy said. "Tell me the story. Bob said you had a story you wanted me to hear." She said this kindly. "I'd like to hear it, I really would."

"Bob Burgess is a good fellow. I've always liked him," Olive said.

Lucy's face got pink—this is what Olive thought she saw. "Bob is the best friend I have in this town. He's maybe the best