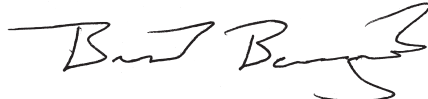


*Stoic?...Reserved?...Confused?...In any case, my tendency to stare was present from an early age.*

**Brad Beauregard** was born in Skowhegan, Maine in 1988. In 2012, he received his MA in English from the University of Maine, where he concentrated in creative writing. During graduate school, he completed his first novel, a story that includes ice cream trucks, Wild Bill Hickok, westward expansion, Abe Lincoln, and a Volkswagen Passat. Beauregard was a finalist for the 2012 Marguerite McGlinn Prize for Fiction from *Philadelphia Stories*. “What’s Kept” is his first publication.

## WHAT'S KEPT



Brad Beauregard

**H**heavy dew settles over Iowa, so I'm thinking of the story my grandfather told. His story also began this way.

When I was twelve years old, I spent a week in Pennsylvania, and on the first day the power went out. It was raining. Flower pots on the patio spilled over with water, and rivers formed in the gutters, carrying leaves and trash down the street. Rain splattered the vehicles in the driveway, drops so big they exploded on the pavement. The house was silent except for thudding on the tin roof.

"Just a heavy dew," he said.

"It's pouring," I said.

"Just a heavy, heavy dew," he said again.

He hadn't looked away from the television.

"I remember the last time I saw real rain," he said. "It was in Maine, and it lasted all summer. Rivers would grow by the hour. Umbrellas were useless. You couldn't see to drive when it was really coming down. If you went out to check the mail, you might as well have jumped in a lake. It was that bad. I remember how we complained about it, and when the first chunk of Maine broke off and floated away, I remember everyone blaming the rain. I can't be sure," he said, "but I don't think the rain had anything to do with it."

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My fiancée is from Connecticut. In October we get married on the shore of Lake Zoar.

Dawn rises cold and gray over the trees, but by midafternoon the sky is blue and endless, and the lake ripples eastward with a gentle breeze.

We make our vows. Everyone cheers. They smile. We smile together, and our friends hope we'll remember this day forever.

Leaves have just begun to turn.

"Does autumn come to Iowa?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

We were sitting on his patio. The rain had stopped.

"Maine will always be autumn," he said. "Leaves, cold breeze blowing in from Canada, the smell of pumpkin and cinnamon, the way a gray sky brings out the yellow and orange trees. That's the way I choose to remember it. That's how it was before it started to disappear."

He lit a cigarette.

"But disappear isn't the right word," he said. "Because it didn't go away all at once. Maine broke off and floated away piece by piece, and it took a long time, or what seemed like a long time, back in those days. So if anything, I guess Maine dissolved.

"It started in Bar Harbor. During the fall, people on the island started complaining that the mainland was getting farther away. No one believed them, even when the bridge to Trenton broke clean in half. Bridges break all the time. They get old and weak and can't hold things together anymore. That's what happens.

"Sure enough, we were wrong. By October, the whole island was a good twenty miles out in the Atlantic. We had to ferry people back and forth on lobster boats for a while, but then the island got too far away. So one day we ferried everyone to the mainland. Then we never saw Bar Harbor again."

I listened.

My wife spends the afternoon planting flowers in our backyard, coming inside after sunset. She smiles. Her white shirt is covered in

streaks and patches of dirt, and her jeans have grass stains on the knees. When she takes off her gardening gloves and wraps her arms around my shoulders, I pull her close. She smells like weeds, flowers, potting soil. I tell her she smells beautiful.

The next day we were trout fishing in the stream behind his house. He continued his story until I interrupted him.

“Is this a real story?”

I was old enough to believe I had the right to question him. He didn't answer right away, instead taking a cast out into the stream. Then another. He stayed quiet until his cigarette burned down. He dropped it into the stream, watched it float away.

“It's a true story,” he said.

“After Bar Harbor, we started to lose a lot of land a lot faster,” he said. “First, a chunk of Eastport broke off. Then people down at Old Orchard started saying their beach was getting smaller. By then, no one tried to deny it. Everyone knew that Maine was floating away.”

He reeled in his line and sat down on a rock without taking another cast. I reeled my line in, too.

“It didn't seem like a big deal at first. Sure, we were losing land, but we had plenty to spare. I remember waking up every morning and checking the paper to see how much land we'd lost overnight. I had a buddy who thought it was great. He lived about twenty miles inland, but all of a sudden he could fish striped bass right off his front porch. Until his house floated away.

“And besides, Governor Walton told everyone not to panic. He said it was just the natural way of things. Global warming. Continental drift, all that. I believed him, too. That's why I stayed.

“But just shy of a year after we lost Bar Harbor, all of Washington County was gone. That's when Governor Walton decided to bring in the dirt. Imagine eighteen-wheelers flying down the highway, each one carrying tons of dirt from all over the country. Dirt from Massachusetts. From Vermont. From New York. From Iowa. We got as much as we could, piled it right into the ocean. We were going to rebuild the coastlines, but this time we'd build it better. That's

what Walton said. I spent a whole summer heaving mound after mound of dirt into the Atlantic. I probably shoveled a few hundred tons. Maybe more.”

His mouth hung open as if he had more to say, but instead he got up and walked to the house. I followed him up the trail. Neither of us said anything.

Snow comes to Iowa, and our daughter is almost five years old. My wife and I take her outside to play in the snow. We try to build a snowman, but the snow isn't wet enough. No matter how we press mounds of snow together, each time the snowballs fall apart. We try, but it's impossible to make snowballs, or snowmen or snow forts, so we lie down in the snow, and my wife teaches my daughter how to make a snow angel. After we go inside, falling snow fills the hollowed outlines they left behind.

“You're old enough to already know this,” my grandfather said, “but sometimes things don't always work out. Sometimes you try as hard as you can, for as long as you can, and things just don't end up the way you want them to. Then you realize that when things decide to fall apart, there's no stopping them. Things fade away when they want.”

He paused and looked at me.

“But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try,” he said.

It was dark. We sat on his patio underneath the porch light. Mosquitoes and moths circled and danced and buzzed around the light.

“The dirt didn't work so well,” he said. “We'd spent an entire week building up fifty feet of land, and when we came back to work on Monday, all that dirt would be gone, plus another ten feet of land past where we had started the last week. We soon realized there's a big difference between dirt and land.

“But we kept at it, right until we had used up all that dirt. We thought we were fixing the problem, but I'm not sure we even slowed it down. Chunks of Maine floated off by the day. Houses. Lawns. Garages. City halls, and parks and baseball fields. All that just floated away. Piece by piece. One day after another.

“When the dirt idea fell through, people really started to panic. Governor Walton evacuated anyone within twenty miles of the coast, which was about half the state, by then. But he still wasn’t giving up, Old Walton. He said we’d be able to turn things around, and that we just needed to keep working, keep trying. So that’s what we did.”

We drive from Davenport to Des Moines. Lightning spears into the plain. Bent and broken streaks thread through the sky and down below the horizon. Our daughter stares out the rear window and asks if the lightning will hit us. My wife and I tell her that the lightning is getting farther away.

My daughter slouches in her seat, tells us the lightning is still scary. My wife tells her we’ll be fine, and as she looks out across the plain she says it’s beautiful.

My grandfather and I were stacking firewood. He carried two pieces at a time, back rounded. He coughed. Then he coughed again.

“You know,” he said, “I should tell you about the trees. That’s one of the best memories I have of Maine.”

He sat down on the pile of firewood. He took his hat off, wiped his brow.

“But first,” he said, “I need to tell you about the ropes.”

I kept stacking wood.

“After the plan with the dirt fell through, Walton decided we’d be better off trying to save what we had left, rather than waste time trying to rebuild the parts we’d already lost. So he made a deal with the governor of New Hampshire. They were going to let us tie ropes from Kittery to Portsmouth. Giant ropes, as big around as a person. We’d tie those ropes to giant stakes in each state. Walton convinced us that if the state was tied to the mainland, then we couldn’t float away.

“It was a little crazy. Still, I think it would have worked. But things didn’t pan out. We spent a couple months bringing these ropes in, digging the stakes into the ground, planning out where the stakes needed to go, and during that time, we kept losing more and more land.

“Then I guess the governor in New Hampshire got scared, because before we ever tied those ropes down, he called the whole thing off. He said his state couldn’t risk being dragged out into the Atlantic with Maine. You can’t blame him, I suppose.”

He lit a cigarette, stared off to the east. His gray hair was slicked back with sweat.

“Soon after that, Walton declared a state of emergency, and the National Guard evacuated everyone who was still left. He said we had done the best we could. I’ve wondered about that. I’m sure we could have done things differently, but I don’t know if it would have changed anything. But as the years go by, it’s hard not to wonder whether we were to blame or if we should have gone about it another way.”

He stopped, still looking toward the east. His cigarette had burned out, but still hung from his lips.

“What about the trees?” I asked.

“Right,” he said. “The trees.”

He looked back in my direction.

“When we were packing up to get out of the state, the water line had pretty much reached Augusta. I was helping my buddy load up his car so he could get his family out. We were standing out on his front yard and we heard this loud snapping, like someone breaking through an old wooden porch, the way wood sounds when it bends and splinters.

“At first we thought it was land breaking away and that people might be in trouble, so we sprinted toward the coast, which was only half a mile away. When we got there, we realized it wasn’t just land. The cracking and breaking and snapping came from trees. A crowd of oaks, poplars, maples, and pines were floating down the Kennebec into the Atlantic, but these trees were still attached to chunks of land, so they were floating upright into the ocean. After an hour, the whole bay was filled with trees, like a forest had sprouted right there in the Atlantic. When they got farther away, the trees looked like a fleet of sailboats scudding away. Hundreds of them. Thousands of them. More than you could imagine. We spent the whole evening watching those trees float away, until you couldn’t see anything except the tips of the highest boughs poking above the horizon. It was beautiful.”

He craned his neck toward the darkening sky, then stood and started toward the house. I followed several steps behind.

"I've spent a lot of time wondering what happened to those trees," he said. "That's probably what I've thought about the most over all the years."

"When did that happen?" I asked.

"The trees?"

"No," I said. "I mean, how long ago did everything happen?"

He stopped walking and turned toward me.

"A long time," he said. "That's how it is with any story. It's never the story that matters. It's the time between the events and the telling. That's the true story. Over the years you take all the things you thought about, talked about, heard about. You leave out the things that don't matter, keep the things that do. Then you get older, and present and past happen altogether.

"As for me, I remember the way rain looks. I remember autumn. I remember the smell of dirt, and I remember how it doesn't hold together no matter how much you want it to. I remember how those trees floating off into the Atlantic should have scared the hell out of me, but I remember that they didn't. Most of all, I remember how it feels for all those things to be memories, and nothing else. Do you understand?"

"I think so," I said.

But I didn't, not then.

Our daughter falls off her bicycle, and my wife puts a Band-Aid on her knee, but she worries it will leave a scar. Our daughter doesn't cry. The next morning I make her breakfast, and she gets on the bus to go to school.

"I stayed as long as I could," my grandfather said. "But it was floating away faster than we could think of ways to stop it."

The room was quiet and white, bright lights humming overhead. He sat on his bed, and I sat next to him. Everything smelled clean and plastic. We were alone.



“Governor Walton had busses shuttling people into New Hampshire. Others drove out through Canada. But before I got on any bus, I grabbed one last thing from my front yard—a rock, about the size of my palm, from the edge of the driveway. I didn’t know why at the time, but I thought that I should take the rock with me. It wasn’t anything special, but I took it anyway. I’m glad I did.”

He coughed, sipped water.

“Then I left,” he said. “And when I got on board one of the busses, the driver told me I was lucky, because that was the last bus out. I sat in the backseat and looked out the rear window the whole ride, which didn’t take long, since the state was so small by then.

“Governor Walton hung around though. Right through the end and even beyond that. I remember the last time I saw him. A big crowd had gathered on the coast of New Hampshire to watch the last chunk of Maine float off. Governor Walton stood right out on the edge of Maine. He had his back to the crowd and was looking out at the Atlantic.

“When Maine finally gave way, it wasn’t the loud crack we always expected. It sort of just crumbled away. And Old Walton stayed, hands on his hips, looking out to sea, floating off into the Atlantic, like he was going after all those pieces and chunks we lost over the years. Then after a while, Walton faded off until his outline blurred into the water and sky, and just like that Maine disappeared behind the horizon, just like Bar Harbor had, just like the trees had.”

He coughed again and laid his head back against the pillow.

“Is that the end of the story?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

“How does it end?”

“It doesn’t,” he said.

Just after dawn, I sit at my desk reading the newspaper, coffee steaming, vapor floating up and fading into the air. As I lift the cup, it slips and spills over my desk. I take a towel and wipe away the puddles and streams, watch a pool of coffee form around a rock on the corner of my desk. When I pick the rock up, a dry circle remains beneath it. After mopping the coffee from the desk and wiping the edges of the rock, I set it back in its place.

We cleaned out my grandfather's house. My aunts and uncles kept some things, things they remembered or wanted to remember. They told stories, glossed over years, passed by details they didn't want or need. They dug into the past, lost their places in the present, like leaves fallen from limbs, gathered on the ground, and raked into piles they could dive into and hide in at any time, in any place.

When we moved the boxes from his house to the garage, I found a rock buried beneath some faded shirts and ragged shoes. I took it out and stared at it. My aunt watched me.

"It's just a rock," she said.

But it's not. 