

LEFTOVER SLAUGHTER

By

Samuel Zeb Shook Wilder

Submitted to the

Faculty of College of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

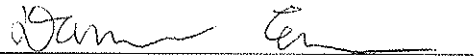
the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

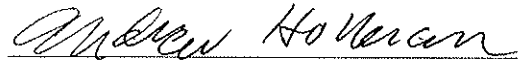
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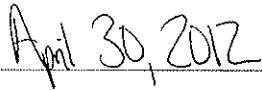
Professor Danielle Evans



Professor Andrew Holleran



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ABSTRACT

The stories in Leftover Slaughter take place in the mountains of Northwestern North Carolina, around Banner Elk, Matney and Valle Crucis. The themes weaving the pieces together include regional pride, ownership of land and immovability. My protagonists are exclusively male and their conflicts arise from opposing ideologies and natural phenomenon. While almost all the stories are set in the present or recent past, I worked to achieve a timeless quality to highlight the stubborn, resistant ascetic nature of the region.

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INTEGRITY

I. 1976

The afternoon the police found David Culler strung up in the wedding tree off Balm Road, Hiram, David's son, knew who did it even though the law said they had no leads.

A week to the day before the body was found, three men in dark gray suits showed up on the Culler's front stoop.

"Are you David's son?" the first asked.

"Yessir," Hiram replied. Maybe it was how clean the man's suit was – or that the man even wore a suit at all – but Hiram didn't trust him. "Who're you?"

"I'm Jimmy Wegman," the man smiled. His teeth shone like they'd been polished with God's shoeshine. The dark, sharp lines of the man's shoulders didn't look right against the sloping blue mountains behind him. Hiram leaned against the rough doorframe with his arms crossed, and as he waited for more information, the pregnant pause between them grew into an uncomfortable silence.

"From Wegman Developers," the suited man said.

Hiram was seventeen, and a shadow of a beard had just started sprouting under his jaw. In fact, his neck itched right now, so he scratched it instead of taking any particular interest in what the man was saying.

"We want to make your father very, very rich," the suited man said.

Hiram's family wasn't concerned with money – "What you don't have, you don't need," David always said. Still, Hiram thought, maybe his family could finally replace the old outhouse with a toilet like they had at the county high school. "Wait here," Hiram said, and he shut the door in the suited man's face.

“Who was that, baby?” Hiram’s mother asked him as he galloped through the kitchen to the back door. After seventeen years, he’d learned how to leap across the unsanded floorboards without getting a splinter.

“Someone here to give Dad some money,” Hiram said as he jumped passed the chopping block where his mother diced ramps with the same large cleaver she used to take the heads off the chickens. The blade was so wide and flat she’d even serve off it from time to time.

Out back, David was hacking through the rear haunch of a lean whitetail with his hatchet. He wore a stained apron folded at the waist. He’d taken off his heavy flannel shirt, and his chest hair was matted with blood and gristle. Hiram noticed flecks of muscle in David’s salt and pepper beard.

“What, boy?” David said. He left his hatchet lodged in the deer’s groin, and lifted a brown clay jug at his feet. He drank and made a face like he’d swallowed a piece of broken jar.

“There’s three men here to see you,” Hiram said. “Say they want to make you rich.”

“Got-damnit,” David said, and let his apron fall next to the deer’s organs. He didn’t bother wiping his chest or putting his shirt on when he marched inside.

David ruffled Hiram’s hair as he passed, smearing salty, rotten juice from the dead animal up Hiram’s neck. But Hiram didn’t mind. He had no one to impress, and he wanted to smell like his daddy – like a man. “Hey boy,” David called out the back window once he was inside. “Try to loose that rear haunch before I get back.”

Hiram picked up his father's hatchet, and brought it down hard on the stringy muscle of the deer's back hip. The hatchet cleaved the meat, but it didn't bite hard. The animal's meat was stringy and dense. He hacked away, trying to detach the hip and leg from the rest of the carcass, but there was no breaking through the ligaments and cartilage holding the bones together. Despite the cool mountain breeze, Hiram sweat so much he looked like he'd been caught in the rain.

"Keep at it," Hiram heard his father say. He didn't know his father had come back, and he spun to see his father laid out in the grass against the back of the house.

"How long you been there?" Hiram asked.

"Don't matter," David replied.

"You talk to them men?" Hiram asked.

"Sure did," David said. His voice broke, and he turned his eyes downward.

Hiram knew something was wrong when his daddy broke eye contact. "Don't worry about them," David said with authority, and Hiram knew not to ask any more questions.

"Now, when you get to this part," David said as he stood up and took the hatchet from Hiram, "the best thing to do is just twist the leg out of the joint." He dropped the hatchet and showed Hiram the places to grip the carcass for the best leverage. Hiram twisted the deer's hindquarter, but nothing happened. "You'll get it," David said. "But we got to get this meat in salt, so I got to take over again." David pulled down on the leg, and there was a loud pop, followed by the crackle of tearing cartilage. "You want to get the salt table ready?" David said, holding the large hunk of deer meat against his chest.

"Yessir," Hiram replied.

“Go on and take a nip,” David said. He nodded to the jug nestled against a berry-purple organ that had slid down the pile of discarded viscera.

Hiram hated the taste of his father’s liquor. Sometimes, he couldn’t get it down, and the times he could, it burned his throat and made him dizzy. But he knew it was a reward of sorts, so he never denied the old clay jug.

Hiram forced a large swallow. He felt his eyes water and his lips twist, but he got it down.

“Can’t call you boy too much longer,” David chuckled.

Even though Hiram had tears in his eyes from the moonshine, his chest swelled. He was less than a year from legally becoming a man, but the law didn’t mean anything on the mountain. He was a man when his father said he was—he was a man when his father recognized he was capable of protecting and providing for a family; he was a man when his father recognized the roots of his heritage grew so deep, nothing could tear him from his homeplace. Drinking his father’s liquor wasn’t a step toward filling his father’s shoes, but Hiram knew his father wouldn’t offer it up if he was having doubts.

“Get that table ready,” David said. “I’ll be down in a bit to salt the meat.” And Hiram headed to the cool, damp basement to prep the butcher’s block with rock salt.

After dinner, Hiram climbed out his window, caught the hickory support beams under the hand-hammered tin gutters, and pulled himself to the roof, even though his father and mother had both told him not to.

“If I you fall through,” his father had said, “I’m not patching that hole, so you’ll likely freeze to death next winter.” But Hiram knew he wouldn’t freeze. He’d grown up on top of a mountain, so the snow was as much a part of him as his blood. Plus, he was almost old enough to hike down to Banner Elk and buy a bottle of proper liquor, maybe some Tennessee whiskey from over the mountain. He could patch the damn hole himself if he needed to.

Below him, he could see the whole town of Banner Elk. The fat moon hung low over Sugar Mountain off to the left. The trees were silhouetted along the opposite ridge, and he could hear a fox’s yip somewhere beyond the light. The state of North Carolina had just agreed to pave the little road that split from Highway 105—the road that ran from Boone to Linville—and he’d heard rumblings—found newspaper clippings, heard his father whispering to his mother after he was supposed to be in bed—things were about to change in Banner Elk, and not for the better.

The men who built the first cabins in Banner Elk were loggers working along the Elk River. They weren’t supposed to make their home deep in the Blue Ridge, but at some point, they decided living off what the land offered was friendlier than living and working in a budding city like Wilkesboro. They left their old lives and set off into wilderness and founded a community of hardened loggers outside the established laws of the State of North Carolina.

Banner Elk was incorporated in 1911, fifty-three years after it was founded, and once rich men in the Piedmont began to catch wind of the sublime mountain communities cropping up along the western edge of the state, the face of the town began to change.

These men paid to have narrow houses built close together along Main Street. They established businesses for convenience or pleasure instead of necessity. The cobblers, farmers, stonemasons, blacksmiths and butchers of Banner Elk became novelties, and they were pushed up into the hills.

Banner Elk began mirroring towns the original settlers had escaped, and Hiram knew there was enough money along Main Street in Banner Elk to support all the poor families living without running water, but he also knew families like his didn't want any of that money. The families who carried the proud blood were immovable as their mountains, and they wanted to care for their own with what they could hunt or gather instead of trading hours of labor for conveniences.

Hiram stretched out under the ceiling of stars, and a breeze blew across his bare chest. But the chill didn't sink into his bones. He was a child of the first loggers. The mountains could be as cruel as they wanted to be, but he'd be fine. The only thing he feared was someone who wanted to change his way of life; someone who wanted to master the mountains instead of recognizing the respect they deserved.

The next morning, Hiram woke to the sound of his father's raised voice.

"I told you yesterday," David said, "I weren't interested, and I'm not gonna be interested." His father's voice carried the heft of a twenty-pound sledge.

Hiram knew who his father was talking to Wegman and the other suited men, so he pulled on his dungarees and took the steps two at a time.

At the bottom of the staircase, Hiram put his weight on a floorboard that squealed like a butchered pig, and it caught his father's attention above the yelling. Wegman and his men peered around David. They wore the same dark suits as the day before, and as Hiram looked them up and down, he decided they looked like the pallbearers at his Granny Culler's funeral. But the men carrying his grandmother to her resting place—his father, Uncle Johnny, Butch Townsend and Jude Grubbs—were more than the clothes they wore. The pallbearers wore their clothes as a sign of respect, and they remained themselves—smiling, crying, laughing—inside their polished shells. Wegman and his men were nothing more than their suits, sinister as the razor sharp angles of their collars and cuffs.

“He’p your mama in the kitchen, Hiram,” David said, and he stepped out the front door and shut it so hard old sawdust fell from the frame.

Hiram knew the men wanted to discuss money, but something had to be traded for money. Hiram's family owned nothing but the clothes on their backs, the house they lived in and the mountain their house was built on.

“Hey ma,” Hiram called, but his mother didn't answer. She wasn't in the kitchen, and she wasn't in the bedroom, and as he looked for her, a breeze carried the whispers of his father's raised voice through the open kitchen window.

Hiram found his mother kneeled in the grass below where he'd helped his dad break down the deer the afternoon before. The soles of her feet were red from yesterday's blood, and Hiram could tell her head was bowed in prayer. He watched his mama try to lift her words to the heavens from where she knelt in leftover slaughter. The

air was so still, Hiram was worried he'd interrupt his mama if he moved and stirred up a breeze, and he slowed his breath until his head went dizzy. Time might've been standing still if it weren't for his father's voice marking the seconds slipping away.

When his father's voice settled, his mother's head rose.

"What are you prayin' for, mama?" Hiram asked.

"Oh baby, just for your daddy and for you," she said. "I worry about you two so, so much."

"We'll be fine, mama," Hiram said. He tried to reply with his father's confidence, because at that moment, Hiram knew his mama needed something steady to hold onto more than a son.

She pulled him to her, but this hug wasn't a comfortable hug. Against her breast, Hiram could smell the flour his mother used to dust her biscuits in the morning, but he could also smell something sour, something more than the dirt and sweat from gardening and yard work she hadn't washed off in a week. Hiram was used to coming away from a hug carrying his mother's body odor, but this stench wasn't a product of honest work. It was worry, Hiram decided, that dripped down her brow and curdled under her collar. His mother held on to him like he might blow away if even the slightest breeze picked up, and Hiram repeated the words he'd just spoken, trying to not to let her unease get to him.

"I know it," she said. "Yes, you'll be okay." But Hiram knew his mother didn't believe it. She pulled him closer, and Hiram could feel her breaths coming short and fast.

"Hiram," David boomed from the kitchen. "Put yer boots on."

“Yessir,” Hiram called back, and he pulled away from his mother. He took a long look at his mom before he went inside. Deep worry lines creased her forehead. Her dress and apron were painted pink, as were the top of her feet.

After he’d laced up the worn leather boots he’d had for years – the pair his daddy bought big so he’d grow into them – he met his father on the front step. A breeze finally rustled the leaves of the red maple overhead, and Hiram could see clouds fat with rain climbing Sugar Mountain on the opposite ridge.

“How long ‘til the rain blows in?” David asked Hiram.

“Hour, maybe?” Hiram replied. His father’d been asking him about the weather ever since the storm several years back no one except Hiram saw coming. That late fall storm swirled up from just a few wisps of cloud over Sugar Mountain and washed away the Cullers’ garden beds. They lost a fair amount of food that was going to be canned for the winter months. Hiram had suggested his mama build a retaining wall, but she didn’t pay him any mind. Even though Hiram was used to his dad asking him about the weather, this time, maybe in light of recent events, he felt his chest swell a little extra.

“Hope you’re right,” his father replied. And they set out on foot up the narrow dirt path leading up their mountain.

Hiram thought they’d stop at the old smokehouse leftover from the Civil War. The thing was crumbling all over itself, and moss grew in every mortar crevice, but his Dad said they couldn’t tear it down because of its history. There were probably still confederate ghosts on that mountain who needed a familiar landmark while they did whatever they needed to pass on. But Hiram followed his father past the smokehouse and

eventually they got to the rotten fence Hiram had never crossed. As a child, his father had told Hiram wild folk lived on the other side, and the fence was there to divide boundary lines.

“Folk on that side wear ferns and animal skins like we wear shirts and dungarees,” his father had told Hiram. “You go on that side, they’re likely to catch you and make a pair of britches out of you.”

That scared Hiram so much as a child, he never ventured close to the fence for fear of having his feet lopped off so he couldn’t run away. As he got older though, he began to forget about the forbidden fence. He figured there weren’t folks on the other side who made clothes from human skin, but his daddy wouldn’t tell him there were if he didn’t want him on the other side.

“Under,” Hiram’s father grunted, lifting a strand of rusty barbed wire.

“What?” Hiram asked.

“Get on under there,” David said. “I ain’t kidding.”

Hiram ducked and hoped the rusty barbs wouldn’t catch on his back. He’d known folks whose jaws latched shut after being caught on a rusty fence. But something bubbled underneath the worry about rusty barbs, something that pushed him onward without stopping to question. This was another step toward manhood, and his father was recognizing his growth.

When Hiram stood tall on the other side, he felt like he’d stepped not only into a new world, but into a new understanding of himself. The trees were the same bur oaks and red or black maples, but they were larger, greener, and stretched toward the heavens

even further. The pines were colder, lonelier, and the crows called twice as loud. His feet were planted on a patch of earth they'd never tread before, and in his seventeen years, he had hiked and hunted every square foot of the mountains around Banner Elk. The air he breathed even smelled different. Everything was a stronger, more exaggerated version of itself, and Hiram felt the same. If his father had asked him to explain what was happening to him, he wouldn't have been able to, but he knew, somewhere in his heart, beyond his brain, his life suddenly meant more than it ever had.

"Keep up now," his father said from several feet ahead. Hiram had been so caught up with his first few moments beyond the fence, he hadn't been paying attention to his father.

The branches above them had started to thin, and sunlight trickled down between the leaves. David took his shirt off, and he still wore the blood of the animal he'd butchered the evening before. Maybe his Dad was one of the wild people, Hiram thought.

After another ten minutes walk, the trees cleared, and Hiram and his father stood on a bald patch overlooking the remaining land between North Carolina and Tennessee. Mountains worn smooth by centuries of weather folded into one another below them, and the fog announcing rain clouds rolling in from the east colored the valleys two shades of blue. David knelt and plucked a strawberry from a small bush at his feet.

"We got to talk," David said. He stood up and motioned for Hiram to follow him back into the forest. "Those men want to take our land," David continued. "They want to buy it up and turn it into a ski resort."

“But they won’t get it,” Hiram said. The hairs on his arms prickled the same way they did the first time he saw his grandma Culler in her casket.

“Right,” David said. “But I got some bad news. Sugar Mountain got bought up,” David continued. “They got plans to start construction in a couple years.”

Hiram smelled something burning, and noticed a contraption nestled in a grove of pines with three pots connected by a large support pole and what looked like hundreds of wires. It was a still. Hiram had heard his friends talk about their father’s stills. They’d found them deep in the woods as his father’s was, hidden since they were illegal. Hiram had taken pride in telling his friends his father didn’t keep a still.

“You wrong, Hiram,” Bradley Stevenson, one of his gap-toothed classmates, had said. “Ever’ man have a still to keep him warm in the winter.”

“They’re going to turn our mountains into some sort of tourist destination,” David said. Hiram watched his father fish a dipper out of the leaves next to the still. “They’re taking our mountains and they’re taking us with them.”

“I don’t get it,” Hiram said.

“Got-damnit,” David said. His face twisted as he sipped the liquor from the dipper. “How can you not understand?” Hiram took the ladle when his father offered it, wishing it was a strawberry instead. “My grand-daddy moved into these mountains because he wanted to escape city men,” David continued. “Men with money. Corrupt sons-of-bitches who hoard and control ever’one with their bank accounts.”

The clear liquid in the ladle burned Hiram’s throat same as the liquor his father had given him the night before. He coughed as the fire traveled down his throat and lit

up his belly. He felt his nostrils open and all the snot lodged up in his head came rolling out. He wiped his nose and took another sip, and as he listened to his father, Hiram's mind start to go fuzzy.

Wegman and his men had no place in the mountains. Hiram didn't want to sit up on his roof at night and stare down at a resort where people with too much money wasted their earnings. He liked pretending the whole world was no more than the single road running through the heart of Banner Elk. Other than that little vein of civilization, he could sit for hours and stare out on the mountains and imagine he sat above every living man, woman and child.

Hiram imagined what Sugar Mountain would look like marred, long treeless gashes cut deep into the mountainside. He imagined tall poles and a wire system hauling rich men from Piedmont up and down the mountain and a big ski lodge nestled at Sugar's base where they sat laughing about how quaint the mountain setting was.

"You understand what I'm saying?" David asked.

"They can't take our land," Hiram said.

"Now I'm going to tell you something you can't tell no one. Hear?" David said. He sipped from the dipper half-full of white lightening. "And I'm deadly serious. You can't even tell your mother."

As long as Hiram could remember, he'd never known his father to have a secret.

"I think those men, Wegman and those fellas, did something to Harry Skeen," David said.

“What?” Hiram asked. Harry’s son, Michael, was in Hiram’s class at the county high school, but Hiram hadn’t talked to him since summer started. They weren’t good friends, and neither of their families had a telephone, so they couldn’t have talked if they wanted to.

“Harry went missing last month,” David said. “Right before Sugar was bought up.” Hiram watched his father twist the spout on the still and refill the dipper. Hiram reached for it when his father offered it up. “Easy now,” David said. “I didn’t know Harry well,” David continued. “Worked a couple jobs with him. Installed a stone fence down on campus, but didn’t really get to know him. I can’t imagine he just went missing one afternoon. I’m sure he knew his land well, and I’m sure he kept it safe like we keep ours. See,” David said after he took the dipper back from Hiram and took another sip, “after some of the things Wegman said to me, I wouldn’t put it past him to kill a man who wouldn’t sell his land, either to send a message or leave the land in the woman’s hands, because that son-of-a-bitch could bully a woman a hell of a lot easier than he could Harry or me.”

Even though Hiram heard the words his father spoke, but he couldn’t make sense of them. His upbringing had hinged not on a strong public education, but a stark sense of right and wrong instilled by his family and the mountain community. The communal law taught him people worked together to provide for their families and neighbors in times of need – everyone shared a mutual respect as long as you upheld your part of the bargain. He’d never been privy to cutthroat business deals, so he couldn’t comprehend one man killing another over a plot of land.

“What do you mean?” Hiram said. The sunlight from the bald off to their right started to die. It was still midday, so the summer storm rolling in from the East had caught up to them.

“If those men did something to Harry, I could be next, ‘cause I’m sure as hell not going to sell to those bastards,” David said. He lifted the dipper to his lips and turned his eyes to the ground.

The same dizziness washed over Hiram he felt for the first time when his dad shot the family bloodhound when it came home with a rabid opossum between his teeth. The beast in the dog’s jaw still had slick froth dripping from its open mouth, and it looked wild-eyed and crazed even in death. David had told Hiram if he didn’t put Bullet down, the dog would go rabid in just a couple hours. Hiram watched his dad pull the trigger as Bullet sniffed the barrel of the gun as if a treat would fall out.

“You think they’re going to get you?” Hiram asked his dad. He felt empty and scared, not like a man at all. But to Hiram’s surprise, David smiled.

“Hell no,” David bellowed, as fat raindrops started slithering down the pine needles around them. “I don’t care how well-bred those city slicks are, they ain’t touching me on my land. It’d be like trying to hunt down the devil in hell.”

Hiram wanted to jump across the coils of the still and throw his arms around his daddy, but he knew better. He knew to show his love by keeping an even keel, pushing the fear from his mind so it wouldn’t interfere with any other thoughts.

The rain came down hard now. It was cold, but it smelled like dirt and summer foliage. Across the still David wiped large beads from his graying beard, and his long

bangs clung to his forehead. Hiram wished he had his father's beard. Maybe if he did, he wouldn't worry about outsiders, and maybe when death threatened, he could laugh too.

Hiram's head felt like it was about to cave in on itself when he woke the next day. The sun coming through his window burned his eyes, and he realized he'd slept later than usual.

At dinner the evening before, his father confessed to his mother that maybe they'd had a bit much up on the bald. After spending much of the afternoon with the still, they'd stumbled home soaked and dizzy, laughing and wrestling like a pair of boys. At first, Hiram thought his mother was angry, not that he cared much – the white lightning had seen to that – but he saw her smile lines when she brought the pot of venison stew to the table. She wanted them to think she wouldn't stand for the men of the family disappearing into the woods and returning drunk fools, but when he saw her smile, he knew she was happy to see her men having fun.

When he went downstairs, Hiram saw his father sitting at the kitchen table with his face in his hands. The oatmeal in front of him had gone dry. "Eat up, boy," he said through his fingers. "We got a day ahead of us."

And sure enough, when Hiram followed his father outside, he noticed the stone retaining wall lining the steps leading to their front porch had been bowled over by the rain. Two sections of the split rail fence had also been crushed by the fallen branches of the large bur oak at the far end of their yard.

Hiram's father tied a dirty red bandana around his forehead. "Well," he said, "how you think we should tackle these messes?"

Hiram had been asked his advice twice in two days now. He couldn't remember his father ever asking him about work to be done—he'd always received instructions and followed them accordingly—and he noticed a weight attached to the decision in front of him.

He'd tire himself if he lugged the scattered stones for the steps up and down the long, sloping lawn, and while he'd normally be stubborn enough to attempt it, he knew he had something to prove. Part of growing into manhood was being thoughtful and responsible enough to make good decisions, and even though there were tougher decisions out there than whether to fix a fence or a retaining wall first, this was a start. "We should both tackle a project," he said.

"If you think that's best," his father said. "Which you want?"

"I'll take the fence."

"Sounds good, but I want you to mix me some mortar while I collect those stones," David said.

There wasn't a cloud overhead, and Hiram swore he could see all the way to the Piedmont as he stirred the thick slurry in the metal pail. His right arm started to get tired as the grey slop thickened, and when it was the right consistency, he drug it around the house to where his father stacked the renegade rocks. The mortar was heavy, like a bucketful of stones soaking in water, but David lifted it as easily as he lifted the empty pail.

“I put the axe over yonder,” David said, nodding his head toward the tree. “You’ll have to split some new rails.”

Hiram’s head pounded as he brought the ax down on the thick logs he hewed to fit the small openings in the posts. While his feet slipped in the soggy grass, he thanked the powers-at-be the posts hadn’t been knocked over. He would’ve gladly hefted rocks and mortar all day instead of digging a two-foot hole in the rocky soil and setting a new post.

Half way through setting the second of four rails, Hiram saw Jude Grubbs walking up the dirt road with his son Robert. Robert and Hiram were in the same class at the county high school, and Hiram liked Robert because he didn’t talk much. He guessed Robert liked him for the same reason.

“Daddy got some news,” Robert said as he clasped Hiram’s hand. “Bad news.” When they let go, Robert adjusted the shoulder straps on his faded overalls, which looked bone white against his dark skin.

“What is it?” Hiram asked. He was too tired to feel anything but his headache and the budding blisters on his palms. He wiped his forehead to stop the stream of sweat stinging his eyes.

“Not too sure,” Robert replied. “But it got my daddy so mad, he said he had to come here straightaway.”

“Does it have to do with my dad?” Hiram asked. He let his ax hit the ground and it slapped the wet earth.

“Not sure,” Robert said. “Sometimes I guess you tell a bad story to keep it from happening again.”

The day was still enough David's voice carried across the yard, and Hiram listened to his father and Jude talk.

"...so she sold it," Jude said. He was a tall man, almost seven feet, and when he stood straight, he was a terrible sight, but Hiram noticed Jude slumped when he talked, like he bore the weight of his news on his shoulders.

"What?" David said, then said again louder. Hiram imagined the folks in their summer homes on Main Street in Banner Elk could hear him. "Have the found Harry yet?"

"That's just it," Jude said so low Hiram could barely hear. "Found him bled dry down in a ditch in Horse Bottom. Bled like he was game to be stored for winter."

"Horse Bottom's at the end of my property line," David said.

Hiram saw his father's face turn redder than the blood let from Harry's neck.

"That's why I wanted to come tell you," Jude said. "Have some men approached you about your land?"

"Yessir," David said. "But they wouldn't know how to let a man's blood."

"You ain't the only other one they been talking to," Jude butt in. "They coulda hired Percy Statler to do Harry in and send a message. That way their hands wouldn't be bloodstained."

"No way in hell Statler'd do that," David said. The maddest Hiram had seen his father was the afternoon years ago Hiram had come home with another boy's slingshot, stolen right out of his knapsack. Hiram's ass had been beaten so hard he had to stand in class for five days instead of sit at his desk. But what Hiram saw in his Daddy now was

worse. David palmed the stone he'd been holding with both hands in his right, which made the veins in his arm look like the telephone lines standing above the trees down on Main Street. Hiram swore his dad was about to squeeze blood from the stone, maybe even crush it to pebbles.

"You'd think dishonor didn't have a price, Culler," Jude said. "You and I both know Statler's hard up since his wife been sick. Hard to say no when the check's big enough."

"Wegman can try 'n get me, but I'll get him first," David hissed. "And if he sends a mountain man to do his dirty work, I'll box up the bastard's head and ship it straight to Wegman's headquarters."

"Now David," Jude said, "I want you to be smart." Jude straightened up. "Get the law involved."

"The law don't care about you or me, Grubbs," David said. He dropped the rock and it buried itself two or three inches into the hard soil. "Our daddies moved out here to get away from the laws and people who tried to tell us what we could or couldn't do with our money, families and land."

Hiram knew his dad was right. He'd never seen a policeman anywhere in the high country except on the main streets of Banner Elk and Blowing Rock or on King Street in Boone. Police were meant to keep order in places where people swapped money for goods. Money attracted the crooks police rounded up. Policemen had no business taking their shiny cruisers on the dusty trails up family mountains to settle land disputes between mountainfolk and outsiders from the Piedmont.

“I just don’t want to see you get low before your time,” Jude said.

Hiram shivered. He hadn’t realized his dad might actually be bled out like Harry until someone else spoke of it aloud. It was one thing when a man laughed at his own death—the craziness of it all made death seem silly—but when others realized the possibility, the reaper became a presence. “You know who found Harry?”

“Sure don’t,” Robert replied. “But his body’s been taken back to the family for dressin’.”

A lawman didn’t find Harry, Hiram knew, otherwise the body wouldn’t have been turned back into the family. The anonymous corpse would’ve been carted off to Appalachian State as a cadaver for students to carve up. Men and women from his father’s generation were caught by mothers or sisters, not hospital nurses. If the birth wasn’t recorded, the death didn’t need to be either.

Hiram felt something hot work its way into his throat, and he needed to change the subject. “Mind holdin’ that log still so I can split it easy?”

Hiram and Robert finished mending the split rail fence before their fathers had finished talking. The sun rested on the tree line off to the west, and Hiram’s stomach ached for food. He hadn’t eaten that day except for the room temperature cornbread and milk that had been waiting on the table that morning. His headache was gone away though, and he was proud he and Robert had finished fixing the fence before his dad had finished mending the steps. But the pride was short lived since the worry crept back into his mind now that his hands weren’t occupied.

Jude and Robert helped mend the steps, and the four of them finished the job in less than an hour.

“Thanks for the help,” Hiram said as he shook Robert’s hand. Only a sliver of sun was left above the trees off to the west.

“Anytime,” Robert replied. “And don’t worry ‘bout your Daddy.”

“I won’t,” Hiram said. For a moment, he was part of something larger than himself, something larger than his family. People from the community were watching out for him and his father, but as Robert and Jude faded down the road, he looked at his dad and saw a lonely man.

Over the next few days, Hiram noticed his father was happiest when it was quiet—first thing in the morning when the day hadn’t yet woken; in the middle of the afternoon when the sun was high over the mountain; at dusk when the animals were either going to bed or waking up. When the wind rustled the branches against their dining room window, David’s shoulders would tense, and Hiram’s would tense as well. Hiram began to understand how pack animals communicated, or how birds knew when to ebb and flow as a migrating flock. Hiram shared his father’s anxiety, but he didn’t hide it as well as his dad. David could wake in the morning and eat his oatmeal without his hand shaking, but Hiram couldn’t get a spoonful to his mouth, not that he knew what he’d do if he did. His throat was so tight, it was hard to drink water.

On the morning of the third day after Jude and Robert had delivered the news about Harry Skeen, Hiram woke up thrashing and kicking, driving his elbow into the wall

on his right and bringing his heels down hard on the baseboard of his bed. He was sweating and his sheets were cold and wet.

He towed himself dry with a dirty flannel shirt while he waited for his heart to slow. “The spirits speak to us in our sleep,” his mother had told him as a child. “There’s something you need to pay attention to. Something you’re fighting.”

When he went downstairs, the door was ajar and his father’s hatchet was propped against the frame. It looked small and useless cleaned and shiny. He pushed the door open and saw Wegman and his three men walking back toward the road. Hiram looked for his father, but David was nowhere to be found.

Hiram called after the men, and the sun glinted off their large black sunglasses when they turned. They turned back around and kept walking without making a fuss. Hiram’s heart hammered in his chest. He imagined someone bleeding his father like fresh game, slitting his jugular and suspending him from his feet while his blood collected in a five gallon bucket below.

Where would they throw the body?

How long until they approached his mother about buying the land?

But before Hiram’s thoughts could get away from him, a hand landed on his shoulder.

“Looks like I got ‘em, boy,” David said.

Hiram knew it wasn’t what a man would do, but he threw his arms around his father and pressed his face hard into father’s chest. He squeezed his dad until he felt his arms start to ache, and Hiram felt his father squeezing back.

Hiram followed his father behind the house. He sat in the grass and listened to the tale of how David Culler scared off Jeremy Wegman and his cohorts as he shared the brown ceramic jug with his father.

“I told ‘em I knew what they did to Harry,” David said. “Told ‘em I even reckoned I knew who they hired to do their dirty work. They said they ain’t done a thing, but I told ‘em I knew better. Then they said the same’d happen to me if I wasn’t careful. Wegman took off his glasses, and real slow, he said, ‘I’ll get your land one way or another.’ His eyes were real small and I swear they went different directions—no wonder he’s always tryin’ to cover ‘em with those shades—and I told him I’d talked to your mama and even if he killed the whole family, the land was willed to someone he’d never guess.” David laughed. “I was lying, of course. I ain’t givin’ anyone else our land.”

As his father opened up into another fit of laughter, Hiram felt the world shift back into place. He no longer felt like prey afraid of being eaten alive. He felt like a man, sharing in his father’s victory. He melted into the grass with moonshine on his lips and his father’s laughter in his ears, and swore if anyone ever touched a hair on a family member’s head or disrespected the land that had provided his family life, he’d gut the poor son-of-a-bitch and feed his innards to the wild mountain dogs.

The next morning, David Culler was not at breakfast.

“Your father heard something last night,” Hiram’s mother told him. She dug her nails into the the kitchen table worn smooth from years of spitting cast iron skillet. “I

guess I fell asleep before he came back. I don't sleep well without him, though, so he had to have come back."

After a few hours, Hiram walked up the lonely dirt path, past the forbidden fence, but David was not at the still, though the stone furnace under the mash pot was still hot. Hiram spent the afternoon wandering his family's land looking for his father. But David Culler was gone. Just gone.

Deep down, Hiram knew what had happened, but he hadn't been shown proof yet. He thought of the moments right before his father put Bullet down. The gun was pointed at the dog's snout and Hiram knew what was coming, but until his father pulled the trigger, his dog was alive and curious and happy.

Sitting at the kitchen table following the path of his mother's worried nail marks, Hiram waited for his father to come home for dinner. He closed his eyes and held onto the silence. His mother was out back collecting turnips. He heard her grunt every now and then, but other than the sound of the breeze rustling the rhododendron leaves outside the kitchen window, the Culler mountain was still. Hiram counted his breaths and imagined his father walking up the road. Any moment now, he would come through the front door with a grouse under his arm ready to stick on a spit and cook up tender over the fire pit. While the grouse cooked, he'd lift the moonshine jug to his lips and get a little happier after every sip. He'd even wrap his arms around his wife and kiss her a little before she swatted him away blushing.

But a sharp knock, like the bullet from the barrel of a gun, shook Hiram from his thoughts before he could will them to be true.

WATER ALWAYS WINS

Jack McDonough told Verl Stevenson he didn't believe the old man had measured one hundred four inches of snow between November eleventh and April twenty-third. Jack and Verl sat in rockers on the porch of Mast General Store, rain beating down so hard they couldn't see the other side of Broadstone Road.

"Now Jack," Verl drawled. "I ain't lied to you before." He spat a mouthful of brown tobacco juice into the rain. "So why'd I start over something like this?"

"Don't suppose you've measured how much it's been raining?" Jack asked.

"Tried," Verl replied. "But my buckets fill up so quick I can't keep up."

In his thirty-eight years living in the High Country, Jack had never even been through a winter as fierce as the one he and his family had just survived. Snow piled up around the McDonough's house so deep they couldn't get the front door open. It was hard to keep a fire going because melted snow would leak down the chimney and snuff the flame. Their food had run out, and they couldn't get to a grocery store—not that one was open, anyway—so they emptied their cellar of canned beans and pork and lived off their ten-year-old Y2K stash. Their spring had frozen up, so they boiled handfuls of snow on the potbelly stove to drink. Their power had gone out, and Jack thanked whatever higher power watched over him and his family he'd had the foresight to stock extra wood.

When the cold broke and the snow began to melt, the rain started. At first, everyone Jack knew was happy to see the rain. Folks would walk a couple to miles to Mast to get supplies to fix the snow damage instead of firing up their old their old

pickups, that is, if their pickups even still worked after sitting under six, seven, eight feet of snow for nearly five months. The rain helped melt the snow, and people were grateful for it, but when the melted snow and fresh rainwater caused the creek to rise, people started wishing for the snow again.

“At least the got-damned snow didn’t wash my garden beds away,” Verl told Jack a week after the rain started. “Crushed ‘em near to death, but at least they stayed put.”

Jack didn’t mind the rain too much. He’d built his family’s house on a slight incline at the base of one of the smaller mountains around Valle Crucis. He’d also stacked the foundation so the house was five feet off the ground in the front. Around back, the foundation met the slope, which meant Jack spent forty-five minutes every day sopping wet, shoveling the rocks and sand that collected against the back of his house. It was a small price to pay. His house hadn’t flooded like Sissy Rominger’s, and his house hadn’t been washed completely into the Watauga River like Sherman Jones’.

“Verl,” Jack said. “Hate to cut this short, but I got to run home.” His flannel clung to him like plastic wrap when he stood and stretched. He was always wet these days. Even standing back from the edge of Mast’s porch, Jack and Verl would get sprayed with mist. Jack didn’t even carry an umbrella because it wouldn’t do anything to keep the rain off. The rain came down so hard, lowering your umbrella to climb into your truck would get you as wet as standing in the downpour for an hour.

“Figured as much,” Verl replied. “I’d hate for Melissa to get mad at you for missin’ dinner on my behalf.” The old man smiled and spat another string of tobacco

juice into the rain. "I'm thinking about squattin' here on this porch," he continued. "So I won't need to go anywhere if I need something."

"If I didn't have my family, I'd join you," Jack said with a smile. He tucked a fresh pouch of tobacco behind his bottom lip and tucked the corn he'd just bought under his arm. He ran into the rain and sunk ankle deep in mud before he climbed into his truck.

When he got home, Jack sat on his porch and unlaced his work boot, but before he could force his foot from the wet leather, the door opened.

"You're late," Melissa, Jack's wife, said, rolling her eyes. "Spent too much time jawin' with Verl again, I bet." But she was in Jack's lap, laughing and kissing his cheeks before he had the chance to defend himself.

"Off me, woman," Jack said, burrowing into her neck so his graying whiskers tickled her skin. They'd been that way since they were teenagers, flirting in the hallways of Watauga High School. In their twenty-three years of marriage they worked through fights that would've torn most couples apart. And even still, after their daughter went to bed, they sat, talked and laughed for an hour or two before they went to sleep themselves. Jack worked during the day, but his evenings were for his daughter and his nights were for his wife. He tacked his work anxieties to whatever he was constructing or tearing down and left it there until he was on site the next day.

“You got a hell of a pile to shovel out from behind the house tonight, baby,”
Melissa said. “Rain just keeps comin’.”

“Got-damnit,” Jack said, and pulled his boots back on. His feet would’ve been drier if he’d stepped into a lake.

He fished his shovel out of a puddle that had formed next to the house’s concrete foundation. His shovel was slick with mud, and water was running into his eyes. The pile of collected earth was larger than it had been the day before, and twice as large as the week before. But with the grim resolve of Atlas, he plunged his shovel into the mess and began slinging it into the yard behind him. When he’d first started shoveling the runoff, he’d carried it around the house shovelful by shovelful to a pile next to the road, but he’d stopped when he realized the rain would just wash the pile of mud back into his yard anyway. Weeks ago, he’d tried shoveling a drainage trench around the house, but the water pushed the trench just filled up instead of redirecting anything. Still, the weatherproofing he’d installed on the door to the cellar next to the pile of runoff kept the water out without a problem. Jack figured his basement was one of the only dry places left in Watauga County, and some evenings after shoveling, he’d light the gas lantern and spend a few moments by himself in the cellar just to remind himself what it felt like to be dry.

Jack liked to get the mud cleared before sunset. After it got dark, the temperature would drop to the mid-50s, and a fog would roll off the mountain into his holler. He’d layered sweaters and jackets to combat the chill while he shoveled, but when the water saturated his layers, the chill would come right in with it.

As he hefted sloppy earth over his shoulder, he looked up at the bare mountainside. The mud just kept drooling down. He could tell the hillside was eroding, moving further and further from his house. There was also a place where the looser dirt had slipped from under firmer dirt, and that patch jutted out from the hillside at a dangerous angle. Jack knew he'd be buried underneath it if slipped while he was shoveling. He considered building a retaining wall, but knew it wouldn't stay, so as his hands ached and pruned, he cast words heavenward in hopes someone would shut off the rain.

Jack's oldest daughter was at the kitchen table when he finally came inside.

"Hey sugar," he said. "You look nice." Carrie had just started ninth grade, and she was becoming more open about her interest in boys. Jack had a hunch she'd had her fair share of crushes before now, but she hadn't been so public about it. He knew falling in love with someone new every day was part of growing up, but Carrie had also just discovered make-up, and she wore each new crush on her face. Jack hadn't bought his daughter makeup, which meant Melissa was turning a blind eye to Carrie rooting around in her make-up bag. But who was he to fuss over a young woman being a young woman? Best to leave the women to their devices.

Carrie didn't look up from the table when Jack said hello. "I said hi, sweetheart," Jack said again from the doorway where he stood.

She made a noise like a pressure valve releasing steam. "Hey," she replied.

Jack's bare, damp feet slapped the hardwood floor as he took several large steps toward his daughter. When he was close enough, Jack lifted his daughter into his arms and squeezed her hard so the water from his flannel soaked into her shirt.

"Daddy, no!" she said. But she erupted into the same bright laughter as Melissa.

"You know what happens when you ignore me," Jack said, holding his fourteen-year-old daughter to his chest. "At least pretend you're happy to see me and you won't have to go through this every night."

When he set her down, she threw her arms around his waist and squeezed him back. "How's this?" she asked.

"More like it," Jack said. "That's what I'll be expecting when I get home."

Carrie made the same frustrated noise she had a moment before, but when Jack reached out to snatch her up again, she giggled and ran into the kitchen.

Alone for moment, Jack noticed the way the house smelled—salty and rich, like gravy simmering under the crust of a fresh potpie. He wandered into the kitchen and saw his wife stirring a pot of green beans. She tipped a frying pan with a freshly seared rasher of bacon over the vegetables so the drippings slid into the pot.

"What's that paint you got all over your face?" Jack teased Carrie after the family sat down to dinner.

"Donovan likes it," Carrie replied. This was a name Jack hadn't heard before.

“Donovan?” he drawled. “What happened to Eli?” As he reached for the plastic pitcher of sweet tea, he saw his wife’s smile was as sly as his daughters.

“Dad, Eli was my boyfriend before Craig,” Carrie said. “And then there was Peter, and now Donovan.” Bacon grease ran down her chin.

“Honey, you can’t even eat without makin’ a mess,” Jack laughed. “You’ll be ready for a boyfriend when you can keep your food in your mouth.”

Melissa chuckled. “Now, sweetheart,” she said turning to Jack. “You know we were holding hands in high school.” She lifted an eyebrow, same as she did when she came out of the bathroom at night with something on her mind. “If I remember right, you even tried to kiss me once or twice.”

“Gross, y’all,” Carrie said. She’d wiped her mouth and smeared a long trail of lipstick up her cheek.

“Christ Almighty,” Jack said. “I can’t keep up with you women. Lord knows why I love you like I do.” He slurped a salty spoonful of thick gravy. “But honey,” Jack said, turning to his daughter. “I catch this Donovan boy with his hands on you and he’ll make a good addition to the foundation of the next house I put up.” Jack didn’t mean it, of course. His daughter was growing up, and her boy hopping was part of it. When he wasn’t sure what to do, he looked to his wife for guidance. If she was calm, he was too. He hadn’t been a little girl after all. He’d been a little boy, which meant he’d spent his early high school years flipping rocks up the mountain streams looking for salamanders and avoiding girls the best he could. Until he met Melissa.

He knew there were cases like his old friend Jim Cantrell, who got a woman pregnant their freshman year at Watauga and dropped out of school. Last Jack heard, Jim had succumbed to a meth addiction and refused treatment when his ex-wife and son confronted him. For all Jack knew, Jim could be rotting in a trailer far-flung up in the hills. His daughter was different than Cantrell's whore, Jack told himself. He and Melissa raised her well.

"Daddy," Carrie said. "I love Donovan..."

"Eat up, darlin'," Jack said. He had no doubt Carrie thought she loved her new boyfriend, but she still had at least one year of childhood left. It was too early for her to spoil her youth with notions like love.

Carrie turned her blue eyes back down to her plate, and Jack watched her smooth auburn hair fall over her ears. Her nose was small and upturned like her mother's. *Why wouldn't a boy want to spoil that?* he thought. And outside the kitchen, the rain hammered against the window.

"Honey, we should talk about something," Melissa said as she crawled into bed. She'd just showered, and the steam rolling out of the bathroom smelled like the lavender soap Jack bought her at the Boone Farmer's Market. But even the scent of lavender didn't ease his mind. The last time Jack had seen his wife bite her lower lip like that was the evening she'd told him she'd gotten a message his mother had pancreatic cancer.

That night the only good news she bore was that at least pancreatic cancer takes its victims quickly. And sure enough, his mother was dead three weeks later.

Instead of showing any outward signs of fear, Jack grit his teeth and met his wife with the same resolve he met the mud he shoveled from behind the house.

“Carrie asked me for condoms,” Melissa replied.

Jack’s mind screeched to a halt. He milled his wife’s words down to their smallest parts. Carrie was his daughter. She was fourteen-years-old. She asked her mother to buy her condoms. Condoms were used during sex to prevent pregnancy and herpes. Carrie was going to have sex. Or maybe she already had.

Jack felt blood rush to his face, hot and close to the skin. He was a grown man—thirty-eight years old, strong, with calloused hands and a prematurely gray beard—but this news about his daughter was enough to take the wind out of him. It felt like a twenty-pound sledge driven straight into his gut. He couldn’t tell whether he wanted to curl up and hibernate or hunt down this Donovan boy and drown him in wet concrete.

So instead of doing anything, Jack lay still and faced his wife. “Well?” he asked. He tried to keep his voice flat, but a sore lump stuck in his throat made his voice crack.

Melissa crawled into bed next to him, pushing the hand-stitched comforter away from their bodies. She sighed. “What else can I do? When children get it in their minds they’re going to have sex, who’s to stop them?” She threw an arm across Jack’s chest. It was damp and cold.

Jack felt a small seed of betrayal planted in the back of his mind. He wasn’t sure it was warranted, but it didn’t matter. His daughter was still a baby. How could he be the

only one who recognized it? He loved Melissa because they were a team, and teams worked toward a common end. He didn't want his baby having sex yet, but it seemed like his wife had accepted that, not only would it happen, it would happen soon. And she was going to speed the whole process up by buying condoms.

"I caught her and Donovan in the cellar just two days ago," she said. "I told her I wouldn't tell you, so on your honor you can't bring it up."

"How the hell'd that boy get over here?" Jack asked, trying to keep his voice level.

"He and his family just live right off of 105," Melissa said. "He biked over, I'm sure."

"In this rain?" Jack said. "There are goddamn school buses stuck in mud up to their axles less than a mile away, and you're telling me this boy rode his bicycle to do god knows what to our girl?" He felt sweat breaking under his arms. "Were they...?" He couldn't bring himself to finish the question.

"No, honey," she said. "They were just kissing. Like you and I used to."

"But we never kissed down in the damn cellar," Jack said louder than he should've. "Hell, they could've been in there when I was shovelin' away that mud."

"I know, I know, sweetheart," Melissa said. "But lower your voice. I don't want Carrie to hear us. She's scared to death of what you'd do if you knew." She pressed herself into Jack's side, but instead of warming his aching muscles, the pressure from her body irritated his soreness. She kissed his neck and grazed her hand over his groin, but Jack wanted nothing to do with her this evening.

“Not tonight,” he said, and turned away from her.

“I understand you’re upset,” she said after she turned out the light. “But it’s good she came to me before she did anything stupid.”

Jack was angry—angry at his daughter for tying a noose around her childhood and angry at his wife for kicking the chair away.

“You’ve raised a good girl, Jack,” Melissa said before her breathing fell into the rhythmic drone of sleep.

Jack swung his sledgehammer and drove it straight through the tough sheetrock of Piper McGinty’s house. Piper’s house used to sit on the banks of Kraut Creek, but its foundation melted from underneath it after the second week the water from the creek had been above the banks. The shock from the sledge ran up Jack’s arm, and it felt good. He could feel his frustration at his wife and his daughter shake from his body every time he brought the heavy head of the hammer down with a blunt crash. But Jack knew his release was only momentary. Only while his hands were busy and his mind occupied could he forget the seed of betrayal that had germinated and sprouted over night. And as he crushed the sheetrock into several small gray piles, he prayed he never caught Carrie and Donovan. He’d drive his sledge into the boy’s skull.

There was now a gaping hole between what used to be McGinty’s living room and his bathroom. Jack’s ungloved hands stung, but he kept hefting the tool like an ancient highlander might wield a war hammer. He tried to recall his childhood. Sure, he’d

kissed Melissa in the dugouts, in the alley behind Boone Drug and under the bridge at the Valle Crucis Community Center. But those were playful, flirtatious kisses. Not to mention, he and Melissa had been going together for six months, and everyone knew how much he cared for his girl. To him, every kiss was a promise he intended to keep. He thanked his parents. They provided a good model.

Where was Donovan's chivalry? Jack didn't understand how that boy could respect his daughter when the two of them couldn't have been going together more than a month. Carrie and Donovan hadn't had time to build a relationship able to bear the burden of sex.

"Christ a'mighty, Jacky," Billy said. He propped his own sledge up on his shoulder. It looked like a handheld hammer on his broad shoulders. "Bring the roof down on us all if you keep this up."

Jack stopped and looked at his work. The flooded bathroom was now part of the old living room and not a support beam remained. A pile of soggy rubble a foot high mapped the path of Jack's hammer.

"Sorry, Bill," Jack said.

"I still think we could've just waited 'til everything dried out to doze this place," Billy said. His overalls were soaked up to his waist.

"If I told you once, I told you how many times, Bill," Jack said. "Another week and there's no telling how far this shack would be downstream. What the hell would we do if this thing went tearin' ass into someone else's house?"

"Ain't that McGinty's problem?" Billy responded.

“It would’ve been if he hadn’t contracted us to tear it down,” Jack said. “So it’s ours now.” He let go of his sledge and it fell to the ground with a wet slap. “You got flood insurance?” Jack asked.

“No.”

“How you going to pay for all this water damage?”

“Work, I guess.”

“Damn right,” Jack said. “And you’re working now. So don’t complain.”

After work, Jack slogged up to Mast. He didn’t feel like going home. He wasn’t sure how he was going to face his wife or daughter. It had been a chore to kiss his daughter on the head before she left for the bus stop that morning. His hands ached from gripping his hammer gloveless all afternoon. He felt like sitting with Verl, packing some chaw and spitting tobacco juice into the rain. He didn’t want to talk, just wanted to enjoy the company of a man. Jack needed to reign himself in, to collect himself so he didn’t act rashly. He’d respect his daughter even if that Donovan boy wouldn’t.

“Goddamnit,” Jack said, settling into the old rocker next to Verl. He pressed some moist tobacco into the crevice between his bottom teeth and lip and worked up the spit to soak the pouch.

“What’s got you down, boy?” Verl said. Cascades of water ran off the tin awning overhead, and the rain thrummed.

“Rather not talk about it,” Jack said.

“Your choice,” Verl replied.

While Jack sat watching the rain come down in great grey sheets—sheets so thick they looked like torn fabric draped from the clouds—he thought about what his wife said the night before. He wasn’t holding a hammer, so he couldn’t do anything but surrender to his mind. He settled into the tobacco fog and, trancelike, followed the rain-carved rivers through Mast’s parking lot. He sucked and spat and waved to anyone who pulled up. But he didn’t bother talking.

That evening, Jack pulled up to his house with a smile on his face. He’d decided Carrie’s virginity was something she could stand to hold onto for a little while longer, and without going inside, he walked around to the back of the house and began shoveling away the mass of mud and rubble piled against the back of the house. His hands hurt. Jack’s fingers ached from grappling with the heavy sledge, and his forearms ached from absorbing the shocks. While he shoveled, he looked at his cellar doors, wondering if Carrie and Donovan were in there right now. But he didn’t check. He’d made up his mind. He knew his daughter would be mad for a little while, but her boyfriends came and went. She’d be on to the next boy before she knew it, and she’d forget all about her father telling her she couldn’t have sex. She’d even thank him in the long run.

He had one lingering doubt though, because he knew his wife was right: once his daughter got something in her mind, she’d see it through. If he told her she couldn’t have sex with this boy, she might just turn to someone else, or do it anyway. Maybe it was better to let Melissa just buy the condoms and pray she’d think twice before she used them.

The lump of tobacco still sat between his gums and lip, and he scooped it out with his forefinger and threw the spent pouch into the pile of mud behind him before he walked back to the porch.

“Hi Daddy,” Carrie said when Jack walked into the house. She said it like he’d asked her to the night before.

“Evenin’,” Jack said the same way he might greet a stranger. “How long ‘til we eat?”

“Not long, baby,” Melissa called back from the kitchen. “How was your day?”

“Alright,” Jack replied. He kept his eyes to the ground. “I’ll be outside until it’s time to eat.” He didn’t want to put himself in a situation where he might say something before he meant to. He knew what he was about to tell his daughter meant there’d be a day or so of hell to pay, and he didn’t want to face that before he had to.

Back on the porch, Jack closed his eyes. He’d become deaf to the constant hum of pouring water. Instead he listened to the forest behind his house creaking under the weight of the water and shifting mud. The mountain was being eaten away by the rain. His house was the only thing collecting the cast off bits, and he wished he could put them back instead slinging them over his shoulder into his yard just to be washed away.

“Dinner’s ready, sugar,” Melissa said as she opened the door just enough to fit her mouth through the crevice.

“I’m not real sure how to start,” Jack said once his wife and daughter joined him at the table. Melissa and Carrie both turned to him, and Jack felt his face turn red. He became all too aware of the rough tabletop and stopped dragging his fingertips across it to avoid getting a splinter. He didn’t like calling attention to himself, even with his family, but he knew it couldn’t be helped this time, so he buried his self-consciousness and moved forward. “And I’m sorry.”

Melissa’s brow furrowed. She squashed her fork into her mashed potatoes and crossed her arms.

“Sweetheart,” Jack said, turning to his wife. “I can’t have you buying condoms for Carrie. And baby,” Jack said, turning to Carrie, “you’re too young to be rollin’ around with your boyfriend.”

For a moment, the wash of rain against the roof was all to be heard. Then both women erupted into a torrent of shouts and stern words, tears and clenched fists.

“But Daddy, I love him...”

“Damnit Jack, I told you...”

“You can’t stop us from doing...”

“You’re a fool to think they wouldn’t anyway...”

Jack wanted to shrink away from his wife and daughter. He wasn’t accustomed to confrontations involving words. He’d torn Billy and Bradley off of each other on construction sites, but men had a way of being becoming better friends after they punched it out a little. But there wouldn’t be such a clean end to this fight—his wife would be angry because he let Carrie know she’d told him, Carrie would be mad at

Melissa for telling him, and, on top of everything, Carrie would be mad because he told her she couldn't have sex with Donovan. But he knew this was going to happen. He'd prepared himself for this on the porch at Mast as he sucked greasy tobacco juice from his lip and spit into the rain. The wounds he caused would have to knit, and that would take some time. But he was working towards everyone's highest interest. Even if his wife and daughter couldn't see that now, they would in time—hopefully before the rain stopped.

As he rolled all this around in his mind, Jack's wife and daughter waved their hands and shouted in the background while he sat in the crossfire of angry words.

"Enough," Jack said, but it wasn't heard. "Goddamnit, enough," Jack said again, louder.

"No, Jack, you're going to listen to me," Melissa said. "I told you about our daughter in confidence, with enough faith in you to think you wouldn't pull a stunt like this."

"A stunt?" Jack said." Jack had a temper he'd inherited from his father. John Michael McDonough Senior had been a stern man with no sense for foolishness. He was small—by the time Jack was ten, he'd stood as tall as his father—but Jack Senior's size had no bearing on his ire. Jack still bore the marks of his father's anger across his shoulder blades. Now he was feeling the same frustration his father must've felt on the evenings he led Jack out back and switched him with a thin hickory branch. "I'll hear no more right now," he said. He didn't want to lose his temper, so he tried to shut the conversation off before he couldn't be held responsible for his words.

“Yes, Jack, a stunt,” his wife said. “I trusted you enough to trust me and my decisions. A father can’t understand what it’s like to be a little girl, and who are we to tell our daughter what she can or can’t do with her body if she’s being responsible?” The large vein in Jack’s neck was hammering. “She’s going stir crazy stuck in this damn house night after night. Thanks to this rain, she’s either in school or in this house, and let’s be honest Jack, it’s not the most comfortable house for a little girl.” Jack wasn’t even sure what that meant, but he’d built that house for his family while Melissa was pregnant with Carrie. Who was she to insult the house he’d shed blood over?

“And what does that...?” Jack begun, but he was cut short.

“Daddy! I love him!”

“Shush baby,” Melissa said to Carrie. She turned back to Jack. “If she thinks she loves this boy, who are we to tell her different?”

“She’s fourteen goddamn years old, woman,” Jack said. “Fourteen.” The wind had picked up outside. The rain slapped against the sides of the house.

“She’s had her first monthly, Jack,” Melissa spat back. “She’s as much a woman as I am.”

Jack brought his fist down hard on the tabletop. His plate slid to the floor, and he stood up. Both his wife and daughter went silent. He felt the full breadth of his shoulders unfold, and he could feel the tough sinews in his chest tighten like bowstrings. But instead of raising his voice, he kept it level and said, “I’ve said all I wanted to, and I expect you two to respect my wishes.”

Jack left his overturned plate on the floor, and walked away from the table.

He didn't speak to his daughter or wife over the course of the next week. Melissa handed him the receipt for condoms, and he assumed Carrie was putting them to use. He hadn't seen or met Donovan yet, so Jack figured they were either romping at his house after school or at his house on the weekend while he was on site.

Jack and his crew were almost done tearing down McGinty's old house, so he occupied his evenings scouring ads for odd construction jobs. But the rain had soaked Boone, Valle Crucis and the surrounding areas so thoroughly, there were none to be found; the high country folk were waiting until the rain stopped before they had anything fixed.

The piles of runoff behind the house grew every day, getting so Jack couldn't clear all the mud, grit and sand in an afternoon. Mud had finally begun seeping into the cellar, and he considered moving the canned food and packs of batteries he kept down there to the house. But he never got around to it.

Jack and his crew stood in front of piles of wood, concrete and synthetic material. The job was finished. "Well boys," Jack said. "I'll be in touch when we get another job."

Billy rung out the sopping henley he'd been wearing under his overalls and draped it over his head. "We'll be out of work 'til this rain stops," he said. Drops of water fell from his walrus mustache. "Why don't we build an arc."

The men looked at each other and smiled. They gave each other hearty, wet slaps on the back, and started walking back to their respective vehicles.

"Hey boys," Jack said before anyone got too far. "Can I buy y'all a pouch?"

"You better after this mess," Billy said with a grin.

"Then I'll see y'all there," Jack said.

Jack's windshield fogged the moment he started his truck. The fabric of the driver's seat had started to mold, but he knew there was nothing he could do. His seat would fester and rot while the conditions couldn't be changed, but as soon as they could be, he'd fix it. He'd gut the upholstery in his truck. He'd talk to his wife and daughter.

When Jack pulled onto Broadstone, the rain was came down so hard his crew's headlamps were just yellow blurs in his rearview. The rain washed the light away and left a yellow patina in his rearview—the same color of the rocker Jack's father used to sit in, the rocker Jack threw out after his father died. He couldn't see the road, just the white line warning him where the drainage ditch was.

Then the line disappeared.

Jack felt his truck start to fishtail, so he eased up on the gas and let himself slow to a halt. He had to get out of his vehicle and lock his hubcaps into place before he could shift into four-wheel drive, but when he opened his door, thick, sloppy mud was half way up his tires. He hung the top half of his body out of the driver side and reached down to

turn the dial on his hubcap. Then he did the same on the passenger side. Instead of wading through the mud to lock in the back hubs, he crawled through the middle window of the cab of his truck into the bed and leaned over the sides to lock in the rear tires. His crew was nowhere to be seen, lost on the road somewhere. He looked at the hill in front of him and saw mud sliding like a moving carpet under the lush green leaves of rhododendron. The mud had covered the road and was oozing into the gully cut by the creek. If the rhododendron hadn't been so thick to slow the mud, he knew his truck would already be in the gully.

If Jack could tell where the road was, he could get home. He crawled back into his truck and jammed the gearshift into four-wheel drive. Slinging mud all over the passenger side window, Jack twisted his steering wheel to get some traction in the soupy slurry.

It was slow going, but after half an hour, he pulled into what he hoped was his driveway. Mud had flooded his front yard, and a wall of dirt and earth piled up three feet deep around his house. The eroding wall of dirt behind the house had slipped. He'd built his house away from the creek to avoid flooding. He'd considered landslides, but they were so uncommon, he didn't think he'd actually have to worry about them.

Melissa sat on the front porch with her face in her hands. Jack slogged through his yard toward her. The mud writhed around his shins like a living creature trying to pull him away from his house. When he finally put a foot on his porch, Melissa looked up.

"Hi," Jack said.

“Oh my god,” she gasped. “Jack, I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s happening. I couldn’t do anything.”

“What’re you sorry about?” Jack asked. She was grief-stricken, but there was nothing she could’ve done about the mudslide. There was plenty she could’ve done about so many other things, though. But instead of saying what was on his mind, he put his arm around her and pulled her close.

“We’ll get through this,” he said. “Our house hasn’t washed away, so we’re better off than Old Man McGinty and his.”

“But Jack,” Melissa said. “Look in the kitchen.”

He looked over her shoulder, and sure enough, mud was seeping in the kitchen windows. The mud piled up so deep at the back of the house, it was leaking in above the sink.

“It’s fine, baby,” Jack said. “We’ll get it all taken care of when the rain stops.”

“Damn rain won’t stop,” Melissa said into Jack’s chest. Her breath was the only warmth his skin had felt all day.

“Is Carrie in her room?” he asked.

“No,” Melissa said. “She and Donovan were here after school, but they said they were going back to his house.”

“Got-damnit,” Jack swore. “In this weather? How’d they get there?”

“Bikes, I s’pose,” Melissa said, wiping her cheeks.

“My truck was almost swept off the road in this mud,” Jack said. “They’re likely to be drowned under the damn mud somewhere.” He knew he shouldn’t have said it, but it slipped out.

“No,” Melissa yelled.

Jack looked out into the yard, and as the mud slid along, a pair of bicycle handlebars reached out of the muck like a skeletal hand.

“What the hell?” Jack said and walked to snag the bike. He reached over the porch and pulled his daughter’s bike out of the mud. His stomach went cold. He vaulted over the porch into the mud and slipped. He went face first into the muck. He stood up and pushed his way forward. His fingers slipped when he reached the corner of the house, and he prayed he wouldn’t see the other bike.

But when he pulled himself around the house, mud pressing into his stomach, he saw a tire cockeyed against the siding under the kitchen window.

SUMMER SKY

“Take my opinions with a grain assault [sic]. I believe in a literal interpretation of Mark 16...Everything comes by faith first, followed by good works last.”

—Holiness Snake Handlers Official Website

One moment, Sister Marianne Abbott was in front of the congregation speaking tongues with her eyes rolled up behind her eyelids, announcing her power over Satan’s demons with a cottonmouth held high over her head; the next she was on the floor bleeding from two punctures in her wrist. The congregation’s tambourines made so much noise it took three or four seconds for anyone to realize what had happened, but as soon as Pastor Hicks saw the snake next to his pulpit, he brought his foot down hard on the serpent’s skull. He ground the pink and grey bits of ex-snake into the stained cream carpet.

A man who sat on the foremost pew jogged to where Marianne lay and cradled her head. “Someone call the dang ambulance,” he yelled. “She’s gone foamy at the mouth.”

But Pastor Hicks raised his voice before anyone could make it to the lone landline in the Church’s coatroom. “The ambulance won’t be necessary,” he boomed above the bustle. “I need Brother Samuel Vance, and Brother William Odom to join me up here at the front.” The pastor stood above Marianne, who hadn’t moved since she collapsed. “No one here would dare proclaim that Sister Abbott falters on her walk with Jesus. I believe the Lord God Almighty meant to strengthen our faith by blessing us with an opportunity to do a little faith healing.”

The two men Pastor Hicks had called to the front now stood next to him. He reached out and clasped their hands, and the congregation went silent.

“Lord God,” the pastor began. “Firstly and foremostly, we’d like to thank you for blessing us with the opportunity to glorify you through your holy practice of faith healing.”

“Yes,” Brother Vance moaned.

“Sister Marianne is a good woman, Lord,” Pastor Hicks continued. She lives to spread your word like wildfire. Perhaps she was persuaded this week by one of Satan’s minions, Lord, and maybe she had a moment of weakness. But Sister Marianne’s faith is strong, Lord God. Her faith is strong!” Pastor Hicks raised his voice. “Cast this demon poison from her body, Lord! Cast out the poison like you cast the demons from the men at the tomb on the other side of Gadarenes!”

“I beg you, Lord, conquer the venom of the demon incarnate! Exercise your power over the devil!”

“Yessssssss...!” Brother Odom moaned as he bounced on his knees.

“Let us speak in the Holy language, brothers,” Pastor Hicks boomed. Shouts went up across the congregation. Tambourines burst to life, and a ten-year-old boy on the front row named Lazarus McCree stared wide-eyed at the spectacle unfolding before him.

A flood of tongues spilled from the three men standing above Sister Marianne Abbot. Wails and praise echoed off the browning walls of The House of the Holy Father in Jesus Name. Ankle length denim skirts dusted the hymnals on the back of the pews,

and men wrapped their arms around one another, clutching and hugging, overcome by the righteous cacophony.

The swell of noise increased when Sister Marianne Abbott stirred and rose to her feet. Lazarus imagined the great boom from The House of the Holy Father in Jesus Name funneling down the closest holler and ricocheting off the mountains, so even folks over the mountains in Blowing Rock could hear the praise. Lazarus sat stone still, his mouth agape, moved by the Lord's grace, astounded the Holy Spirit could erase the physical effects of viper venom. If he ever had a doubt about the splendor of God, it was dispelled as quickly and fully as the poison in Sister Abbot's bloodstream.

"Lazarus, Marianne got up because the bite was superficial," David McCree said to his son over dinner that evening. "That's the only way she would've survived a bite from a copperhead that size." David had not been at church that morning, but the news of Sister Marianne's miraculous recovery had overtaken Matney, North Carolina, once the service was over. Every time the story was retold, the snake grew another six inches. David was the town's lone paramedic, and instead of being moved by the tale, he told his son he was shocked Pastor Hicks had insisted the ambulance not be called.

"No, Dad, they prayed the poison out of her," Lazarus replied. "They didn't need you or the ambulance." He put his silverware down hard on the finished hickory table and shifted his gaze away from his father to the picture window overlooking the Blue Ridge. The sun was setting behind the profile of Grandfather Mountain, silhouetting the

bridge of the old man's nose. "God cast out the poison out of Sister Marianne like he cast the demons out of those men in the Bible."

"I'm only going to try explain this one more time," David said, taking a breath and pushing his salt and pepper hair off his brow. "A copperhead's fangs have two little holes in the tips. The snake's fangs are like syringes. When it bites, it injects poison through those holes. If the snake bites and doesn't inject any venom, the bite isn't dangerous."

"But Sister Marianne fell down. She almost died," Lazarus said. He gripped the corners of the table as hard as his little hands could. He'd seen God work a miracle, which few people do. He didn't understand his father.

"She probably fainted because of the shock, son," David said. "When she realized she'd been bitten, she experienced an acute stress reaction that slowed her pulse to the point she fainted. Does that make sense?"

"No," Lazarus spat. "It was God, Daddy. Everyone prayed and Pastor Hicks spoke in tongues and that made her better. God made her better."

Lazarus knew his father didn't agree with the church, and he'd always assumed his dad was angry because his mother had run off with Brother James McGinley, one of the founding members of The House of the Holy Father in Jesus Name. It worried Lazarus his father was always trying to tear down God with medicine or science, and the only time Lazarus could remember his father stepping foot inside The House of the Holy Father in Jesus Name was to protest the practice of drinking strychnine.

“Pastor Hicks, I respectfully oppose the decision to ingest poison ceremonially,” David McCree had said as he stood the morning strychnine drinking was to be introduced to the congregation of The House of the Holy Father in Jesus Name. Lazarus had noticed how the members of the congregation eyed David. They wouldn’t acknowledge him, and only looked at him out the of the corners of his eyes. “As the town’s only medic,” David continued. “I won’t be able to care for fifty folks suffering from convulsions as often as you plan to practice this.”

Lazarus tried to melt into his pew, disappear, when his dad stood to oppose the pastor’s decision. Lazarus was positive it was an unpardonable sin to disagree with Pastor Hicks, especially when the person disagreeing never came to church.

“Well Dave, that’s too bad,” Pastor Hicks replied. “Mark, chapter sixteen, verses seventeen and eighteen, tell us that if we have true belief in the Lord God Almighty, poison will not harm us.” Pastor Hicks spread his arms and addressed the entire congregation. ““If they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them.””

Pastor Hicks brandished the glass goblet of clear liquid over his head like he did the serpents he handled, and as he held the cup aloft, his eyes slithered from David to Lazarus, who was still trying to melt into the pew cushions. “Perhaps if you had as much faith as your son, Dave, you wouldn’t question me.”

Pastor Hicks did not convulse when he drank his poison, but three of the five other congregates who swallowed the strychnine did. As the poisoned worshippers convulsed on the carpet, clutching their stomachs, arching their backs, David forced

water down their throats, even as Pastor Hicks told him not to. David caught their vomit as they ejaculated a bitter-smelling slurry.

“Well, David,” Pastor Hicks boomed after the three poisoned church members had been escorted to the coat room where they could flail freely in case of a residual seizure. “I hope Brother Thompkins, Brother Smith, and Sister Heron are thankful for your services. Even if it went against God’s will, you’ve given them one more opportunity to climb back up on the path of righteousness.” Pastor Hicks opened his arms again, feigning an embrace from across the room. “Please reconsider the church, David,” he said. “I’m sure it breaks your son’s heart to know you’re hell bound.”

“Damnit, Hicks,” David replied. “Don’t drink goddamned poison. You’re going to kill off your congregation.”

Pastor Hicks bowed his head, shaking it like the pendulum on a grandfather clock. “God’s will be done,” he replied.

Unlike the resentment and embarrassment Lazarus harbored for his father, he could forgive his mother because she left when he was a toddler—long before he could remember. Like a child born without a limb, Lazarus never knew what he was missing. When he started kindergarten, he saw other boys with their mothers, but their moms always looked fussy, mussing their sons’ hair and spitting on their sons’ faces to wipe away dirt. Sometimes, Lazarus even considered himself lucky his mother left, and if she left with someone from the church, it must not have been the wrong thing to do.

The women of the church were his surrogate mothers. Because Matney didn’t have a daycare, Lazarus’s father would drop him off at the church’s nursery while he was

out driving the ambulance. The old women would read him Bible stories and tell him of God's terrifying magnificence. The old birds would recite Mark 16:17-18, and reinforce the importance of a literal interpretation of the passages. They would put him to sleep by whispering tongues in his ear.

Lazarus stared at his father across the table. The old man's iron jaw worked a mouthful of spinach, and his eyes were tuned to something through the wall, beyond the ficus on shelf behind Lazarus's head.

"I don't want you to go to hell, Dad," Lazarus said, and he meant it. But he wasn't sure whether he wanted to save his dad because he couldn't bear the thought of his dad smoldering and tortured for eternity—sinners deserved punishment, after all—or whether he just wanted the other members of the congregation to stop associating him with the town heretic, even though he wasn't sure they did since his father was always absent.

David chuckled and set his fork down. "I'm not going to hell, son," he replied.

"Yeah you will. If you don't go to church you will," Lazarus said.

"Son, I spend every day trying to save people's lives and keep them healthy. If that's not enough for God, I suppose I deserve a place in hell."

"No Dad, salvation comes from faith first and good works last," Lazarus replied. "That's what Pastor Hicks always says." Grandfather Mountain's entire profile was silhouetted out the window beyond the dinner table.

David chuckled.

"Why are you laughing?" Lazarus spat.

“I’m not laughing, son,” David replied. He turned his grey eyes to his son and wrinkled his brow. “Have you ever considered the possibility Pastor Hicks may be wrong about a thing or two?”

“No.” Lazarus stood up and put his foot down. It didn’t make the thump he’d hoped, so he raised his voice. “Pastor Hicks is right because he’s relaying on the word of God. God’s never wrong, so Pastor Hicks isn’t either.” He took a step away from the table. “You need to come to church, Dad, and you need to believe Pastor Hicks.”

“Lazarus...” David reached for Lazarus’s shoulder, but Lazarus took another step back.

Lazarus turned and ran up the two flights of steps leading to his room and slammed the door. Pastor Hicks couldn’t be wrong; there just wasn’t a possibility. Since he could remember, he’d been told to believe in the unyielding, unwavering truth of the church. Questioning the Truth was heresy. Even if something seemed unrealistic, you had to have faith—throw reason out the window and trust in the Lord, trust in Pastor Hicks. A lack of faith was failure to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and a surefire way to be bitten by a snake. God could see everything. God knew everything. You’d be rewarded for living a faithful life, and punished otherwise.

Lazarus kneeled beside his bed, and clasped his hands in front of him. A million stars, a million reminders of God’s glory, were visible from the skylight in his ceiling. He bowed his head, and began to pray.

“Dear God, I’m sorry my dad doesn’t think you’re as awesome as you are. I try to tell him that you’re always right and that Pastor Hicks is always right because he says

what you say but he doesn't believe me and I'm worried he's going to go to hell."

Lazarus took a breath. "But maybe he deserves to go to hell."

Lazarus opened his eyes. The moon was full, blue and visible behind thin, feathered clouds. David had built their three-story mountaintop home nine years ago, shortly after Lazarus's mother left. In one of Lazarus's earliest memories, his father lay next to him in bed, cradling him in the crook under his left arm. His beard wasn't grey, and the deep lines that ran from the corners of his father's mouth to up next to his nostrils weren't as visible as they were now. His father held a large picture book above both of them and read a story Lazarus couldn't quite remember, but he did remember being comfortable with his head on his father's chest.

"Do you know why I put that window there, Laz?" his father asked in the middle of the story.

"No," Lazarus replied. The lamplight made his father's arm look like a dinosaur on the opposite wall.

"So when you see the moon, you know there's something bigger than you," his father replied.

"What?" Lazarus replied.

"Humans like to think we're at the center of everything," Lazarus's father said.

"And that's just not true."

Lazarus's father usually stood and pulled the covers up around his son when they were through with the book, but this evening, he let Lazarus's head linger on his chest until Lazarus fell asleep.

“I love you,” Lazarus’s father said, leaning in and kissing him on the forehead after tucking the racecar comforter snugly under Lazarus’s neck.

Now, as Lazarus prayed by his bed, he began to feel guilty. “God, even though I get angry at my dad because he doesn’t believe you’re always right,” he continued to pray, “I don’t want my dad to go to hell. I don’t want to be in heaven and look down on my dad hurting.”

It was easy for Lazarus to condemn his father after church, when he had just heard how perfect and powerful God was, but now, hours after Pastor Hick’s words had floated away, he realized maybe he didn’t want to think about his father burning away in the fiery vats of the devil. “Please God, help me convince my dad you’re real and you’re as good as you say. Help me show him Pastor Hicks is right. Please God, please God, please.”

The next morning, when Lazarus stumbled downstairs to fix himself a bowl of cereal, he found a note from his father on the granite kitchen counter. It read, “Good morning son, I’m going to be out most of the afternoon, but I should be home before dinner. If you’re not too upset with me, maybe we can drive to Boone and go to a movie once I get back. Call me if you need anything. You know the number (and in case you don’t, it’s 828-555-9401). I love you, Dad.”

A swarm of butterflies exploded in Lazarus’s stomach. It’d been months since his dad had taken him to see a movie. The afternoon’s seconds would stretch into minutes,

the minutes into hours, and the hours into days. Time would turn to molasses roll by at a fourth the speed of any other day.

“God, please help today go by fast,” Lazarus said as he poured milk over his cereal. He took his bowl to the couch and turned on the television. With a little trial and error, Lazarus broke the code to unlock the channels his father tried to keep private. It was the third time his father had changed the code, and it was a mystery to Lazarus how his dad always knew he was watching programs he wasn’t supposed to.

He was pretty sure Pastor Hicks and the Bible would consider breaking the code to watch forbidden channels a lie. He was also pretty sure looking at women in their underwear was a sin too, but he’d pray extra hard on Sunday. His slate would be wiped clean.

The women prancing in their underwear didn’t help the time slide by any quicker though, so he decided to go hunting with his slingshot. He’d pretend to be Johnny Badass, the hero from the last movie he and his father went to see together. He would even wear his sunglasses in the shade where it wasn’t necessary, just like the hero. Even though God commanded, *Thou shalt not kill*, that hero made it look okay sometimes, and Lazarus would hunt down rabbits the way Johnny Badass hunted the men who spoke Spanish.

Lazarus threw a layer of t-shirts from his dresser on the ground looking for his favorite camouflage tank top. He pulled it on and flexed in the mirror hanging on his closet. He pretended not to see the stuffed animals he’d just decided to put away. As he secured a belt across his chest, the squeal of tires, followed by the terrifying shriek of a

guinea being slaughtered, broke the concentrated silence of the warrior preparing for battle. Since he was a hero, Lazarus decided it was his job to investigate.

From his front porch, nothing looked off. The sky was open and blue, peppered by a few small clouds. The forest across the road was still, save a soft breeze, but, looking across the road into the woods, Lazarus noticed two thick, black tire marks in the middle of the road.

Something rustled in the deep drainage ditch on the opposite side of where he stood. A cold anxiety clawed at Lazarus's stomach, and he felt his throat tighten the way it had when his father opposed Pastor Hicks the Sunday the congregation drank strychnine. Still, he was a hero and he had to do his duty.

When he was five or six, he found the flattened corpse of a rabbit in the road. The little mammal's innards had been forced from its body like the jelly from a flattened donut, but its hind legs still twitched and its eyes still darted back and forth feverishly. It was another one of his earliest memories, and one that stuck with him still. Maybe, instead of running away in tears this time, he'd be able to break the creature's neck and help it instead of letting it live until the pain became too much.

But what Lazarus saw at the bottom of the ditch was not a rabbit. It was Sarah McQueen, his schoolmate who sometimes made the three-quarters of a mile trek down to his house from hers on the longest summer days, tangled in the yellowing crabgrass. Lazarus noticed a small patch of blood under her left armpit, but that looked mild when he saw her leg was bent forward at the knee.

Lazarus jumped into the ditch and hooked his forearms under Sarah's armpits. He didn't want to. In fact, his brain was telling him to run, but no one was going to help her if he wasn't.

When he tried to lift her, she squirmed and whimpered and he let her go. She plopped back to the ground, and as she hit the earth, something snapped. It sounded to Lazarus like breaking the cartilage of a turkey's leg at Thanksgiving dinner.

"What happened?" Lazarus asked. A breeze that felt like hot breath blew down the ditch and Lazarus felt dust from the road stick to his face.

"Truck didn't stop," Sarah gasped. "Get help."

Lazarus stood and leapt at the opposite bank, but as he scrambled out of the drainage ditch, an idea crashed into his brain like a message from the Creator Himself. Last night, Lazarus prayed for a chance to prove God's grace and elegance to his father. This was it. He could kneel over Sarah McQueen, lay his hands on her wounds, and pray her trauma away. God would repair the flesh and bone. God would replenish Sarah's blood supply and deaden her screaming nerves. His father, the ever-skeptical David McCree, would have to accept God's miraculous divinity and unquestionable reality when he came home and heard Sarah's testimony.

He knew his faith wasn't a shred of Pastor Hick's, but there were stories all throughout the Bible about miracles happening to common folk, so Lazarus knelt over her and bowed his head. "Dear God," he began. "Thank you for this opportunity to prove your holiness to my dad. Please work through me to make Sarah better so Dad will believe in you." Lazarus floated his hands over Sarah's body, channeling every ounce of

faith he could muster through his fingertips. He kept praying, kept begging, kept casting requests skyward without a doubt in his heart. Doubt was the enemy of faith, it was what fueled his father's denial of the church. Instead of God's power to heal, Lazarus's dad put his faith in medicine.

Pastor Hicks usually spoke in tongues when he practiced faith healing, but Lazarus still hadn't been blessed with the gift. *No better time to give it a shot*, he thought. "Pla lalalalalaal laooaahhaa," he mumbled, but it didn't sound natural or fluid like Brother Vance or Brother Odom's. The small bloody patch under Sarah's armpit had begun to grow, saturating her teal, cotton Tazmanian Devil t-shirt. He tried speaking in tongues again, but it still sounded forced, so he reverted back to what was comfortable: begging. "God, please, God, please, God, please," he said. "God, please."

Lazarus had lost track of time, but after awhile, he heard the low rumble of a vehicle coming down the road. For a split second, he thought about jumping up and down to flag the car for help. The driver wouldn't see the two of them at the bottom of the ditch if he didn't, but as Lazarus shifted his weight to propel to stand, guilt froze him in place. If he turned to an earthly being for help, God would know Lazarus didn't have complete faith in Him, so Lazarus crumpled back over Sarah's tiny body and floated his hands inches above her once more.

Sarah's breaths were becoming shorter and irregular, and her eyes wouldn't focus. She looked terrible, but the worse she looked, the more miraculous her recovery would be. Lazarus tried to forget the dead, dried grass stabbing his legs and he continued praying.

The sun had risen from behind the green treetops and now beat down on the ditch where Lazarus knelt over Sarah McQueen. The scent of her blood overpowered the freshly mowed grass being baked by the summer heat on the roadside above them. Lazarus was thirsty, and his sweat burned as it rolled into his eyes and over his dry, cracked lips. His prayers weren't coming as easily, and flies were beginning to swarm on the blood crusting Sarah's armpit. When she would gasp or cough, a fresh slick would appear at the heart of the stain and the bugs would scatter.

"Please God, please God, please..." Lazarus croaked. He was tempted to ask the Lord to deliver him a bottle of water.

Then Sarah's breathing stopped.

Lazarus's heart screeched to a halt, then it began hammering hard and fast. His eyes couldn't focus and he felt dizzy. He turned his eyes upward. Nothing but the white hot summer sun stared. The sky was open and blue and beautiful, but God was nowhere to be found. Lazarus wasn't sure Sarah was dead, but if she wasn't yet, she would be soon. He forced himself up.

His father's number was still on the note in the kitchen.

THE CORPSE BIRD

My son's at the damn window again, yelling at the blackbirds on the power lines outside my daughter's hospital room. I've told him three or four times now to stop harassing the birds, told him he'll upset Sandy yelling like he is, but that's not the real reason I want him to stop. He doesn't mean anything by it, I know, but the crows don't know that. Hunter's just reached the age he's interested in all the animals. I guess he's gotten bored with discovering the limits of his own limbs, so he's turned to the creatures that move a little differently. He's also at the age where he can't quite understand what kind of shape his sister's in. He understands the words "sick" and "bad," but he can't realize their depth.

Hunter starts banging on the screen with his little palms, trying his damndest to get those birds to do something other than stare at him like he might have a chunk of cornbread in his pocket. Sandy stirs—takes a quick breath, opens her eyes and coughs—and the little light on that brown box above her bed goes from green to red, then back to green. Before I can ask her how she is, her eyes are closed again and she's asleep. Doctor Belle still can't tell what's wrong with her lungs, so he's monitoring every vital sign he can. She's got wires coming out of her gown at every angle, all of them attached to different computers arranged around her bed so she can't see them. Doctor Belle says patients get anxious when they can see the way their bodies are working. "Once you see the body at work," he said, "you realize it has the potential to stop."

I take Hunter by the wrist and sit him in my lap. Before he hopped up to keep yelling at the crows last time, I set him in the square, blue-cushioned chair next to mine hoping the cartoons on TV would keep him in his seat. He's wiggling and going limp,

pretending to be boneless so he's hard to hold, but I'm in no mood to deal with him, and I don't have the energy to scold him, so I tell him he can have some fruit candy if he sits still for ten minutes.

My plan works, and Hunter's asleep in my arms before the ten minutes are up. The same cartoons he refused to watch earlier are still on, but my eyes keep traveling to the brown water spot staining the ceiling panels above the TV.

Something whirs on one of Sandy's computers, and I turn to look which light on which box is blinking this time. Nothing's changed, as far as I can tell, but I catch something out of the corner of my eye and see a crow perched on the window ledge. It opens its beak without making a sound, and I notice a line of grey feathers under its throat as it puffs up its chest.

I feel something turn cold in my stomach, and I look at my little girl. I don't know whether I should get rid of the bird or leave it be. I don't like it sitting there, looking in on me and my babies, but I don't want to wake up Hunter. I feel a little silly for still believing in the old mountain superstitions I was raised on, but a part of me will always stay in those hills. A part of me may always believe in omens.

My Granddaddy Michael called them corpse birds, the crows that settled on the lone birdfeeder in the front yard. Despite the cold, he'd sit on his front porch for hours at a time with a hand-rolled cigar and a mason jar half-full of amber whiskey, bulls eyeing the black beasts with his slingshot. He never missed, but he also never killed one.

Until I was fourteen, I stayed with my grandparents the first week of every New Year while my parents went on their annual ski trip to Jackson Hole or Mammoth. I always looked forward to my week deep in the mountains of Pigeon Roost, North Carolina, where the snow fell hard and fast, but lay calmly, while the warm scent of wood smoke lingered on everything in my grandparent's five-room cottage.

On the morning after my parents dropped me off, kissed me good-bye, and began down the mountain to the Charlotte airport, I awoke to the smell of Granny Bea's biscuits, and a torrent of Granddaddy Michael's curses.

"Got-damnit Bea," I heard as I lay in bed, warm under a hand-stitched quilt embroidered with my mother's initials. "Them things is hotter 'n a bed of coals."

"That's why you let 'em cool down, Sugar," Granny Bea replied.

Granddaddy Michael was a fiery man, born and raised in the same hills he still lived in. My mom told me stories about how, as the oldest son, it was his responsibility to provide for his brothers and sisters after his dad, my grandfather, died of tuberculosis, what was then called consumption. When he met Granny Bea and they started a family of their own, their first child was a boy, my father. They'd go hunting together, spend entire days in the mountains. They oftentimes caught or killed more than they needed, but on days they came back with little or nothing, Granddaddy Michael lashed out at my dad, sometimes bloodying his ear with the butt of his hunting rifle.

Personally, I had never seen Granddaddy Michael so angry he'd hit a man, but he had a habit of letting things get to him. Granny Bea was the only soul who could calm him. Her voice worked like a sweet salve to sooth a burn, and her patience could

withstand any of the devil's parlor tricks. They balanced one another, and after being married sixty-three years, their roots were so entwined, they had grown into the same tree.

I arose and made my way into the kitchen. Granddaddy Michael sat at the round, wooden table under a stuffed grouse, mounted so it looked freshly flushed. He had his leather tobacco pouch laid out, and he was rolling the second of his cigars for the day. A palm-sized, brown tobacco leaf lay in front of him with a mound of sticky tobacco cut into fine ribbons piled in the center. When I entered the room, he stopped what he was doing and presented his large, dry hand, with knuckles like knots, for me to shake.

This is what we did. No hugs. Just a simple handshake at breakfast and before bed.

Granny Bea, on the other hand, pulled me into her warm bosom, damn near strangling me as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

"Mornin' granny," I said best I could with my face pressed to her collarbone.

"Good mornin', sugarpie," she said. "Hope you're ready for breakfast."

She let go, and I fell into a chair opposite Granddaddy Michael.

"Shit," he said as the side of his cigar split. "Can't buy a 'bacca leaf worth a damn anymore."

"Michael," Granny Bea said. "You know to watch your language in front of Smithy."

"Boy's fourteen years old now," Granddaddy Michael replied. He slapped my back, and his knuckles felt like quartz rock against my spine. "I'm sure he's said worse."

A large plate of biscuits slathered in butter and drizzled with honey appeared before me.

“You said worse, Smith?” Granddaddy Michael asked.

With my mouth full of biscuits and butter, I mumbled, “Shit yeah,” and my grandpa let loose a chuckle that sounded like kindling burning in a fresh fire.

After breakfast, I sat by the fireplace and tried to find something to watch on television. My grandparents bought a TV because the family pressured them to accept some modern conveniences. This was after cable had been in circulation for a few years, but Pigeon Roost is so far-flung up in the mountains, it takes an extra ten years for technology like that to become available. My options were either blurry soap operas on the local NBC network or a rerun of Ernest Angley, the televangelist with a tendency to parade around stage in a pastel leisure suit preaching hellfire and brimstone. I chose neither and threw on my flannel jacket to join Granddaddy Michael on the porch.

On a clear day, you could almost see Boone, the closest town with a movie theatre, from my grandparent’s front porch. But this particular morning was cold, wet and heavy. Fog, thick as oatmeal and near cold as snow, had settled upon the mountain, and you couldn’t see the split rail fence at the far end of my grandparents’ yard. It felt like the sky was trying to suffocate us.

Granddaddy Michael sat in his hand-made rocker next to the sturdy hickory banister. He rocked back and forth slow and dangled an unlit cigar from his lips. He had a slingshot in his lap and a bucket of smooth stones next to his feet.

“Damn sky’s gonna swallow us whole,” he said as I pulled a stool up next to him.

One of the stool’s legs was shorter than the other two, and I wobbled for a moment before I found my balance. I put my hand on the banister. It was slick with cold dew.

Granddaddy Michael removed a box of strike-anywhere matches from his denim jacket and put the white phosphorous tip to his cracked leather boots. He drug it across the rough arch to strike it and lifted the flame to the tip of his fat, black cigar. We sat in silence for a moment while a thick cherry formed at the end of his smoke.

“Sometimes it’s hard for me to believe there’s a world beyond this mountain,” he said, exhaling a plume of smoke that smelled like a smoldering brushfire. He looked at me, and his eyes, sunk as they were into the cavernous sockets, shone Carolina blue. “If it weren’t for the grocery or the hospital, I’d never come down.”

“Why’s that, granddaddy?” I asked. As much love as I had for my grandparent’s mountain cottage, it was hard for me to endure the isolation for more than a week.

Granddaddy Michael chuckled, and said, “Got everything I need right here.”

“What’s everything you need?” I asked.

“A roof over my head, and your granny,” he replied. “And my drink. Sometimes it takes a good swig whiskey to appreciate Beatrice.” He smiled, and the deep lines in his face softened.

A lone birdfeeder stood in the middle of the yard. Muted grackles hopped around the bottom where sunflower seeds had fallen to the dead grass, while the bright cardinals landed on the perches, knocking more seed to those below.

A crow, stark black against the gray fog, landed on top of the bird feeder and pecked at the cardinals, driving them away, bleeding all color from the scene. A smaller crow landed at the bottom of the feeder, and in less than half a minute, they were the only birds left. They lifted their heads and cawed a warning. Any beast that wanted their feast would first have to put up a good fight first.

“Damned corpse birds,” Granddaddy Michael said. He handed me his cigar. One end was wet with spittle, while the other burned slowly toward my fingers.

He reached into the aluminum bucket by his feet and found a round, white stone. He loaded it into the leather patch of his slingshot and drew back. As he let loose, the crow on the ground cawed, stumbled, and flew into the fog.

I laughed, but nervously. Something wasn’t sitting right on my mind. Maybe it was the fog that had me skittish, but when that crow flew off, I knew it was off to stir up trouble and send it back our way.

Granddaddy Michael reached for his cigar, and I handed it over. “One more up there,” he said, and he brandished the slingshot.

I looked through the fog at the crow atop the bird feeder. Its beak, curved like the blade of a scythe, pointed right between my eyes. It was watching me, daring me to take the slingshot.

“I don’t think I can hit it, granddaddy,” I replied.

“Horseshit,” he said. “We won’t know ‘til you try.” He took a long drag from his cigar, and, through a cloud of smoke, said, “Take the damn weapon and mark that sumbitch.”

Of course I could’ve said no, but even as a young man, I understood what that would’ve meant. There’s a deep pride that still burns in men who years ago survived on the mountain’s gifts, and having the sense and skill to identify and reap what nature offered was the measure of a man. When I was but five, Granddaddy Michael taught me how to coax a fire from damp wood and a single match. I can still recall how his eyes shone brighter than the roaring fire when I succeeded on my second attempt. Granddaddy Michael wouldn’t’ve shown disappointment if I’d denied the weapon, but I have no mind as to what he would’ve thought. So I took the slingshot and fished a misshapen stone from the bucket at his feet.

As I loaded the stone into the leather pouch, I pinched around for a protrusion that would make my grip shaky. I had no intention of hitting the crow, but I didn’t want my granddaddy to know I intentionally misfired. My fingers were cold, and I could barely feel the hide-wrapped rock. But I found a grip and lifted the slingshot eye-level.

In my mind, I drew a line down my arm, splitting the fork of the weapon, and pointed it at the blackbird. The crow atop the birdfeeder looked at me, but then he lowered his head and dislodged a few loose feathers under the wing closest to me. I aimed left of the crow, but not enough to give Granddaddy Michael mind to what I was doing. I drew the leather pouch holding the rock back to my ear and let loose. I meant to miss. I didn’t want to slay the corpse bird, but I did.

As I let go of the stone, sending it into the foggy yard, the crow took flight and aligned its underside with my shot. I hit the bird square in the heart, and it died mid-flight. With what I imagine was its last lungful of air, it let forth a call into the gray morning so haunting I felt trouble stir the moment all was silent again.

“Hot damn,” Granddaddy Michael said. “Hell of a shot, boy.” He slapped my back, and his knuckles pummeled my spine. “That corpse bird’s deader ‘n the roadkill it eats.”

“But you never kill...” I began, but Granddaddy Michael cut me off.

“Hell no, I never kill ‘em,” he said. “Bad omen to slay them birds. I didn’t think you’d hit that sumbitch, but what do you know?”

Fear has a way of settling on your heart like a fog thicker than what settled on the mountain that morning. The worry it comes with hides your happiness. I knew, as that bird died, he called for some sort of vengeance from the powers that be.

And that afternoon, the snow started. Fat flakes fell heavy and blue, and by sundown eleven inches had settled upon the earth.

I watched out the large window in my grandparents’ front room as the snow piled up. When it was too dark to see farther than a foot or two in front of the house, Granddaddy Michael lit a fire in the wood stove and settled into his plaid recliner.

“Haven’t seen snow like this in thirty years,” he said. He had his box of matches and his second cigar in his hands. “Sure is pretty.”

“Granddaddy,” I began. “I didn’t know killing that bird would make it snow like this.”

“Don’t be a fool, boy,” he said, his unlit cigar bobbing in his mouth as he spoke. “I expected this from that damn fog this mornin’.” He struck a match on the splintered table next to his chair.

“Are we going to be okay?” I asked. I felt childish for asking, but the worry over killing the crow wouldn’t stop me.

“Can’t nothin’ get us in here,” he replied. “I built this house, and it’s stood through worse.” He exhaled a mighty plume, and stood. He walked to the kitchen, and I heard him mutter something to Granny Bea. I couldn’t tell what he’d said though, because his low voice died out before the words traveled to my ears.

I ran my fingers through the woolly grey carpeting, and looked up to the picture of Jesus hanging above the doughy grey couch against the left wall. Aside from afghan Granny Bea knitted hung over Granddaddy Michael’s chair, the picture was the only decoration in the den.

When Granddaddy Michael came back, he held two mason jars half-full of whiskey. He handed me one and said, “Drink up. It’ll all be fine.”

The slurry in my glass was thick and cloudy. He’d mixed my whiskey with honey so I could palate it, but it still burned as it slid down my throat.

Sure enough, the more I drank, the sleepier I became. I stared at the raw wood walls, not looking at them, but through them, imagining the snow falling soft and heavy outside. My worry had fled, and as the room filled with Granddaddy Michael’s cigar smoke, I felt like everything was back to how it should be.

Granny Bea had nestled into her old easy chair, and she called me over so she could run her arthritic fingers through my hair. They felt stiff as she raked them across my scalp. Still, they were comforting. I took my time finishing the drink Granddaddy Michael had given me so I could sit at her feet just a few minutes longer.

“It’s bedtime for you, sugar,” Granny Bea said when I set the empty mason jar under the lamp on the table next to her. “I expect you’ll wake when you smell breakfast cookin’.”

But the next morning I awoke disoriented to Granddaddy Michael’s knotted hands bearing down on my shoulders.

“Get up, boy,” he said. He couldn’t catch his breath. “Get dressed and get down to the basement.”

I shot out of bed, allowing the quilt to tumble to the floor. As I dressed, I remembered the crow’s dead body cradled in the fog, and wondered if it was still there or if a hungry coyote had rooted through the snow to retrieve it. I ran to the top of the basement steps and heard my grandparent’s voices below. The light in the basement was dim, and I couldn’t make out what my grandparent’s were doing, but it looked like Granddaddy Michael was kneeling over Granny Bea, who lay on the cold, dirt floor. I felt my breath coming faster and could hear my heart in my ears as I descended each step, and as my eyes became used to the dark, I saw Granny Bea’s left ankle folded into a ninety-degree angle.

“Quit pussyfootin’,” Grandaddy Michael said. “Get down here.”

I took the last few steps three at a time and I felt the dirt give slightly as I landed next to Grandaddy Michael.

“We’re takin’ her up sideways,” Grandaddy Michael said. “When we get her a-sittin’, you’re to sling her left arm across your shoulders and go first.”

I didn’t ask any questions, just helped level Granny Bea to her feet. She wasn’t a fat woman by any means, but she was short and stocky, built like Civil War fort, thick and low to the ground.

She didn’t once whimper as Grandaddy Michael and I clambered her up the stairs. Close to the top, I felt my legs shaking, and I worried they might buckle, which would send Granny Bea and Grandaddy Michael both tumbling down the steps.

“I need to stop, granddaddy,” I said.

“God damnit,” Grandaddy Michael growled. “You’ll keep goin’ if you don’t want your own ankles broke.”

“Michael,” Granny Bea gasped. I expect it was to be a rebuke, but came out desperate, and I could hear the pain in her voice. Her brow had broken out in a dewy sweat, as had her underarms.

I mustered what strength I could and pushed on. My legs burned and shook under Granny Bea’s dead weight, but at the top, back in the kitchen, she felt lighter.

“Hold her while I come to your side,” Grandaddy Michael said, and he let go. I leaned left to compensate, and felt my grandpa’s head push between my hips and Granny Bea’s.

“I’ll get her to her chair,” Granddaddy Michael said. “And you’ll wait for me here.”

Granddaddy Michael helped Granny Bea to the next room, whispering softly to her all the while, kissing her curly gray hair and pressing his cheek to her forehead. And I waited.

After a minute or so, Granddaddy Michael reappeared in the doorway. He took a step and cuffed me on the side of the head so hard, stars ruptured into view. I almost lifted my hand to my head, but left it by my side, and met my grandfather’s blue gaze. I wanted to cry, but I knew tears might just earn me another swat upside my head.

“Can’t be licked when kin’s hurtin’,” he said. “You have to muscle up and be man.” He ruffled my messy bed head, and his knuckles felt like the stone I killed the bird with running across my scalp. “Now layer up while I get a pair of shovels and meet me outside quick.”

“Should we call someone, Granddaddy?” I asked.

“Tried.” Granddaddy Michael replied. “No dial tone. Damn snow’s done knocked out the phone lines.”

Granny Bea’s head had lulled backward against the her chair. Her eyes were closed and the sweat from her forehead had begun to run down her cheeks. She was covered in dirt, and her ankle had swollen to three times its normal size. It was also deep red, and I swore I could see her pulse throbbing in her foot.

I pulled on a sweatshirt and an extra pair of wool socks. I laced up my boots and zipped my flannel jacket to my neck.

“Be careful, sugar,” Granny Bea told me as I opened the door.

“Can I do anything for you?” I asked as I opened the door. A wall of cold air hit me square in the chest, and I felt it weave its way through the fibers to my skin. I was scared for her. My dad nearly shaved off the top of his thumb with a sander once, but it was the worst injury I’d experienced ‘til now.

“Just help your granddaddy,” she said. “He’ll take care of me.”

Granddaddy Michael was already heaving great shovelfuls of snow into the deserted horse pasture on the slope below the driveway. Snow still fell from the pregnant clouds, and I had a hard time believing we’d do much to clear the driveway if it kept snowing like it was.

“Get shovellin’, boy,” he said nodding toward the imprint of a shovel in a deep drift next to where he stood. “We’ll clear this today so we can get Beatrice to the Banner Elk hospital by sundown.”

“Okay, granddaddy,” I replied, not believing we’d do much with it snowing as hard as it was. I took a place next to him, and buried my shovel into the snow around my knees.

Every shovelful we slung into the horse pasture was replaced by a fresh batch of snow in a quarter hour, and my doubts about clearing the driveway were confirmed over and over. But when I looked at Granddaddy Michael, six times my age, arching his back

time and time again to clear a pathway so his old, white Chevrolet pickup could escape and he could take his love to the nearest hospital, I felt strong again.

I have no idea how much time we'd spent shoveling, or how much snow we'd moved, when he began to cough. He stood up, the first time all morning his spine straightened, and put his gloved hand to his mouth.

"Shit," he said. "Damn cold." Icicles hung from his large nostrils, and his cheeks were pale purple. "You hungry, Smithy?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. I hadn't thought of food before he asked, but upon mentioning it, my stomach growled and I realized just how hungry I was.

"Go get you a sandwich," he said. "Bring me one back when you come."

I ran back to the house best I could, the snow above my kneecaps by now, and stomped on the porch so I wouldn't track too much snow inside. My fingers burned as I pulled open the door.

The house smelled hot and sour, and the air felt stagnant when I stepped inside. I was used to the snowy air outside, clean and crisp, and the smell of the den almost made me gag. I imagined I was the only thing to move the air since I went outside earlier. Granny Bea's head still rested against the chair back, and her housecoat was soaked through with sweat. Her ankle had swollen to the size of a grapefruit, and her breaths were coming sharp and fast.

"Granny Bea?" I said softly.

"How's it comin', Smithy?"

“Real good, granny,” I said. “Just makin’ me and granddaddy a sandwich. Can I make you anything?”

“No, Smithy,” she said. “Will you pull Michael’s table over here and perch my foot up on it?”

I drug Granddaddy Michael’s table over to Granny Bea’s chair and kneeled to lift her left foot. When I got close to her, I realized the sour smell in the room came from her housecoat. The skin around her ankle was hot to the touch, and felt like gelatin wrapped in leather. She groaned and winced once as I settled her foot on the rough wooden table, but told me it felt better once it was there.

“Thank you, sugar,” she said. “We’re out of mayonnaise, but Michael doesn’t like it anyway. Make sure you take a few biscuits outside with you when you go.”

When I jogged back outside, Granddaddy Michael was coughing as he shoveled. I handed him the sandwich and two biscuits and he took his gloves off to eat. The sun had started to fall behind the powdered trees off to the west. I knew we didn’t have much time left to shovel, and not even Granddaddy Michael would be caught outside in the snow on the mountain after dark.

“Let’s get another good hour in before we go inside,” Granddaddy Michael said as he licked mustard from between his fingers.

“Okay, granddaddy,” I replied, and we buried our shovels in the snow once more. The snow kept falling, undoing all our hard work, and the mountain was silent except for Granddaddy Michael’s wracking cough that exploded like Mossberg blasts into the blossoming night.

The next morning, the snow fell still. Through the frost on my bedroom window, I saw a divot in the blanket of white where me and Granddaddy Michael had cleared a large patch of the driveway, but there was no evidence of our work otherwise.

Granny Bea was still in her chair, her head against the afghan, eyes closed, mouth agape. Her ankle had swollen further, and the skin looked like it might rupture if something touched it right.

Granddaddy Michael was in the kitchen dressed and ready to pick up where we left off. He ate a bowl of cereal, and had one set out for me.

“Eat up, boy,” he said. “Then get dressed and meet me outside.”

The flakes he’d poured me had already soaked up all the milk. They were soggy and warm. When Granddaddy Michael went outside, I threw the remnants out back, and fished a pair of biscuits from the tin next to the stove. They were dry and hard, but tasted good all the same.

After I pulled on my warm clothes, I lifted the phone once more to see if we had a dial tone yet. Silence.

“Can I do anything for you, granny?” I asked before I went outside to help Granddaddy Michael.

“No,” she said, and said nothing else.

This day felt twice as cold as the day before. Instead of thick, feathery flakes, the snow had become small and vicious. Crystals of ice collected on the ground. Granddaddy

Michael coughed as he shoveled, much as he did the evening before, and I took my place next to him, watching Mother Nature cover our work as quickly as it was performed.

My mind kept wandering back to the bird, and the longer we shoveled, the more convinced I became I brought all this misfortune tumbling down on us.

“I need a moment, granddaddy,” I said.

“Hurry up,” he growled through bouts of cough.

I trudged back up toward the birdfeeder, and split the icy snow with the blade of my shovel. I dug through more than a foot of snow before I came upon the frozen crow carcass, stiff and preserved. I picked it up, and I swear to this day its dead eyes still looked full of life and hatred.

I walked behind my grandparent’s house to the edge of the evergreen forest and looked for a track of earth where the snow wasn’t fifteen inches deep. A few needles poked through under a large Eastern White Pine, and there I stepped on my shovel. I thought the ground would be harder to break than it was. It hadn’t been cold long enough to freeze the ground. I had a hole dug deep enough for the crow in ten minutes time. I held the beast at arm’s length, and tried folding its outstretched right wing to its body. But the limb was frozen and stricken with rigor mortis.

“All right,” I said. I wanted to say something else to the bird, but I couldn’t find the words. I covered the crow with dirt.

That afternoon the snow stopped, and our work started to mean something. We were finally making a rut in the snow large enough for Granddaddy Michael’s truck to pass through.

The sun was setting when we heard a great rumbling from the road on the hill above us. One of the county snowplows was barreling down the road, pushing the snow with its bulldozer blade and spreading gravel for traction as it passed.

“Smithy, I can’t stop shovelin’, so you need to flag one of them trucks down to plow out our driveway,” Grandaddy Michael said between bouts of violent cough.

“Okay granddaddy,” I said. His cheeks had gone true purple, and his bald head was red and raw from the dry air and wind. Even his eyes, which had shone sapphire blue the day before, had ebbed colorless.

I trudged to the top of the driveway, and stood in the middle of the road waiting for one of the county trucks to come roaring up or down the mountain. Branches hung low above the road from the weight of snow and ice. They dangled like skeletal fingers above my head, and I felt the same sense of foreboding I had when Grandaddy Michael shot the crow on the ground two days prior.

I looked up and saw three corpse birds nestled on branches on the opposite side of the road. They sat silent, watching me, waiting for the cold to kill me, I thought, so they might have a fresh meal. After a quarter hour, one cawed, and all three flew off into the woods. Their dark forms faded amongst the trees, and I was happy to be rid of them.

Just then, I felt the ground tremble, and saw a plume of snow steadily rising up the road. I stepped out of the way, but jumped up and down, waving my arms and shouting as loud as I could to get the driver’s attention. The behemoth stopped beside me, and the passenger side window slid open.

A man in sandy coveralls and a red trucker hat looked down and said, “What’s the matter?”

“We need help, my grandma broke her ankle, and my granddaddy and I have been shoveling for two days...” The words came fast, and I gasped to catch my breath. The frigid air plummeted into my lungs and chilled me from the inside. It felt like the afterlife had taken seat inside my chest.

“Well god damn,” the man in the trucker hat said. “We’ll dig you out.” The window slid smoothly back up, and the massive truck backed up far enough to pull into my grandparent’s driveway.

“Grandaddy,” I yelled as I trudged back toward him. “The truck’s coming.”

He raised his head, and tried to yell something back, but began coughing again.

“Are you okay, granddaddy?” I asked.

“Wrap up Beatrice nice and warm, and I’ll go start the truck,” he said. His voice sounded like it had to travel across coarse grit sandpaper before it reached my ears.

Inside again, the air felt swampy. Granny Bea’s eyes were open, and something yellow had begun to creep into the corners.

“Granny, a truck’s diggin’ us out,” I said. Her ankle was thick and purple, and covered in some sort of moisture I hoped wasn’t leaking from within her.

“Good, sugar,” she rasped. Her voice sounded no better than Grandaddy Michael’s, but it sounded no worse either.

I collected the hand-stitched quilt from my bed, and I took the top comforter from my grandparent's bed. I swaddled her like a baby in two layers, without any notion of how Granddaddy Michael and I would get her to the truck.

"I'm too hot, Smithy," she said. But I heard the white Chevrolet tearing into the yard as she spoke.

"You'll be outside soon, Granny," I said, and I mopped her forehead with tissues from the table by her chair.

Granddaddy Michael swung open the door and stood towering over us. He looked like a man who'd been stranded in the woods for upwards of two weeks, but the color in his eyes had returned.

"Okay Beatrice," he wheezed as he bent to kiss his wife on the forehead. "We're goin' to get you to the hospital. Everything's goin' to be just fine."

He began to cough as he stood back up. He took his gloves off. He spat and hacked for ten seconds before he slid his gloves back on. But before he holstered his great gnarled hands, I saw that his palms were as full of blood as they were mucus.

INTEGRITY

II. 2011

Franklin Snively lifted his office phone off its cradle and paged his secretary. While he waited for her to pick up, he looked out the floor-to-ceiling window of his twenty-seventh story office. Frank had just received a message about the old recluse he'd spent the last two months looking for. He'd be damned if the codger was going to keep him waiting any longer.

Frank cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder. He toyed with his gold cufflinks, and, head cocked to the left, watched the sun fall beyond the long stretch of evergreens on the far side of Interstate 77. A two hundred foot tall industrial crane stood silhouetted amidst the buildings of Midtown. A steel girder dangled from a chain attached to the upper sheave. Charlotte was one of the few US cities where new buildings were still being erected, which was why Frank had relocated to the South to begin with.

Frank was born and raised in a small mill town north of Boston. Derek Snively, Frank's father, was found dead in the Merrimack River before Frank could remember, but Frank was an only child, so his mom, Miriam, hadn't had a hard time supporting the two of them until she became addicted to the Percocets her nurse boyfriend stole for them from St. Joseph's hospital.

Frank dropped out of Lowell High School half way through his junior year after his mom lost her job, and he began working with a local construction company cleaning up sites to pay utilities and buy food. Before long, he was wielding a hammer instead of stuffing industrial strength trash bags full of leftover fiberglass insulation, and one

evening, he found himself passing a joint and bottle of wine on a site after hours with three of the men from the crew.

“You know how much goddamn money the owner of this property’s gonna make when we’re done with it?” a barrel-chested man who claimed he went to Harvard said. “A fuckin’ fortune. He probably bought this fuckin’ place for fuckin’ nothin’, and after we fix it up, he’ll sell it for three times what he paid for it.”

Despite the pot buzz and the wine, those words stuck with Frank, and a few months later, when he turned eighteen, he applied for three credit cards and took out cash advances on all of them. He’d kept his eyes on a rundown shack on the banks of the Merrimack, bought it when he got his money, and used the rest of the cash advances for materials to fix the place up. While he didn’t make a fortune off the place, he was able to pay back the credit cards and had more money in his pocket than he’d seen from working a month of construction with his old crew. Frank spent the next fifteen years developing land in Northern Massachusetts.

Eventually, the New England housing market began to plummet and Frank was losing money for the first time in his life. One of Frank’s golf buddies had recently liquidated every one of his New England assets and moved to the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area of North Carolina. Frank had never known life outside New England, and he hadn’t spoken to his mom in years, so he liquidated as well and moved to Charlotte.

“Karen,” Frank said after his secretary picked up the phone. “How many appointments do I have the rest of the week?”

“Nothing tomorrow,” Karen replied after a split-second pause. “But it looks like you have a meeting with a realtor from Castle Rock on Thursday.”

“Which realtor?” Frank said.

“Jim Dorman,” Karen replied.

“Goddamn it.” Frank leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. Jim Dorman was one of the few realtors from the mountain region who understood the untapped potential of small mountain communities like Matney. Most realtors Frank talked to from Western North Carolina were willing to sell plots of derelict, hillbilly infested land as cheap as 1500 dollars an acre in hopes development would increase the property value of the entire area. But not Jim. “Why do we keep scheduling meetings with him?” Frank barked.

“He’s the only realtor from the mountain region who’s willing to drive down here on a regular basis,” Karen replied.

“Cancel the meeting,” Frank snapped. “What do I have Friday?”

“Golf with Michael Moon,” Karen replied.

“Cancel with Mikey too,” Frank said. “No one’s bidding on those apartments in Cherry. We can reschedule for next week.”

“Yes sir,” Karen said.

“And don’t schedule anything through the weekend,” Frank said. He loosened the broad knot of his tie and unbuttoned his white collar. “I’m driving up to Banner Elk tomorrow morning, and I might be gone a few days.”

Earlier that year, Frank built a stack of condominiums on a plot of land right outside Seven Devils, North Carolina, a few miles Southwest of Banner Elk. The real estate game in NC was slower than it was in Massachusetts, and Frank had developed the knack to sense real estate trends the way amputees sense the changing weather in their stumps. He gambled the Floridians who swarmed to the Blue Ridge in the summer were getting tired of the same old quaint communities.

After shopping around, he purchased fifty acres of land in the heart of Avery County at 2392 dollars per acre, and spent a little more than a million dollars on the complex's actual construction. After he'd run electricity and rigged an efficient septic system, the total cost for the twelve unit Dutch Creek Condominium Complex was just under 1.75 million dollars.

He advertised as he built, and, upon completion, sold four of the condos at 750,000 dollars per unit to Sarasota and Orlando lawyers and bankers who wanted a temperate summer retreat. He leased six others at 2000 dollars per month, which left two unoccupied. Frank had already put himself 1.25 million dollars ahead, so he could give two shits about the unoccupied units. They'd sell soon enough.

Despite his complexes in Charlotte and Concord, Dutch Creek became Frank's ripest investment, and, after he saw what could be made from a single mountain complex, he wanted more. He was stripping the fatty meat from a new market and planned to bleed the cash cow dry before he moved on to another.

On a rainy afternoon in early April, a week before his condos went to market, Frank went hiking, looking for other potential sites to develop, when he stumbled on a wide field nestled between Sugar Mountain and an unnamed mountain north of the Dutch Creek Complex right off a road called Old Horse Bottom. The vibrant field was healthy and verdant, and the grass looked manicured by livestock of one breed or another. But for as long as Frank walked the land, he didn't see a single horse or cow. What he did see was his crew building two green granite buildings on opposite sides of the creek. He'd erect a tower, inspired by a 17th Century Hebridean castle, on one side and connect it to the luxury condo building on the other side with an arch thirty feet off the ground. He could sell a single unit for two million easy.

But, no matter how he tried, Frank couldn't find the public records establishing ownership of the land. He worried it was protected national parkland, but the ranger at the records office in Price Park insisted it couldn't be.

"Ain't got any records of that land," the ranger drawled as he thumbed through a dusty blue binder.

"Christ," Frank said. He crossed his arms and shook his head. He eyed the stuffed raccoon hanging from the ceiling. "Any ideas where I could find out who does?"

"I'd check the county courthouse," the ranger replied.

"You don't think I've tried that?" Frank said. He watched the ranger close the binder and put his feet up on his desk. The man's worn work boots peppered the old telephone and desk calendar with dirt. The stuffed raccoon grinned. "Nothing," Frank said.

“Sorry buddy,” the ranger said. “Best of luck.”

“Fuck,” Frank muttered as he pushed open the screen door that led back out to the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Three days before Dutch Creeks’ first open house, Frank sat in the lobby with a man named Harold Shook. Harold was an electrician Frank hired out of the Avery County Yellow Pages to check the installation of a flickering light in the condo’s lobby. Due to prior projects, Harold told Frank, he couldn’t make it out to Dutch Creek until almost eight o’ clock in the evening, but he promised Frank a reasonable rate. Frank wanted every detail of the complex tended to so he could ask the highest price per unit possible, and if this redneck was willing to give Frank a cut rate because he’d be a couple hours late, it was worth it.

Frank sat next to the fake spring bubbling out of the wall in the lobby, and he watched Harold fiddle with wires that sprouted from the ceiling like weeds. Frank swung a full bottle of whiskey between his legs, and every so often, he’d lift the bottle and drink.

“How’s everything look?” Frank yelled from across the lobby once the lights had stopped flickering. The water lapped over the stones next to him, and his voice echoed around the cavernous room.

“Looks fine,” Harold said. “Sometimes them Mexicans just pretend to know how to rig a dimmer switch.” He chuckled. “But they don’t.” Harold climbed down his ladder and untucked the flannel shirttail from his jeans.

“You drink, Harold?” Frank asked.

“Yessir,” Harold replied.

Frank brandished the bottle, and Harold took it. The electrician took a long swig and amber droplets clung like dew to his black mustache.

“How long have you lived up here?” Frank asked as Harold took another long drink.

“All my life,” Harold said. “Wasn’t one for school, so I dropped out and went to the community college to learn wirin’.”

“Smart move,” Frank said, reaching for the bottle. “I have a question for you.”

“Shoot,” Harold said.

“You know Old Horse Bottom Road?” Frank asked.

“Yessir,” Harold replied. “Off Balm Highway?”

“I guess,” Frank said. “I was out walking recently and came on a plot of land I want to buy. Big field with a creek running right through it.” Frank swallowed some whiskey. “You know it?”

“Think I know where you’re talkin’ about,” Harold replied. “Probably ain’t for sale though.”

“Offer the right price and anything’s for sale,” Frank replied. “Who owns that land?”

“I’d guess ol’ Hiram Culler,” Harold replied. He put his foot on a stone around the edge of the little pool under the fake spring. “His family’s been here as long as these mountains and owns some of ‘em, even though he’s the only one left. The ski resorts tried to buy his daddy out in the seventies, but he wouldn’t sell. County police found him

hung.” Harold reached for the bottle. “Hiram’s been offered millions, and the ol’ bastard’s turned every offer down. I’m sure as sin he won’t sell to you.”

“We’ll see about that,” Frank said, clutching the bottle of bourbon. “How would I get in touch with Mr. Culler?” He kept a firm grip on the bottle as Harold reached for it again.

“God himself don’t even know where ol’ Hiram lives,” Harold replied. “He’s tucked so far back in them hills, anyone who found him wouldn’t know how to get back to civilization. There’s some talk he don’t even exist, but that’s just superstitions goin’ to some fool’s head.” Harold trailed off. “Though there’s talk Sheriff Grubbs visits him ever’ once in awhile.”

“I thought you said you wouldn’t know how to get in touch with Mr. Culler,” Frank snapped before he took a long slug of bourbon. “Sounds like I just need to talk to Grubbs.”

“Guess so,” Harold replied, and he reached again for the bottle.

For a third time, Frank held the whiskey close.

“Goddamnit,” Harold said. “Are you goin’ to let me after that bottle again or can I git?”

On the drive up to Banner Elk, Frank imagined bartering with Hiram for his land. The old hillbilly would be stubborn at first. He’d tell Frank how long the land had been in the family, and how he couldn’t tolerate another condo tarnishing the virgin land. But

ol' Hiram would warm up when Frank waved a seven-figure check in front of his nose. Hiram's chapped, tobacco stained lips would crack into a weather beaten smile as he reached for the banknote, and Frank would smile back as he closed the deal on another golden real estate investment. Hell, he'd probably even be doing the old man a favor. An aging man can't live comfortably in the middle of nowhere forever. Eventually, Hiram would need help, maybe even a retirement home, and with Frank's money, Hiram could afford the best senior care in North Carolina.

Banner Elk itself was a small town that looked like it had been lifted from a children's book. Tall green street lamps lined the sidewalks, and the town's lone Exxon looked more like a country store than a gas station. Frank checked into the Main Street Inn around lunchtime.

"Hungry, sir?" the woman behind the front desk asked. When her lips parted, Frank noticed craters in her gums where teeth should've been.

"No," Frank replied. He hadn't eaten since before he left Charlotte, but the woman's grin chased away his hunger.

"Well, we offer all our guests complementary breakfast and lunch," she said with an even broader smile. "And I'd take advantage if I was you. Miss Sue's creamed corn is to-die-for."

"Thank you," Frank replied. "But I try to avoid dairy."

Frank threw his leather weekend bag onto the lone twin bed in his room. He checked his mobile phone. No service. If he needed to make a call, he'd have to dial out on the room's phone.

He ducked under the short doorframe and adjusted his tie in the bathroom's smudged mirror. Frank's chin itched. He hadn't shaved that morning because he wanted Hiram to think he was a blue-collar businessman when they met, and he thought a five o'clock shadow might help him look the part. He patted his ribs. His checkbook was next to his heart, along with a fresh stack of one hundred dollar bills. He wasn't going to waste more time than he had to away from the city. He needed to get Sheriff Grubbs on the phone.

"Yessum," the voice on the other end said.

"Hello," Frank said. "I need to speak with Sheriff Robert Grubbs please."

"Speakin'," Grubbs drawled on the other end.

"Good afternoon, Sheriff," Frank said. "You left a message on my personal phone yesterday concerning Hiram Culler." He paused, hoping Sheriff Grubbs would pick up the thread of conversation. "Anyway," Frank continued. "I had a few free days, so I drove up to Banner Elk hoping you could show me out to Mr. Culler's place."

"Tell you what," Sheriff Grubbs said. His voice was full and cavernous, two octaves below the lowest note on a piano. "Why don't you and I have a drink over at Sue's. We'll talk there."

"Love to," Frank said. "Sounds great, really."

"Fifteen minutes," Sheriff Grubbs said.

"See you there," Frank said. Then he paused. "Where's Sue's?"

"Next to Hanger's Funeral Home," Sheriff Grubbs said. "Across the street from the Inn where you're layin' your head."

Sue's only distinguishing feature from the buildings on its left and right were its drawn shutters. The businesses on Main Street were all housed in large, revitalized mountain homes with white decorative columns shouldering porch roofs painted blue. Hanger's Funeral Home had a pleasant white picket fence on the perimeter of the manicured front lawn. A statue of a poor country boy with his trousers around his ankles stood in the yard of Farmer's, the hardware store to Sue's left.

You're in the middle of fucking nowhere when every business on Main Street is named after just one person, Frank thought as he waved his mobile phone in the air to find service.

An old, white Ford Bronco pulled into the gravel driveway between Sue's and Farmer's, and the largest man Frank had ever seen got out of the driver's seat. His chest was as broad as a buffalo's and his skin was the color of fresh coffee.

"Sheriff Grubbs," the man said, extending his hand.

The Sheriff's hand was as large as a catcher's mitt, and it swallowed Frank's when they shook. "Pleasure to meet you, Sheriff," Frank said, staring up at the giant in front of him.

"Wish I could say the same," Sheriff Grubbs replied, and he nodded toward the door.

The liquor behind the bar was arranged single file in front of a mirror, and small spotlights hanging from the ceiling cast a dim glow across the bottles. Since the shutters

were drawn, the bar was dark. If Frank hadn't known, it would've been impossible to tell the time of day. When they sat down at the bar, Frank ordered a pint of beer and Sheriff Grubbs ordered a diet cola.

"Know why I'm puttin' you in touch with Culler?" the Sheriff asked before Frank even had his first sip.

"No sir," Frank replied. He couldn't remember ever calling anyone else "sir" before, but Sheriff Grubbs stature demanded it. Frank felt microscopic in Grubbs's presence, but he ran his hand over the checkbook and stack of money in his jacket and felt better. "But I truly, truly appreciate it."

Sheriff Grubbs took a sip of his soda. The pint glass looked like a children's cup in his hands. "Because I knew if I didn't, I'd never get rid of you," he said. "You realize how many times you called my station in the past two months?"

"Too many," Frank said. He chuckled, trying to lighten the mood, but Sheriff Grubbs's face stayed stony.

"Damn right," the Sheriff replied. "I'm goin' to tell you how all this'll play out. So listen close."

Frank took a long drink, and as he leaned towards Sheriff Grubbs to hear what the man had to say, someone entered the bar and the sunlight fell across the Sheriff's hard brow.

"I've drawn you a map of how to get out to Hiram's place," Sheriff Grubbs said. "It's right accurate, but you'll prob'ly get lost. I grew up in them mountains, and I been to see Hiram more times than I can count. But I still can't find it from time to time." He

smiled and bared his teeth. "If you do happen to stumble across Hiram's place, you'll be lucky if the old man doesn't shoot you on sight. And if he does, I sure as hell won't be able to get out there before he slings your body into them woods. Hear me?"

"Come now," Frank said. His palms were wet and cold.

"I ain't kidding," Sheriff Grubbs said. "Hiram don't like many people. Might be I'm the only other human he talks to. He's told me on many occasions he won't tolerate trespassers. Told me he'd shoot 'em on site. And Hiram's a man of his word." He took another drink of soda. "But if he doesn't split your skull with a bullet, he'll tell you his land ain't for sale, and he'll kindly ask you to leave."

"I appreciate it Sheriff," Frank said. "But you can't imagine how much money I'm willing to offer Mr. Culler." He brushed his hand over his breast and felt the corner of his checkbook. "I know the mountain folk of North Carolina are proud of their heritage and their land, but I want to help Mr. Culler." Frank took a drink of beer. "He can't live out his days in those mountains alone, and he'll need money for assistance. I'm telling you, what I intend to offer takes the price of pride into consideration."

Sheriff Grubbs let out a laugh that filled the bar and shook the bottles on the shelves in front of them. "Money?" he gasped between fits of laughter. "You think Culler has any use for money? That ol' crow has everything he could need or want out on that mountain," Grubbs said as his laughter settled. "You could offer him all the money in the world and he'd still spit in your face. He'll die on that mountain, and he wouldn't have it any other way."

Grubbs removed a piece of paper folded into quarters and a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket. He pushed the paper toward Frank and the banknote toward the bartender. “Keep it,” Grubbs said, nodding to the barman.

Frank felt Sheriff Grubbs’ full presence descend upon him as the man shifted his girth and stand.

“Look at me, boy,” Sheriff Grubbs said, and Frank turned to meet his gaze. “Money don’t mean a thing to Culler. If I was you, I’d head back down to the city and stop wastin’ our time up here, and if you have any friends who’re interested in Culler’s land, tell them not to waste their time either.” He nodded to the piece of paper in front of Frank. “But I know we won’t get rid of you ‘til you’ve talked to him, so that’s a map out to Culler’s place, best as I remember.”

Frank taped the map to the windshield of his two-door luxury coupe, and set off west. The map itself looked like a spider-web, twisting and spinning further and further into the mountains toward Tennessee. He hadn’t expect the meeting with Grubbs to go particularly well, so he wasn’t discouraged. He got the map from Grubbs, which was all he really wanted. Still, something cold was crawling around the pit of his stomach.

After almost an hour of driving backwoods gravel roads, Frank began to wonder whether Grubbs had led him astray. Frank was sure Hiram couldn’t live more than ten or fifteen miles outside Banner Elk, but he felt like he’d driven fifty. The red and black

maples had thickened and rhododendron were growing so close to the road, two vehicles couldn't pass side-by-side.

Frank almost missed Sawmill Road, his second-to-last turn, because the road sign was little more than a two by four nailed to a tree. The road itself wasn't so much a road as it was two worn tire tracks trailing off into the woods. His sports car wouldn't make it up the path, so he parked his car in the middle of the road and tore the map from his windshield. According to Grubbs, Hiram's driveway shouldn't be much farther.

Despite the brilliant sun overhead, Frank couldn't see more than fifty yards down the path, but he patted his breast pocket, imagined his bank accounts glutting after he closed the deal with Hiram and finished construction on his new developement and took what he imagined was his first step toward a new fortune.

The first break in the trees was a rocky shelf that jutted out thirty feet from the mountainside. Frank looked down and saw thin tendrils of fog crawling over the treetops below him. When he looked up, he could see the soft blue peaks of a hundred mountains, and beyond them, the curve of the earth itself. A soft breeze blew a murder of crows through the forest around him, and they settled on the branches above and below the rocky outcrop. Frank watched the birds hack at each other with their beaks, spreading their wings and inflating their pitch bodies when they'd had enough. Another cool breeze blew, and they took off with it, draining the color from patches of sky as they flew.

The trees closed back in around Frank as he continued up the path. He wasn't sure how much further he'd have to walk, but every time he felt his courage ebb, he rubbed the stack of money and the checkbook next to his heart.

Again, he imagined bartering with Hiram. He didn't believe the old man couldn't be purchased. Everyone had a price. Frank himself would sell or do anything for the right amount of money. The rest of the world was the same way. There had to be at least one or two things an old hillbilly slung out in the mountains wanted, and Frank could help him get those things. All he had to do was put his name on a check.

The smell of wood smoke tore Frank from his daydream, and before much longer, he spotted a break in the trees to his left. A dark wood cabin sat at the top of old stone steps beyond a split-rail fence and a long, sloping yard. The smoke Frank smelled puffed out of the cabin's chimney, and Frank knew he was about to meet the man he'd spent the past two months of his life looking for.

But there was no answer when Frank knocked on the cabin door. He knocked again, harder, and his knuckles against the smooth grain broke the stillness of the mountaintop clearing. Again, no one answered. Frank glanced over his shoulder to make sure Hiram hadn't crept up on him with the barrel of a rifle pointed toward the back of his skull. Another crow perched on the black, wrought iron lamp attached to the doorframe. Frank met the bird's gaze, and it cawed, high and loud, and as though the blackbird's call was the cue, howls erupted from behind the house.

Two russet bloodhounds trotted around the cabin, and they slowed their trot and hushed when they spotted Frank. Their noses were stained a deeper shade of brown than their glistening coats, and when they snarled, a pink froth slicked their teeth. Frank put his arms over his head like he was being held at gunpoint.

"Oh, Jesus," he murmured, despite not being a religious man.

A man wearing a white bloodstained t-shirt and a worn pair of blue jeans followed the hounds' path. "Got-damnit dogs," he snarled. "The hell'd you find this time?" He carried a hatchet with a chunk of drooling meat still clinging to the blade. The old man looked weather beaten and calloused, sturdy and thick, like one of the Blue Ridge mountain maples Frank passed on his hike.

"The hell are you?" he said. He brushed his sweaty, gray bangs out of his eyes.

"Mr. Culler?" Frank asked.

"Get off my property," the man Frank assumed was Hiram Culler said.

"Mr. Culler, please, I'd like to talk to you about your land," Frank said. The hounds sniffed at the cuffs of Frank's dusty trousers, baring their teeth every now and again.

"I've got the mind to take this hatchet to you if you don't get," Hiram replied. "I ain't kiddin'."

"Okay, Mr. Culler, I understand, but please hear me out," Frank said. His palms were icy and wet. "I promise I'll leave if you listen to my proposition and still say no."

"You ain't got anything I want," Hiram replied, taking a few steps toward the porch. He squeezed the handle of the hatchet, and Frank saw several ridged muscles flex in his forearm.

"But I've spent the past two months looking for you, sir," Frank said. It was the second time that day he'd called someone "sir" after neglecting the word the rest of his life. Frank was used to being the person everyone else called sir, and, though he was scared, he felt his stomach sink as it fell off his lips again. The one with the least to lose

is always in control—that had always been Frank’s mantra for conducting business—and Frank felt control slip from his cold, slick grasp as he used the respectful title in place of Hiram’s name.

“I try to not be found,” Hiram replied. “Grubbs rat me out?” He took a few more steps toward the porch, and Hiram’s lips curled into a smile.

“He told me he knew he wouldn’t get rid of me until you and I talked,” Frank said. He smiled back and met Hiram’s grey eyes.

“I’ll tell you what,” Hiram said. “I’ll listen to whatever you got to say. But if I don’t agree to whatever it is, I’m goin’ to kill you and sling you so far out in them woods, your family won’t have a body to bury.” Hiram’s voice didn’t waver as he rested his hatchet on his shoulder.

Frank didn’t believe for a moment Hiram would actually kill him.

“Now, you can either get, or take your chances talkin’ to me,” Hiram said. The hounds trotted over to Hiram’s feet, and licked at the cuffs of his jeans, trying to lap up the last tastes of blood. “But I’ll warn you, I’m goin’ to say no. And I’m a man of my goddamned word.”

“Sheriff Grubbs mentioned you were,” Frank replied. “And he also said you killed trespassers.” He crossed his arms, and felt the checkbook and stack of money against his chest. “But I think I can make you an offer you can’t refuse, s—. . . Mr. Culler.”

“Alright,” Hiram replied. “I respect your persistence.” Though he spoke with the same lazy mountain drawl, there was a newfound levity in his voice. “You drink?”

“Absolutely,” Frank said. He was finding his hubris again, and it warmed his palms.

“Tell you what,” Hiram said. “I got some game back here needs broke down. Go on inside, and I’ll be right in.” He smiled. “There’s a bottle on the table. Ain’t but one table, so you’ll see it. He’p yourself.” And with a smile and a nod, Hiram Culler walked back around the cabin, his two dogs in tow.

The alcohol didn’t taste like anything Frank had ever tried before. It burned worse than the moonshine his golf buddies had brought back from Georgia the summer before. The day they drank it, they had planned on playing nine holes, but were so drunk by the third, they were vomiting and passing out on the green.

Hiram’s cabin was small and warm, three rooms lit by a pair of oil lamps hanging from the rafters. Animal hides hung from the walls, and an ancient, moth eaten quilt was draped over the lone west-facing window. It was mid-afternoon by now, and the bottom arc of the sun was visible from the top of the window.

Frank sipped his drink, and again, as he had earlier that day, imagined Hiram smiling as he snatched the check from between Frank’s fingers before the ink was even dry. The fact his life may be in danger had all but left Frank’s mind, because Hiram’s general demeanor had shifted so quickly earlier that afternoon, he couldn’t’ve been serious. *It was all a ploy*, Frank thought, *Hiram put on a good show to see if I was ready to make a serious offer*. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more Frank admired

Hiram Culler. He had integrity. Hiram was happy to live far from any other human being—a self-sufficient man with no need for anyone or anything but himself and his own devices. Frank smiled as the alcohol fire traveled the length of his throat. Hiram was older than Frank had guessed he might be. He wouldn't be able to hunt or swing his hatchet for too many more years. Frank would make sure to see to Hiram's continued self-sufficiency with money. Hell, Hiram could even stay where he was and hire folks to do all the dirty work country living demanded. He could even pay them extra to make themselves scarce.

The sun had sunk so the window framed its entirety before Hiram opened the cabin door.

"Sorry to keep you waitin'," Hiram said. "Creature was larger than I 'spected."

"No problem," Frank said. Frank wasn't drunk, but he'd had half a mason jar of Hiram's liquor. The alcohol diluted his judgment enough so most ideas were good ones.

"Is it okay I left my Benz in the middle of the road down there?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Hiram said as he took the seat across from Frank at the table. "But I'm sure it don't matter much."

The shadow of Frank's head fell across Hiram's face, but the rays from the oil lamp above the pair of them trickled into the lines that crisscrossed the man's forehead and cheeks.

"Now, let's get down to business," Frank said. He leaned across the table and clasped his hands. "I'd like to purchase a small section of your land."

“Is that right?” Hiram replied. He leaned back in his chair and lifted the clay whiskey jug to his lips. “Ain’t for sale.”

“Thought you might say that,” Frank said. “But I haven’t even told you the portion I want or how much I’m willing to pay you for it.”

“Don’t care,” Hiram said.

Frank reached into his blazer and removed the stack of hundred dollar bills. “This is five-thousand dollars,” Frank said. “As you can see, it’s a lot of money. I’m willing to give you this much per acre.” Frank lifted his eyebrows and pushed the money toward Hiram. A splinter lodged in his wrist as he slid the cash across the table, but he tried not to flinch.

Hiram didn’t move.

“I want the field off Old Horse Bottom Road,” Frank continued. “I’m not sure how many acres that plot is, so you tell me.” Frank paused. “I wouldn’t sue if you told me it was twenty acres larger than it was.”

Hiram’s fingers were stained brown, and the bloodstains across his fingers cracked when he wrapped his fingers around the jug. The shadow of Frank’s head on Hiram’s was beginning to fade as the sun fell, and the topography of the man’s jowls became more defined in the lamplight.

“So what do you say?” Frank said. He took Hiram’s silence for a good thing. At least the old man hadn’t told him the land wasn’t for sale a third time. “You can even just take that stack of bills as a fee for your time,” Frank added after a long, silent pause.

“What kinda use do I have for that money?” Hiram finally said. “I don’t want it, and I sure as hell don’t need it.”

“Come now,” he said. “I’m offering you an outrageous payment for a plot of land you never see or use.” The alcohol haze fogging Frank’s brain cleared slightly as he felt his fight-or-flight instinct wake.

The bloodhounds nudged open the front door and sat on Hiram’s left and right. The old man scratched behind both their ears, but even though their tails wagged, the dogs didn’t take their eyes off Frank. Frank scooted his chair away from the table and a low growl resonated from the hounds’ throats.

“Not only will you be making a lot of money,” Frank pleaded, “but the land I buy is land you’re no longer responsible. Don’t you pay property taxes?”

“Not that I know of,” Hiram drawled. “Ain’t no one come to see me about it if I need to. Tell me,” Hiram continued. “Just what do you plan to do with my land if I sell it to you?”

“Fair question,” Frank said. “To be honest, I’m a developer, so I planned on building a few condos on the property I just mentioned.” Frank’s throat was tightening, so he coughed and continued. “They won’t look modern or out of place by any means. There are a lot of Scots in these mountains, right? I was thinking of making my condos look like a castle.”

“I wasn’t really lookin’ for an answer, boy,” Hiram said. “Because I knew you were a developer before you opened your damn mouth, and it don’t matter what you’re plannin’ to do with it.” The sun had set, and the only light in the cabin came from the oil

lamps hanging from the ceiling. Hiram took another sip of whiskey. “I have a long history with developers. They’re the only folks fool enough to come up here uninvited. Now, remember when I tol’ you I was a man of my word?”

“Yessir,” Frank replied.

“Well, I wasn’t lyin’ about that,” Hiram said. “What else did I tell you?”

Frank could barely feel his hands, they were so cold, and his legs itched like he wanted to run, but he couldn’t lift himself to his feet. He brushed his hands over the front of his blazer. The stack of money was on the table, and his checkbook now felt impotent and useless.

“What else did I tell you?” Hiram said. His voice stayed slow and even.

“You warned me you were going to say no,” Frank whimpered.

“Sure did,” Hiram said. Hiram cast his gaze toward the table and his brow softened like his heart was heavy with regret.

Frank’s heart hammered in his chest. He felt his pockets for his phone, but knew he didn’t have the service to make calls. Even if he could, he was so far flung out in the mountains, it would take an hour for help to arrive. It was an act of desperation—something automatic his body did to placate what was to come.

Hiram’s hounds flanked Frank against the wall as Hiram strung a length of rope between his hands. The oil lamp above shone down on the pile of money that sat between Frank and the old man.

“Oh Jesus,” Frank murmured as Hiram stood and took a step toward him.

Hiram sat on the top step outside his house with his dogs at his feet. He'd just collected a fresh batch of moonshine from his still up the dirt path past what was once the forbidden fence.

Before long, Hiram saw a giant's silhouette walking up the dirt path at the far end of his sloping yard, past the bur oak and the split-rail fence. The man's chest was as broad as a buffalo.

"Afternoon, sheriff," Hiram called out.

"Howdy," Sherriff Grubbs called back. "Hope there's a few sips of that rotgut left." He nodded to the jug in Hiram's lap.

"Prob'ly enough to kill a man, even as big as you," Hiram replied. He brandished the jug, and Sherriff Grubbs took it. The sky overhead was clear and blue, and only a few feathery clouds tarnished the clean canvas.

"Saw the damndest thing walkin' up here," Sheriff Grubbs said. The sheriff took a long swig of Hiram's liquor and coughed after he swallowed it down.

"What's that, sheriff?" Hiram replied. The lazy smile on his face didn't falter.

"There's a fancy black sports car parked in my spot," Sheriff Grubbs said. "Keys still in it and all. You got a visitor, Culler?"

Hiram laughed and scratched his hounds. "You know I don't, Sheriff."

"What in the devil should I do with that car then?" Sherriff Grubbs said. He took another long swig of whiskey.

“Far as I can tell it’s been there for a couple weeks now,” Hiram replied. “I don’t need it, and I sure as hell don’t want it, so why don’t you seize it as one of your own.”

Grubbs handed the jug back to Hiram and smiled. “You’re a damn fool, Culler,” he said. “One of these days someone’s going to figure out you’re the reason slickers from elsewhere keep disappearin’ in these hills.”

“I’ll be dead and gone before they do,” Hiram said. He tipped the jug up, but nothing came out. “I made a promise to myself after my daddy was found dead and my mama died of grief.”

“Damnit, Culler,” Grubbs said with a smile. “Much as I hate to admit it, you might be one of the last men with an ounce of integrity left in North Carolina.”