

EXCERPT FROM

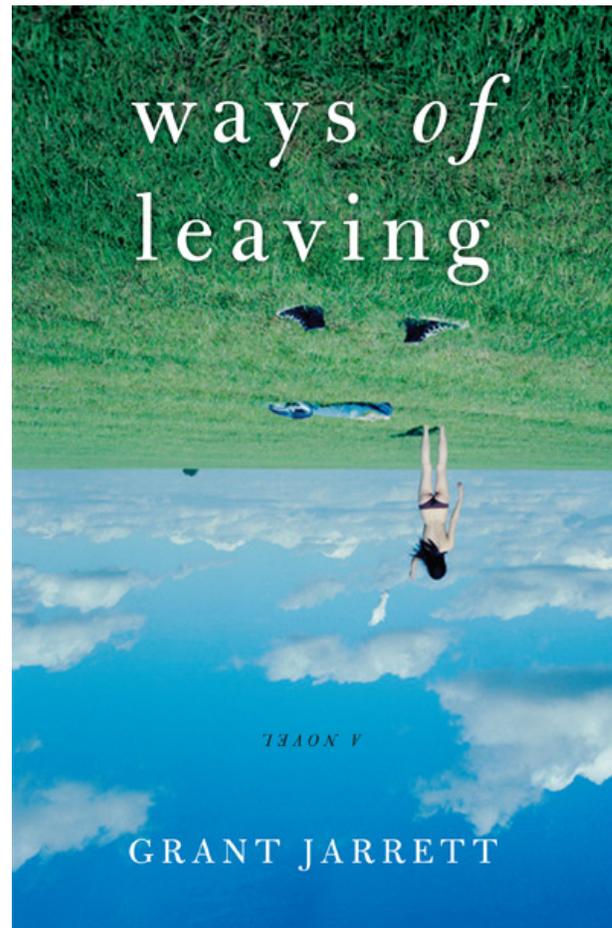
# Ways of Leaving

A NOVEL BY GRANT JARRETT

Chase wasn't ready to go back to his father's house, to stare at the walls or to spend hours obsessively scrubbing them. He needed a distraction, something to jar his thoughts onto some other path. Without a plan or a destination he headed toward downtown Stroudsburg.

The traffic on Main Street was heavier than he'd expected, and the population, while still elevating the national standard for obesity, now included a generous mix of darker shades. Old buildings with new faces, already dull and worn with age, neglect or both, flanked the narrow, two-lane street: a sporting goods store, gift shops, stores selling sewing machines and vacuum cleaners, a flower shop, two or three clothing stores, bars, cafés, a coffee shop and a hotel; a mix of mom-and-pop stores with a few representatives from the minor chains. In spite of the facelifts everything looked dirty and cheap. Without shedding a single layer of its shoddy atmosphere, his hometown had evolved from a gloomy small town to an ugly little city. It certainly wasn't home. The town where he grew up no longer existed. It had vanished along with his childhood.

Certainly most of what was gone wouldn't be missed, not by him or anyone else, but there were aspects of his past that he would welcome now: images and scents, sounds and sensations that might provide some sort of comfort, a feeling of home—not his true home, not the place where he'd lived,



with all the oppression and unspoken tension, but the home that exists in that faint but compelling feeling of security and belonging that can be triggered by memories of those transient moments and the sensory stimuli that somehow made them shimmer. There were the thunderstorms he would watch—sometimes alone, sometimes with Aaron or Hannah—from the illusory safety of the front porch, the violence of the noise and light, the power of the rain, inexorable and insistent as the passing of time—as his mother's silent anger—and the crisp, cleansing scent that remained when it was over. The nights when he slipped silently out into the backyard with his blanket to lie on his back and stare up at the sky watching the stars multiply, and then to wait, sometimes for hours, in hopes of glimpsing just one shooting star, and then, spurred on by his success, to see another. Those same stars were still there, but they looked duller now. Most of their magic was spent, or if it was there, it was no longer available to him. If his memory could be trusted, which wasn't at all clear, there'd even been a few pleasant family moments: sitting around a tree opening presents on Christmas morning and acting for a couple hours as though everything was just fine and dandy; the few times his father laughed, and then, forgetting for a moment how terribly unhappy she was, his mother joined in, her laughter staggered and uneasy, as though she was trying to choke it back, as though it confused her or caused her terrible pain. The fireplace where they roasted marshmallows and popped corn; the neighborhood cat, the one nobody owned and everyone fed and cared for, fat, fluffy, and orange as a Creamsicle; the big weeping willow in the front yard and the crooked tree out back that was made for climbing. Those trees, that fireplace, the cat, the laughter and the stars had meant something, had produced in him a singular warmth, something separate from home and family but somehow representative of what some part of him knew it *should* have been.

But perhaps what he'd found was of his own making, generated to fill a void, the feelings merely artifacts of some frenzied subconscious search. Perhaps everyone found comfort in convenient little myths created out of need, out of desperation. Or maybe some lives were truly wholesome, replete with the rich, sustaining byproducts of love. But what did it matter? Searching for answers was like studying a map after arriving at your final destination. All the information in the world wouldn't alter where he was or what he'd become.

At Ninth and Main Chase stopped for a red light. Hobbled across the street pushing a shopping cart was a man in tattered jeans and a baggy green t-shirt that looked as though it had spent a week balled up in his back pocket. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with hair the color of used motor oil. As he crossed in front of the car Chase noticed the prominent forehead, the Roman nose and broad extended jaw. That distinctive profile was etched in his memory. In a town this size how

could it belong to anyone else? His gut churned. It had to be his old high school friend. Tim Staples had been bright and talented and far more popular than any of Chase's other friends, but now he looked as though life had collapsed in on him.

Chase pressed the button to lower his window. He was about to call out when a horn blared behind him. He looked up at the light and drove on. When he was on the north side of the intersection he craned his neck around to look back. Tim was leaning over, rooting through a trash bin in front of Dunkin' Donuts. It didn't make sense, didn't seem possible, and it was sad, but it really had nothing at all to do with Chase. Tim was just another piece of a past that no longer existed.

Chase didn't want to be here, in the land of the terminally corpulent, where almost everyone smoked and where among even the most cultured, motor vehicles had a more prominent position, and were more likely to spark animated debate, than literature, art or music. But neither was he eager to go back home to the overpriced strip mall that New York City had become, or to the suburbs, where people hid behind the perfect clothes, the perfect hairstyles, the perfect toys, the perfect cars, the myth of sophistication and simulated depth, which, for those few who cared or dared to look deeper, was totally unconvincing, but which no one ever challenged. But was everyone so deeply flawed, or did it serve the needs of Chase's ravenous ego, did it make him feel better about himself, to view them that way? At least I'm not *that* bad. Of course that didn't work. Not at all. Nor did this ceaseless self-examination bring him any answers. And with his sister in yet another form of limbo there really was no question where he needed to be.

In spite of his attempt at a cognitive detour, he couldn't excise from his thoughts the image of Tim and the shopping cart. Chase rubbed his temples, checked his mirror, cursed and made a u-turn.

Tim was still in front of Dunkin' Donuts arranging the contents of his cart when Chase pulled into the lot. After parking his car Chase stepped out and approached his old friend.

"Hey, Tim. It's me, Chase."

Just a cold, empty stare.

"Chase Stoller. We were in high school together, Stroudsburg High."

Tim narrowed his eyes and scrutinized Chase, inspecting his clothing, his hair. The suggestion of a smile, the slightest nod.

"You remember?"

The smile blossomed, though there was something peculiar about his face. It was a little difficult to look at. Maybe he'd been in an accident and suffered a head injury. That could explain the vaguely

contorted shape of his head when viewed from the front, and the way he stood with his shoulders hunched.

"What's going on?" Why not ask where he got the nifty cart? "It's been such a long time." Ugh. "Listen, let me buy you some lunch, or dinner or whatever. What do you think?"

Tim shrugged, then nodded.

Chase surveyed the area. "Is there some place around here?"

Still silent, Tim pointed to a little tavern on Ninth Street, just east of Main.

Chase smiled and reached out to grip his friend's arm. "Can you speak, Tim?"

Tim looked down at the ground and shook his head.

The bar was dark and, but for the bartender, unpopulated. The odor, a musty mélange of beer, cigarette smoke, fried food and aged eighty-proof urine, was overpowering. They sat down at the table nearest the door and a minute later the bartender, a tall, blocky man with a face full of potholes, plodded over.

He glared at Tim and then turned to Chase. "I take it *you're* paying." His arms were carpeted with a heavy black pelt.

"Yeah, I'm paying."

He rolled his eyes. "What'll it be?"

"Can we get some food?"

"You can if you want burgers and fries."

Chase looked at Tim. "Is that okay?"

Tim nodded and pointed to a card on the table that showed a bottle of Pabst.

"Two burgers with fries and two bottles of Pabst."

"No Pabst."

"What do you have?"

The bartender sighed. "Why'nt you ask your pal?"

Chase swallowed his anger. "Just tell me what you got."

"Bud, Schaefer and Rolling Rock."

"Two Rolling Rocks. And can we get cheese on the burgers?"

"Cheddar or American?"

Of course. "Cheddar okay," he asked Tim.

Tim nodded.

The bartender shook his head and walked away.

There was something ludicrous about the entire situation, and the symbolism wasn't lost on Chase. Here he was again, trying to communicate with someone who sat across from him unable or unwilling to speak, to give anything back. Feeding him was, perhaps, a gracious gesture, but it was also a self-serving act, the effects of which—beyond the mollification of his own conscience—would be no more lasting than a strip of duct tape on a freshly severed limb.

"I've been away for a long time," he said. "I have no idea ... I don't know anything about what's gone on here, about what you've been through. I came for my dad's funeral and just sort of stayed on. I live in New York now, but, I don't know, I'm getting a divorce and I'm not working, I lost my job, and my brother and sister are still here, so I don't know ... I really don't know what I'm doing." Chase laughed. "Not very enlightening, is it?"

Tim seemed to be paying only partial attention. His head was in constant motion, as though he was looking for something, and he kept pushing his hair back, but he occasionally nodded and grinned in Chase's general direction.

In a few minutes the food came and Tim gorged himself. He'd eaten everything in front of him and finished his beer before Chase had swallowed his third bite. Chase slid his plate across the table and Tim grabbed it.

The bartender came over and Tim held out his empty glass. "Two more?" He directed the question at Chase.

"Sure."

Tim's second beer went down in two long, noisy gulps and Chase reluctantly bought him a third.

"Take your time with that one, buddy. I don't want to overdo it."

Tim stared into his eyes and opened his mouth as though to speak. It was then that Chase realized what was wrong, really, glaringly wrong. Tim's eyes, a deep sapphire blue, had always drawn attention, particularly from girls. The man sitting across from him had brown eyes.

It wasn't the money that bothered him or the time he'd wasted. It was the fact that he'd been such an easy mark, that a vagrant with a vaguely misshapen head could so effortlessly dupe him. He'd just stood there looking like a serial killer while Chase did all the work. He wanted to break his glass over the man's head. But no, he was controlling his impulses now.

"So, old buddy," he said, trying to conceal his anger. "Tell me about yourself."

The man tilted his head and shrugged.

"What kind of work are you doing these days? Still trading stocks and bonds?" Chase turned toward the bar. "Could I have one more beer please, and a prune juice and vodka for my old friend?"

"Prune and vodka?" The bartender screwed up his face. "You serious?"

"Yeah. It's called a pile-driver," Chase said. "Heavy on the prune juice." He turned back to his guest. "You always loved your pile-drivers." He grinned. "See how much I remember, buddy?"

When the drinks came Chase raised his glass and held it out. "To old friends." He swigged his beer, put the glass down. Then he motioned to the mixed drink. "Drink up, pal."

The stranger lifted his glass, took a tentative sip, swallowed. He wiped his mouth and said, "Not too bad." Another sip. "Not bad at all."

"It's a miracle!" Chase stood up. "He's talking. Another pile-driver for the new, improved Tim, bartender."

"Make it a double, Frank," the stranger said.

Chase leaned closer. "I hope you shit your only pants."

"That's not very neighborly." He chugged the rest of the drink.

"What about what *you* did?"

"I really didn't have to do a thing," he said.

"You could have said something."

"Yeah, I guess I could have. But I was kind of hungry and, well, you *did* offer."

The bartender brought the drink and walked away.

Chase glared at the stranger as he raised the glass to his lips. "I hope you wake up in a swamp of deep fried diarrhea."

The man shrugged. "Truth to tell I could use a good crap."

"That's good to know."

Wide grin. "Save it for you if you want."

"Photos will be fine."

"I'll need the money for developing and postage."

"You have a camera?"

"Nope. I'll need that, too."

"Why don't I just give you my American Express card?"

"How about transportation?" He motioned to the drink. "Want some?"

"No. Thanks. Cessna okay?"

"Cessna?"

"It's an airplane. You could parachute out over the mall. I'll make sure your equipment's properly ventilated."

"Wouldn't want to take advantage."

"Of course not, you fucking prick."

"What are you so pissed off about?"

"I thought I was talking to my old friend."

"Probably didn't like you much anyway."

"Jerk."

"Don't be that way. You had the pleasure of my company, a bad meal, a couple beers, and you got to open up your heart to an old friend without any unpleasant complications. You don't even have to take me home and clean me up."

"Gee thanks."

"And you got to feel good about yourself. That's worth a hell of a lot in these difficult times."

Chase sat back and assessed the man. He could almost see the humor in this. "You seem fairly bright, you're reasonably well-spoken, you're not crippled in any way I can see, you have a sense of humor that people who don't happen to be me might appreciate ... "

"Thanks. You have a very nice shirt."

"It's yours." He reached for his top button.

"Too small."

"Well ... "

"So what's your point?"

"I just don't understand what you're doing pushing a shopping cart around."

"I work at the Shop-rite."

"You what?" Chase shot forward.

"I'm kidding."

"I really hate you." He couldn't restrain a smile.

"So does my ex."

"So listen. I treated you to a lovely dinner and drinks and I've nearly decided not to beat you to death. Just do me the favor of telling my why you're doing ... whatever you're doing."

"I got sick of the bullshit."

"Everybody gets sick of the bullshit. There's got to be more to it."

"And I was bored. Still am most of the time."

"That still doesn't explain it."

"And I'm a dedicated alcoholic." He raised his glass.

"Ah," Chase said and picked up his own glass. "I suppose I can take some solace in the knowledge that I'm contributing to, perhaps even accelerating your slow suicide."

"Me, too," the man said, and they both drank. "Name's Tom." He wiped his hand on a napkin and extended it.

Chase shook his hand. "Just one letter away."

"Sorry."

Chase studied the man. "Can I ask you one more serious question?"

"Why not."

"Well, can you look back and see some point when you stepped over a line, or, I'm sorry, but is there something you could have done that would have enabled you to ... to avoid this?"

"I guess it was probably a process, not inevitable maybe, but pretty goddamned likely, given my fondness for drink and my general nature. But I really don't give it much thought. No point." Then suddenly he wrinkled up his face.

"You're obviously thinking of something."

One hand pressed against his gut, the man struggled to his feet. "Batten down the hatches."

"Excuse me?"

"Soup's on," he said. Then, legs clenched together, he shuffled toward the bathroom.

