

DARK ON THE HILL

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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By AARON BIGLER LEFEBVRE

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*Dark on the Hill* is a novel of fiction based on Morris Township in Southwestern Pennsylvania. All research was conducted in by interview and primary resources, and with information accessible to the public via the Internet. The novel follows the protagonist Bobby Miller as he learns to cope with his role in the community as the Marcellus Shale Gas project booms and overtakes the area. Bobby finds himself at odds with a nearly impoverished community that welcomes new money and opportunity, and rejects their long history and culture of farming. The novel explores the sociological impact that the gas drilling industry can have on rural farming communities by revealing the world through the eyes and first hand account of a young, farming community member. The novel reveals the importance of remaining tolerant and retaining one's identity in a unpredictably dynamic world.

## Prologue

*A cow and bull moaned like monsters in the night, pale orange by the light of gas well flares, and I knew Steve Price would have one calf by spring. Stationed at my bedroom window, naked to the warm summer night, its air bathing me, my privates became aware in the wisp of a slow cooling breeze. I listened and watched. A dog barked three times somewhere. Surely Steve heard it, his cattle, the chained dog, but did he stand at his window listening? Did he sleep soundly, even with a coalmine's ventilation shaft buzzing under a once black sky, now orange and purple from soaring flames? Steve probably had an air conditioner in his window blocking everything out, keeping him dormant. That AC would soon be paid for by royalty checks pumped into his bank from gas wells on his farm.*

*In dreams, the sound of the ventilation shaft entered, and I would become the pilot of a small biplane as I writhed in agony in my cockpit. I tried to keep moths from escaping my throat and blinding me from what lay ahead. Even without clear sight, what was ahead never changed. I woke as the frustration of my motionless plane mounted. Always ahead of me was my father in a brand new Winnebago, years ago, waving goodbye with the keys to the farm still attached to his RV keychain. He said the time would come when it would be mine. But not yet.*

*I found myself half-asleep and full of bitterness in front of my bedroom window hearing what should not be there and rarely hearing what should. The heifer and bull find pleasure through it all, so why can't I? It'd be nice to have a small, quiet mind like theirs. But I'm quick to let fury come catch me when I fall from good sense.*

*Normally, I'd try to go back to sleep.*

*The cow and bull yammered on and reminded me of the cattle on this farm, my family's farm, when I was so much younger.*

*I turned from the open window and made my way downstairs.*

*Noises had woken me before. They were the sounds I heard in the sleep of my youth. Sounds not heard for years, or even covered by the murmur of the coal mining and gas drilling now furiously underway in Morris Township, around Prosperity in particular. The old sounds were signals that brought me back from whatever peaceful space it was we went when we dreamt. If there was a band of coyotes out for calves I'd wake and dress, have been ready to chase them off before I noticed I wasn't dreaming anymore.*

*"You're never going to get over your nature," Dee would say if she woke in the night with me. "Sometimes when I wake alongside you at the same sounds, you're rigid. Tense. Ready to explode."*

*It was in my blood to react that way, no matter what the sound was.*

*She had asked me not to confuse chasing off coyotes, gun in hand, with men who weren't too different from me. They were just doing their jobs. They had little say. They had little ones back home. Having none myself, I could not argue. But still, each time I woke, I was brought back to some primal place that wouldn't let me sleep. Guess I could blame my father for it. He raised me to wake at loud sounds, ready to fight. I never would have done that to my own son. Cursed him with this quick anger and jolt of excitement at the slightest cry in the night. But instead I chose not to bring anyone into this world. And with the world around me now filled with uncertainties about jobs, water quality, land value, and general quality of people, I felt I'd done the right thing by letting my time for children pass by.*

*Stepping out onto our porch, I took in the dewing air, and walked out in the dark still nude, as I often slept when it was warm—windows opened wide to encourage the dew to settle upon my skin, the smell of plants releasing scents, aromas that knocked me out cold. I walked out to the high point of our hayfield to sit in the middle of the cleared circle where we pitched tents in the summer on the sharp and hardy grass. When I reached the field's open circle, I seated myself and let the prickle of the field enter my thick skin.*

*The breeze passed over my bare body, and I thought of swimming in ponds late at night when the water was still but the fish were not as they excitedly nipped at the softer, fleshier parts of my body.*

*I tried to get used to the coal mine's vent shaft rattling through the groves that lined our fields. I looked south and noticed the hillside lit up by a gas well burning something off, flaring thirty-foot flames up into the night's dark navy sky. I wouldn't return to bed until I was satisfied it was part of the rural skyline.*

*Still, I was provoked more by what was not in place. There was a hole where there should have been tree peepers and bullfrogs, an owl in the woods, the crickets, the sounds in the dark that lulled me to sleep. That air of the old farm was not the air the intake delivered to miners under my naked self, where all of them were filthy and dressed in denim or canvas as they had been for over a century. Being a coal miner's grandson, I understood them. They had the guts to take a step underground and get dirty and risk it all crashing in on them. If Karma existed, it existed in the hearts of coalmines. The ceilings would fall and it would take the lives of each miner and leave them buried forever. When you take and take, something will be given back. Yet somehow, it, especially the fracking, was a cancer growing. I'd never get to see what it*

*looked like or felt like down there. But it might start poisoning me. I'd seen the reports. The documentary. Lot of good that knowledge did me. I could do nothing but sit and know that it was there beneath the surface, marked by mine portals, vent shafts, and tri-axle trucks that drove along crumbling roadways. Industry was the heart of America, and it was my duty, as it was for any coal miner's grandson, to understand the need for what I lorded over. I tried to ignore the voice at the back of my mind saying that this was cancer eating away at the spirit that dwelled in the land. This was my farm. And that was the Price's farm across the valley.*

*He and I, we wanted for nothing. I didn't have a high paying job by working as an equipment operator at Penn DOT. But somehow the job that had always kept me satisfied when there weren't farm chores to do, wasn't keeping me busy enough lately. I could tell. Thoughts dipped in anger tended to visit me more often. And I knew, from a good history of it, that if my hands weren't kept busy, my mind would wander and spend too much time in the company of rage. There was a high level of fight in the Miller gene pool. The family had found its way from Scotland to America over two hundred years ago, and the legend in the family was that we were full of fire, piss and vinegar. But I had a chance at defying that family trait after a good long stir in the melting pot of Southwestern Pennsylvania. Had the semi-famous Miller attitude been scrubbed from me? Not entirely. I tried my best throughout my youth to escape it. But in the area, and especially since the night flares had begun, I was known for my temper.*

*Reason told me we were carving the guts right out of the Earth. There were abandoned mines that bled acid into streams and turned them rusty orange. If pollution from long-ago mines could still be so present, then it'd be only a matter of*

*time before the same was true of the gas wells. Somehow, no one cared to notice. With the gas-drilling boom had come jobs. And that's why the drillers, the foreigners, we called them, were here. The coalmine suddenly felt less like an issue because I knew how coal mining worked and it had been here for so long, imparting opportunities to my family yes, but not always without lies, deception, and exploitation. I'd heard enough of it from my grandparents. I knew what to look out for even if others did not care to notice the parallels.*

*For the time being, I just had to keep my mouth shut about it. My encounter with Arnold Hayes, a gas executive, had reminded me of that. I could see how the gas companies that moved in were taking pointers from history. Surely they knew about it. The mine camps and the company thugs, making sure folks kept their mouths shut. Making sure a carrot stayed dangling in front of us at all times. I'd been through a year of college history. I'd heard the tales of warning from my grandfather. This present wasn't the future I'd imagined when I was that sweaty, exhausted boy listening to tales told to my father over beer after a long day of farm work.*

*When or if my neighbor, Steve Price, a man I could rely on for any help if I needed it, looked outside his house from his bedroom window, did he notice the subsidence reinforcement posts holding his old barn up? Did he pour himself a drink of water from a water buffalo sitting in his front yard, no longer able to drink the cool well water full of minerals? Did I think about it too much? Thousands of people were benefitting from our sacrifice and I wanted to feel patriotic knowing that I was seen with respect for what I might offer. But no one had come to me to ask me to give it up. My farm might be worth nothing. And I'd be stuck here on the lower rung of the community while everyone else had more money than they knew what to do with.*

*Finally, the flare was the sun rising early, not an impending apocalypse, and my tired eyes came back. No disturbances shook the ground when I stood, even though I knew there was something scraping away at its foundation somewhere. Still, I felt nothing. A brisk walk back to the house, my bare feet on the grass and sharp gravel of our driveway, and I was back in our quiet farmhouse, white but fading grayer from soot and pollution on the wind. The dogs didn't stir when I entered. Eventually, as easily as it woke me, the mine vent whir put me to sleep like the white noise of a small fan.*



## Chapter 1

Shuggs sat tethered to the porch at Rinky Dink's Roadhouse, lazing in the cool summer rain of early evening, making sure I saw him. My knuckles ached like I imagined his ribs once did. I'd kicked him, hard, in the night as he slept when I was in high school—a rite of passage of sorts. That squeal and my shame worsened whenever our eyes met after. I thought I saw the pig's lament in those beady dark eyes. Or was he telling me he was on my side? That everyone else was wrong. That Arnold Hayes truly was a puppet master.

Arnold Hayes, now there's a man who deserved the steel toe of my boot. That should be the new rite of passage for local young bucks. Sneak up in the middle of the night and kick Hayes right in the side. Tell him to get out or expect more boot sized bruises and cracked ribs. Had that been what I was pressured to do in high school, walking up here seeing that man, all rosy pink and plump, sitting there expecting some apples or half-eaten onion rings from inside the roadhouse, I'd feel no shame today. But I'd had my chance last spring, and no one else seemed to think it wise. Folks around Prosperity, they wanted it the other way around, so long as the apples and onion rings were pieces of green paper falling in their pockets. Never mind the fish kills on ten mile. Never mind the sick steers, the patches of field browned out and dying. Farms have a new kind of worth, one that doesn't include farmers harvesting or sending cattle to slaughter. It's easier to sit back and watch JP Percy's roughnecks do the work and hand over the money. But where was it? The gas under my farm wasn't worth the trouble after my run-in with Hayes. Still, I felt left out. Where was my lease? I wanted it just so I could take it up to his fancy house and rip it under his gaze.

There might be a lynching party if I did that. But it's my farm. Well, it should be anyhow. I had seen it in their eyes when I stood over Arnold Hayes outside the municipal fire hall that electric evening when he first introduced himself to the community. All those eyes standing around me in a half circle of contempt and disgust. They'd rather see me tied up and made a public spectacle for doing anything to get in their way. It took too much out of me to keep my anger pressed down like it wasn't there. I've kept my face down and out of the way. My thoughts aren't welcome. They made that clear. I've heard that we, those of us whose families had built this community, were bread to be quiet, descendents of the coal miners, trained to stay quiet when everything was against them and the man to blame was standing right there with nothing but a revolver and a twelve man gang of hired hooligans. He didn't need those thugs these days. Baldwin-Felts guards were a thin of the past. They'd figured out how to make locals into thugs. Everyone I'd grown up with was on board. I guess I missed the memo. But I guess when you get down to it, without that man there's nothing. No jobs. No money. Nothing but open fields and fresh air and cud-chewing cattle. Farms have a new value now.

Lost in my reverie on the wrap around porch of the roadhouse with Shuggs, a coal truck screamed along the road, sloughing heavy sheets of rain, and Jake-braking on the wet blacktop through the valley. Guess he hadn't seen the speed limit signs up at the top of the hill incline. Here was another road to repair. You could already see where it was crumbling to bits under the weight of the heavy, fast traveling trucks. Some, hauling coal. Most, hauling machinery to well sites.

I regretted my high school boot in Shuggs' side again. He looked up and snorted what I could interpret only as a happy snort.

“Hi, Shuggs,” I said. “Getting fattened up on all those fried onion rings, as usual.”

Another happy snort.

Maybe he wasn’t the same Shuggs. That was a long time ago.

I pressed my way inside, into the smell of Pinesol and cigarette smoke, over the dusty wood floor, past two big jean-clad gas drillers in white caps, to the bar where Trevor sat waiting for me. Pop country music played on the jukebox and it made the air feel just the way it should for a place like this. Smoky but sharp like we were in an electrified tube full of neon gas. My wife, Dee, came from the side door where the bar’s scullery was, grabbed a couple of beers from the bar and sidled next to me. She passed me two and I passed one to Trevor.

“Bottoms up,” said Trevor.

The three of us took nice long, refreshing swigs of our beers.

Another truck raced along the road outside, roaring and chug chugging as it slowed to a manageable speed at the valley’s bottom. In the silence between jukebox songs the sheets of rain the truck passed through made their presence known by pelting the metal sheeting roof of Rinky Dink’s, just like the tin roof of the farmhouse when I was a kid.

At work I heard it had rained four inches in an hour during the afternoon. Floodwaters would run down into the coal mine near home and I knew there’d be water trucks going up and down my road for the next week. That road would fall to shit. And I would cringe each time I saw the road shoulders fall away over the hill slope. Shoulders like that were impossible to fix, though I’d tried it before and done it well, securing my place among Penn DOT’s most useful workers. Yet, even with

my skills, I kept myself from moving up. I tried to think of a way to mention to Dee that starting in the Spring I could be dropped to a B-Class worker, which meant that depending on budget allotment by the state, I could be laid off until the following season. I got in between two other operators, Vern and Bubba, and tried to keep a fight from starting. I wound up punching Vern in the mouth instead. It felt good.

Rinky Dink's attracted the types you'd expect. Surly, grungy men with cheap cigarettes at their lips, finding shelter away from their wives or families for a while. Many of their wives were as burly as they were. On the other hand there were some younger raucous types with mud-covered pickup trucks, stopping for a beer after a day of mud bogging or fishing. Lately, a new gang of worn-tough men had started showing up for happy hour. They were gas company men from out of state who drove large white pick up trucks. These drillers came from all over. From Texas, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Alaska. Came to our sweet pocket of Southwestern PA.

None were friends of mine. To date, none were men I'd known. Some folks got jobs working for the gas companies, mostly women working in the offices, or the occasional high school grad put to work as security at a drilling site. Dee talked to them during their visits to the bar. She'd taken big tips for her bartending. I couldn't be bitter about that.

"Cheers," Dee said to me.

We clinked our bottles and I squeezed her knee. She sipped hers. I downed half mine. Trevor seemed off in his own world.

"Bobby," she said. "Did you have trouble getting here from work? With the floods, I mean. Some of the guys back there said there were mudslides all over. Said they'd never seen anything like it.

"They wouldn't, seeing as how they come from a land without hills."

"Or manners!" Trevor added.

We clinked bottles to that.

"I'm here," I told Dee. "Not buried in mud. SO no. Plus I took the high roads along the ridges. 221, I bet, was flooded all over. I know better than to go that way."

"Think we can get home all right?"

"Wouldn't worry about it," I said.

Along with the hour of heavy rain, there'd been a steady afternoon downpour and most of the low lying streams, had turned to small rivers covering fields and rising above bridges and drowning low areas. My truck had little trouble with it and besides, I'd never let a little flooding get between me and my Friday tradition.

"Well," Trevor said, leaning in closer and grinning. "The Johnsons up along 18 did have trouble. Some *little* trouble."

"Get on with it," Dee said. "Spit it out. I deal with enough of you men and your beating around the bush. And ever since you got here you've had that stupid little smirk in the corner of your mouth. Laughing about some inside joke or something. I want in on it already." She plopped her bottle on the bar's Formica counter.

Dee and Trevor got along well enough, but I knew she hated the way men like Trevor took their time pussyfooting and trying to make stories out of nothing just so they could hear themselves talk. Having spent time around the men of my family had worn out any patience she once had. My pap was especially fond of stringing out a tale as long as he could, and even more fond of doing it in her presence. I tried

telling her it was a sign of affection for the company of certain women, but she'd said she could care less. Just get on with it.

"All right, all right," Trevor said. "The crick was awful high, still is. We all know that. One of their miniature ponies got swept up in it and drowned. Ain't that just pitiful?" He chuckled and finished off his bottle of Rolling Rock.

"That's awful," Dee said.

I didn't respond. I thought it was funny too. Mini whinnies, I called them, were an example of where man should keep out of nature's plan. I'd heard once at the county fair that they were once bred for royalty as pets and companions for children. How they wound up out here trying to avoid floods on farms was beyond me. A regular sized pony probably would have done just fine in the flood.

"You might be wondering," Trevor said, "why I'm slightly damp?"

"Let me see," Dee said. "It's raining? I could care less. But please tell me it's because you tried to save that poor pony."

Trevor wore jeans, a flannel shirt, and a hunter's-orange winter cap. He smelled musty, like he'd just woken from a week's sleep in a dingy basement somewhere. It was still summer even if the season was coming to a close, so he'd probably wrangled the outfit out of a chest in his basement after getting soaked through doing whatever it was he had done. His hair was stringy gray, matted to his neck, still wet.

"Before I came here, I was helping the Martins out. One of their trucks got warshed away. Parked it too close to the crick. They called me up to get my F-350 to haul it up and out before it got buried by crick mud."

"Get it out?" I asked.

“Nope.” He laughed. “Can’t say I tried too hard though.”

The Martins’ kids spent a lot of their time riding quads in the woods behind his house. Ripped up his yard from time to time. Quite a guy, he was. Willing to help his neighbor in spite of it.

One of the gas drillers from behind us hollered to Dee, “Hey Dee, how about another round?” It was long and drawn out.

Dee was still on the clock until the next bartender came in.

“You got it, Hopkins,” she hollered back.

Trevor nudged me and mouthed the name, Hopkins, screwing up his face as he did, finding the name funny I guess. Sounded too proper for a driller.

I shook my head back at him.

Trevor stood up and I grabbed his sleeve.

“Chill, Bobby. It’s time I headed home. And with that flooding maybe you and Dee should too. The Day Bridge is nearly swamped. I don’t know about the roads past it towards your place.”

“Got it,” I said. “I want one more before we head home though.”

“Suit yourself.”

He finished off the bottle he’d been nursing. “I’ll see yins sometime this weekend or next, okay?”

“Yep,” I said.

He walked off towards the exit while I leaned further into the bar. I cradled my head in my hands and stared down at the floor between my legs, avoiding others until Dee came back. Carly Beatty sat at the other end of the bar. Probably waiting for her husband. There was a country band that played shows at the bar on Fridays.

She was staring at me. She'd been at the fire hall when Arnold Hayes introduced himself. I thought her gaze might engulf me in flame if I dared meet her eyes. Allen Beatty would probably get into me about how I wanted everyone to go on being poor farmers like we'd always been.

The front door shut as Trevor left. He and I had been coming to Rinky Dinks a long time, since before I met Dee and dragged her along to my way of life. Trevor was a private contractor, close to retiring at age fifty. I hoped I could look forward to that when I neared his age, but that was highly unlikely. I'd be at Penn DOT as long as the older guys had been. I was fine with that really. Idle hands would only bring me trouble. Trevor would keep building I was sure. He had the same trouble with idle hands as the rest of us. It benefitted those of us with farms to have them just so we had something to make us feel like we had some responsibility. When Trevor started out in contracting, my dad hired him to help build up our newer barn, which was nothing but junk storage now. I was in high school then, just about to turn 18. After a day of building the barn I'd go to the bar with him and my dad and the two of us hadn't stopped since. Dad on the other hand, he'd left me to watch after the farm and he traveled the nation with Mom until they settled back down near my little brother Dick in Virginia.

Had Carly noticed my tension when Trevor stood up to leave? My body was still feeling the spike of adrenaline that had coursed through when I nailed Vern in the jaw. I lowered my right hand below the bar top to hide the raw flesh of my knuckles from Carly's gaze. I needed to get home and have a decent meal and get some rest.



The ride home took five minutes, even with parts of flooded roadway. I stopped by our mailbox at the end of our driveway and then we headed up to the top of our hill. The farmhouse sat nestled on top, eerie with the mists of the weather surrounding it. Who'd have guessed this old house would stand so long?

It wasn't until we were at the kitchen table, serving ourselves from the Crockpot roast I'd prepared before leaving for work that we noticed the manila envelope among the mail with the name JP Percy in bold on its front.

"What's this?" Dee asked.

She grabbed it and read the address at the top left hand corner.

"What is it?" I held my fork, ready to spear some meat and stuff my moth, but I waited, knowing exactly what it had to be. I couldn't believe it really. They might really be that desperate to get under my feet. They'd risk driving a borderline mad man to insanity just to make more money. I sat back in my seat. If it was a lease, dropped off in our mailbox, like so many had recently come home to find, there would be the gravity that my confrontation with Hayes hadn't done a thing except pit my neighbors against me.

"It's from JP Percy. I bet it's a lease."

She looked excited. But she also watched my face because she knew me well enough to take note of my expression before thrusting her opinions upon me. She knew how much this old place meant.

"Bet you're right," I said. I put some meat into my mouth and chewed. I needed a good taste in my mouth.

"What's that wise-ass sound in your voice all about?" she asked me. She fluttered the envelope like it was a fan. Then she went to tear the seal open.

"Don't bother. Just put it back in the center of the table."

She looked at me like a kid on Christmas Eve who'd been caught getting ready to open gifts in the middle of the night. I took another bite and swallowed.

"Why?" she asked, placing it back down among the crumbs and other junk mail on the table between us.

"I'm going to start raising cattle again," I said. "That lease will just get in eh way."

I stuck another bite of roast beef and potatoes in my mouth. Sailor and Cecil, two shepherd mixes, sat near the kitchen sink side by side. They'd eat when we finished. I got up and grabbed a bottle of Miller Lite from the fridge.

"Want one?" I asked her.

"Bobby?"

The window above the kitchen sink revealed that the sun was setting because the tinge of gray beyond was finally growing blacker and blacker. Raindrops still pelted the windowpane. It'd soon be time for us to sit on the couch and watch some TV like we usually did on Fridays. That was all I wanted. Just to go about the comfort of the usual and relax. Meditate on what I needed to do around the farm the next two days. There was an aloe plant in the windowsill turning white like a dying spider. Several of its fronds, ripped off. I remembered the scabs on the knuckles of my right hand.

"I'll take a beer, sure," Dee said. "But why raise cattle again? That envelope I had in my hands could be a Godsend. You've seen how much others have gotten. What if ours is worth more?"

"What if it's worth less?"

She paused a moment. Breathed deeply

“Bobby, why not just get on board like everyone else around here and use the money to pay off what we can?”

I gave her a bottle and looked her over as she took it. The black top she wore was already covered with the dog hair that floated around the kitchen, and her curly brown hair was pulled back. I walked to the kitchen door where my grandfather’s old TNT box sat full of shoes and boots. I kicked my work boots off and added them. Sailor jumped up and ran over to sniff them. I sipped my bottle, smelling diesel fuel still on my hands from cleaning asphalt crusted shovels at work, and I patted Sailor’s side with three loud thumps. Then I sat down and took another bite of the roast.

JP Percy and Hayes, the operator, had only been around for half a year.

“Well?” Dee said, her arms crossed with her bottle in the crook of her left elbow.

I picked up my hand and revealed the backside of my hand to her.

“What’d you do now?” she asked.

“I may or may not have connected my knuckles with Vern’s hairy mandible.”

“What? Why? I thought you were done with that shit, Bobby?” She released the envelope.

“Well—”

“What’d he say?”

She didn’t touch her beer. Mine was already near empty.

“Vern was talking about trapping. He mentioned that he saw a baby Bigfoot while he was out checking his traps yesterday.”

“You punched him for that?”

“No, no. Let me finish. This isn’t a real simple story.”

“Don’t see how it could be simple when it has Vern and Bigfoot in it.”

She sat back in her chair. A spice rack with a lower shelf full of knick-knacks—slat and pepper shakers, two little ceramic pigs dressed as farmers and a little wood-carved plaque that read ‘Bless this Home’—was on the wall behind her, exactly where my grandmother had kept it when this was her kitchen.

“Bill got into Vern by saying it was probably Vern’s wife, not Bigfoot. Bill said things like ‘I hope Sasquatch eats you,’ and ‘you know where to find your wife if you’re looking, just check your traps,’ and that kind of thing. Vern said he’d whoop Bill’s ass.”

“You’re talking about Bubba, right? Bill?”

“Yes.”

Most folks knew him as Bubba. As for that name, go to Nineveh, just up route 18, and ask around for Bill and no one will know who you’re talking about. Ask for Bubba and they’ll call him right up. Tax collectors and process servers have an awful time with it. They never know nicknames. Mine is less cryptic and only a few folks use it. Bobpat. I’m not deep in any debt to anyone though, so I rarely hear that old nickname. I’m not running from anything. Ask for Bobby Miller and everyone will point to the Miller farm anyhow. No way to hide even if I wanted. Not now. Everyone would just as soon see me off to jail than cover my back. All of them preferred false truths to make them feel better. IF they could convince themselves everything was just fine, then there wasn’t a thing to worry about.

I kept on, and said, “During work we all went down to one of the more recent gas drilling pads to check it out. We were out near it anyhow, checking out the road.

It'll need fixed again soon. Got to talking about leases and such. Vern mentioned he'd signed one and that he was going to be rich as ever. Later on they kept going back and forth about Sasquatch."

"Bobby, I'm not seeing why you'd need to punch Vern over this. Seems like Bill was being the jerk."

Cecil came and laid her long shepherd snout in Dee's lap. She stroked her ears and scratched under her chin.

"I'm getting there. Be patient."

I pulled the manila envelope and the lease towards me.

"Back at the shed before we left, those two were getting into it again and Vern started saying how it was Bubba dressed up like Bigfoot, trying to scare off drillers. Vern went on to say that with the royalties he'd get, he could stop working with us and ride around in his new diesel truck, and break up the roads and spit in our faces when he saw us fixing them."

I paused to gather my wits.

"So?" she said.

"So, I punched him in the mouth and told him I hoped Bigfoot stole all the royalty checks out of his mailbox and slashed his truck tires."

She sat forward, releasing Cecil from her loving grip.

"I don't see how you got worked up enough to hit him, Bobby."

"It's this gas drilling business. None of this shit would happen if they weren't here churning fire between us all. I wanted to remind him where he was and where he came from."

She nodded while looking at the empty dinner plate before her. "I see. You know I'm not from here, so I don't quite get it. Especially when you lose your temper and lash out like you do. It's a miracle you haven't gotten in more trouble for it." She finally began to sip her beer. "So in that tall tale, I hear you saying that you don't want a load of easy cash from JP Percy and their gas drilling empire. Right?"

"I'd say you learned the moral of the story there."

"You and your romantic attachment to this place. Guess I'm jealous, really. But you can't just blame all your problems on the gas drilling. Everyone else is coping with it just fine it seems like. Why can't you?"

"You know I've always felt this place was like a vital organ. We're small, maybe backwards in some ways, but we're special. Not some damn appendix you can just throw in a jar of vinegar and pitch. I've got something to prove. I just know it."

She nodded.

"Know what I mean?" I asked her.

"Sure. Can't sign a lease on property we don't own anyhow."

She didn't know. She grew up how I imagined most Americans did. In the suburbs, playing with neighborhood kids, never lifting a finger, watching TV, going to the mall and to see movies. If ever they saw a deer, it was dead on the road, not dead on their dinner plate. As for the farm, it wasn't really ours. My dad still owned it. We'd been the caretakers. It was cheaper that way. Just paid some bills. He paid the taxes. I always thought he'd return, but it'd been two years since he and Mom settled in Virginia near Dick.

"I know. I know. My father never did get around to signing over the title and deed to us."

"How could I forget?" She sighed. For a long time she'd been on my case about getting the farm signed over. I didn't want to push it with him in case he decided to sign it over to Dick or, God forbid, Colleen. I was sure he didn't realize we actually wanted the place. I brought it up to him five years ago, casually when he said they had a condo in Virginia, but he'd played it off saying something like, "You don't want that old garbage pail. Soon as you leave I'm selling it." I did want it. I just figured he'd come around on his own and give it to us. I didn't want to bruise anything we had between us. But he still hadn't come around. It was like he didn't trust me with it or he didn't see what good it would do me anyway.

She gathered up our plates and put them in the sink. Then she threw our empty beer bottles in the trash.

"Bobby, not to *nag* or anything, but don't you think you ought to finally get him to pass this place along? Otherwise, why are we wasting our time here? We could just move into a nice little place without an old farm to keep up with. Don't get me wrong, I've told you before how much I like this place. It's been fun. But our younger days are falling behind us now and it just isn't worth it."

"I'll call soon and ask him about getting the legal stuff taken care of. I'm sure we've got squatter's rights by now anyhow."

"We've only been watching and running this place for ten years, maybe more, right?"

"Yes. It's ours. Just not on paper."

"Then get the paperwork taken care of," she said.

"I will."

"Soon," she said, looking at the manila envelope on the table.

I looked at it then too, and wanted to pick it up and rip it to shreds. I felt like the whole community was standing behind me, looking over my shoulder, waiting to see what I did. How could we all keep showing up at the county fair in August to show off our hard farm work five years from now when all our farms were dead from water tables poisoned by shattered shale underfoot? It'd been years since I'd gone to the fair with anything of my own. This place could be an example to everyone who'd hopped right on the gas drilling bandwagon. They'd see what they'd forsaken if I could ever get it put in my name. It was only a matter of time before everyone started noticing all the baggage that came along with their drilling leases.

"Another beer?" she asked.

"Please."

As she handed it to me she asked, "Are you going to get in trouble for decking Vern? They're going to fire you, you think?"

"Not sure if I'll get in trouble or not seeing as how I technically hit him off the clock even though we were still at the shed. I don't know if he'll report it or not. Bill winked at me, so I feel like he'll back me up if Vern reports it. The foreman wasn't there, but I know he would look the other way in this case. But it all depends on what Jeff up at the offices thinks. He's the final judge in all this. They know I'm worth something there. I'm better at running the planar than the rest of them. They'll probably demote me to a B Class worker is all. Which can be bad, because if the state budget doesn't go through next summer, I could get laid off after."



"I see," she said. She started emptying the dishwasher. "That crock pot needs washed, mind helping me?" she asked.

I held up the envelope from JP Percy and looked it over. Inside was contractual jargon and a line for me to sign my life away. JP Percy was the devil if ever there was one. It didn't feel right and it couldn't feel right. The envelope felt like fire in my hand. I envied Vern. It was so simple for him. Steve Price too. He avoided me these days. Hadn't spoken one word to me this summer when he harvested the hay from our fields. Somehow I doubted he'd have a healthy calf to give us in the spring. Maybe he'd try buying us off with his royalty money. It might be all he has left by then.

I moved to the sink to help Dee with the dishes.

"So we're not going to sign that thing then?" Dee asked. "Not even if your Dad hands over the farm and you get laid off or fired?"

It looked like we'd need to consult someone about it before we could get a real idea of what would happen. I'd heard the horror stories of course. I'd also heard the dreams-come-true stories. A couple of the township supervisors had leases on their farms and they were bringing in enough money that no one knew how much they got. They kept it secret. Vern on the other hand wanted us to know, even though I had a feeling he didn't really know how much he was getting, or when he'd be getting it.

As for the horror, it wasn't in our area yet. It was somewhere else closer to South Central PA, in Mt. Pleasant. I'd heard rumors that the township supervisors were just looking for handouts. They were people who were gung-ho about allowing industry to come in and provide for the better population of the country.

They had fancy new computers in their schools. A new sculpture put up in town, commissioned the gas company there. They didn't care how it changed their community. We were well on our way to that ourselves. But I was aware of the possibility of exploitation too. My pap and grand pap were coal miners and they'd seen it, lived it.

"I don't want to sign it right away. Let's see how things are going for others first. It sounds like a great deal, sure, but there could be nothing but hell to pay.

"So you'd be ready to deal with the taxes your own self once you dad gives us the farm and stops paying the taxes?"

"I don't like handouts," I told her. "It might break the bank, but I'll still feel better about it that way."

"Set it aside for now. Talk to your father about it and we'll see what some of the people in town think."

"You know well what everyone else thinks," I said.

"Maybe you just think too much about it," she said, taking a sip from her bottle.

"I think that's what *they* want us to think."

She finished putting the dishes away and started reloading the dishwasher. I dried off the porcelain crock-pot and put it away.

She sipped her beer again, emitting a "Maybe," into her bottle.

As it was, Dee and I only had a couple of horses, and a couple steers for our own meat supply. Helped to keep some livestock on the grounds to keep the farm locked in with farmland taxes, otherwise all this land would cost my Dad more than he cared to afford, even with the farm's enrollment in Clean and Green. I didn't want

to inherit that part of the farm so much, but it was all part of it. It'd been ten years since my parents left town to sight see. They'd stopped back from time to time and spent a few weeks with us. I was just waiting for the absentee landowner to pass it on.

Dee grabbed another beer from the fridge. "Let's go watch some TV. Maybe there's a movie on or something."

I used to keep my mouth shut about these kinds of things. It was part of how I was raised. Keep these things for town gatherings and even then, keep it quiet, keep it to yourself, unless a leak in the dam has sprung and everyone else needs to know, wait until your family was threatened and others' too. But I knew a thing or two about history. And nobody else seemed to. So I voiced my opinion. Which just put me on the outs. And made my wife have a hard time understanding me.

"You really want to raise a new herd of cattle?" she asked me.

"I don't know. Maybe. You've never done it. I bet you'd like it."

"Sounds like an awful lot of work."

"We'd get others to help."

"Would they help fund it so we could start it up?"

"Some might. Trevor would, I'm sure."

"Still, some how it seems like we'd be paddling up-stream."

"Why does everything always have to be so easy?"

"Why does it always have to be so hard?"

"Because hard work makes you feel good about yourself. Makes you feel like you're really doing something worthwhile."

"Well, get the farm first. Then we'll talk, okay?"

"I'll call Dad soon."

She came to me and wrapped her arms around me. The two of us stood in the kitchen in silence for a moment. She in her black outfit she wore to bartend, now covered with renegade dog fur, and me still in my grease-stained jeans and my neon green t-Shirt, reeking of sweat and diesel and tar.

We left the JP Percy envelope on the table and went to the living room where the old hearth of the fireplace was covered with wood scraps from logs we fed it last winter, still putting out the smell of wood smoke from all the fires that had ever been made in its belly.

## Chapter 2

In the morning, beyond the bedroom window, a natural alarm clock roused me. It flitted in and out of a large elm tree my great grandfather planted in the front yard. The tree had been reaching out, touching the house this past spring, so Trevor and I trimmed it back with the equipment he purchased for such occasions when people called him up and needed their trees pruned. When that was all done, Dee urged me to climb a ladder up to the sawed off limbs and hang a number of birdhouses to make sure the returning migratory birds didn't find themselves homeless in the new Spring air. I could hear them, the birds, by picking them out and secluding each call.

Seated at the edge of the bed near the window, Dee already rummaging somewhere in the morning of this old farm house, I listened to the birds and felt my ancestors were bent low over a fire in the kitchen making mountains of food and slowly warming the house. A scent of breakfast lingered in the air. I couldn't be sure if it was in my nose or my imagination. Didn't care either way, I was hungry.

Before dressing and heading down the creaky wood-plank hallway outside the bedroom, I listened to the birds one more time. It wouldn't be long before most of them headed south. All this summer, naming birds helped dispel the bizarre dreams I usually had in the morning. It helped me seat myself back in the reality I'd come to accept. There was your robin, house wren, a titmouse, but then there were a couple that seemed to come from the same spot in the tree. I couldn't pin them down and I couldn't see it because they were likely hidden away in one of the birdhouses—one made of wood, tin, clay, decorative gourd, or wicker.

I got out of bed, dressed for Saturday farm work, and went downstairs to find Dee.

She and the dogs were in the kitchen, she, at our kitchen table, her fuzzy blue slippers dancing under the table and throwing up clumps of dog fur. She stared at me as she sat gruffly, her curly brown hair pulled back with a hair tie, frizzled hairs hanging here and there. She had the Saturday edition of the Observer-Reporter on the table in front of her.

"Thought I smelled breakfast cooking," I said as I entered the kitchen from the hallway that lead from the front entrance where the stairs were. It ran parallel to the dining room and the living room. You had to walk through either the living room or the kitchen to get to the dining room. Pictures of my family long dead and gone were placed in that hallway on the true wood-paneled walls painted white.

I grabbed a mug for coffee.

"Don't know what you were smelling," Dee said. "One of these days it might help you get that breakfast you think you're always smelling by getting up before me and making it yourself."

"Fat chance of that. When I get up that early I go straight to the barn and feed the animals anyhow."

I sat at the table with her.

"I think that mocking bird is back," she said.

"Mocking bird?"

"Yep. It was singing the melody to a tune I listen to when I'm mucking out the barn stalls. I heard it this morning when I went to the bottom of the driveway for the paper."

She snapped the newspaper in her hands to straighten it out.

"Something wrong?" I asked her. "Mad the bird's back and making fun of that so called *music* you listen to?"

The envelope from JP Percy was still in the center of the little round kitchen table. Crumbs from whatever Dee had eaten, toast maybe, lay on top.

"He wouldn't sing it if he didn't love it. But since you mention it, something is wrong. When I went for the paper I found it tossed in our driveway, not in the delivery box at our mailbox across the road. Gas company must have put down a new bed of gravel on the road early this morning. You know they're using it as a service road to get up to the wells on Steve's farm. Our driveway is about a foot below it. I tried to get hold of someone but they keep putting me on hold. I'd like to bring it up at the next township meeting."

She snapped the paper taut again.

"Paper delivery couldn't reach the box?" I laughed a little. "I'll take the truck down and scrape the axle off it and sue. Don't worry."

"I'd like to see you try, Bobby. I was trying to get hold of the company to complain and ask for some help, but I couldn't get through to anyone real that could help." She looked over her newspaper down at the envelope. "I don't know if it'd be worth dealing with crap like this just to make some money."

"My thoughts exactly," I said.

I grabbed a piece of venison jerky from a sandwich bag on the table. I tossed a piece of it to Sailor. He ate it in one gulp and looked to me for more. Cecil, the other one stood up from behind Dee's chair and came to my lap under the table hoping for her own.

“As for the new gravel down on the road, I’ll take a shovel and rake down and flatten it out so we can get up to the road. Hopefully the mail can be delivered.”

Odds were that the gravel road at the bottom of our driveway wouldn’t be that far below the gravel that overshadowed it. Dee had her own little temper and exaggerated sometimes in hopes that I’d take care of things sooner. I’d gone straight out after my first cup of coffee and a few bites of jerky. I drank a second cup outside as I stood on the front porch facing down the large valley adjacent our hill. The air had the brittle crisp that’s familiar in pre-autumn air. I finished my coffee and made my way through the familiar air to the barn for a shovel and rake.

Saturdays were farm-work days. I’d put on boots, jeans, and a T-shirt. Sometimes, depending on the weather, I’d wear a flannel shirt, or my father’s old Carhartt jacket made of sand colored cotton duck, finally worn in but hardly worn out.

I tried to get the animals fed first thing before eight. I liked to have everything done by one or so, usually sooner, so I could have the rest of the day to relax or go out. But I’d have to stave that off until I could take a look at the driveway.

Returning from the barn with the spade and gravel rake, I headed for my truck. Dee had already fed our two draft horses in the barn. They kept pretty quiet while I was in the barn, only shorting and stomping their hooves occasionally. It was chilly in the barn and dark, the day’s first light was only just coming through the upper windows and falling through the older boards of the walls that had worn and shrunk away from one another, like neighbors gone sour. One day soon I’d have to replace them.



As I walked along the gravel driveway from the barn to my red Dodge dually, I passed the spindly fir tree beside it. One of our barn cats was nestled in the crook of its lowest limb.

Barley watched me in that drowsy cat way. His sister, Hops, had been on the old Gravely seat in the barn. Hops put that tractor to more use than I did. It was usually broken down when I needed it and if it was working, the pins on the machines I hauled were snapped and caused extra work for me. I used my truck for most jobs nowadays.

Some dust flew up when I threw the shovel and rake in the truck bed. Until I started the truck up, the noise level outside was small, nothing but birds and breeze. My truck interrupted the sound of the birds and the trees that grated against themselves.

Along the lower end of our long driveway, the trees were coated in a fine film of grayish dust from the gravel dropped along our valley road that lead up to the next ridge road running along behind the farm. A dump truck rolled by towards the main road as I put my truck in park. I flipped the dump truck driver the finger. I doubt he noticed. He kept going, billowing dust into the air behind him as he went.

The fresh gravel was nearly a foot higher than the base of our driveway's gravel. Dee hadn't exaggerated. Last night, much of the gravel washed away in the rain and so they had to add a fresh layer over night to keep operations up. The road was probably nothing but mud earlier this morning. For us to use the road, I'd have to level out the lip of new gravel onto our driveway. There wasn't enough of a slope to get a truck up over it. Not without scraping the undercarriage anyhow. Dee's car definitely wouldn't make it. I kicked at the gravel to see how loose it was. Still loose.

It rolled down over my boot. I kicked it a few more times to see how much I could pull down without a shovel. Having a new bed of gravel on this road would be nice when we could get a vehicle up on it. This road used to be tarred and chipped every spring. That was better, even if it stuck to the sides of tires and the underside of cars and trucks. But who cared? We weren't trying to show off anything fancy anyway. Access to the road from our own driveway would be nice though.

Now that the gas company did so much work up the road, the township had required them to take care of it. Dozens of coal trucks, dump trucks with their heavy loads of coal, sped up and down it each day, the drivers making money based on the number of coal loads they could deliver from the mine portal that lay somewhere over the back ridge. Now there were all these heavy hauling trucks taking machinery and parts up the road to the gas wells on Steve's farm. It was illegal I was sure. But no cops had been posted out here to monitor and even then all they did was hand out citations and make themselves a hearty chunk of change in the process. Township didn't have its own police department, so the money never trickled back down to us in any way. The road was falling apart like wet sand under the pressure of those constant truck trips. We were thankful that the company took care of it now, but each time they did take care of it, they also buried us in our home. It wasn't just our driveway either. A new family had moved into one of the coal company's rental houses up the way. McAllister was their name. Hadn't met them yet. But I'd heard stories at Rinky Dink's and at Jim's Stop n Shop. Your average rednecks. Started brawls here and there. Picked up road kill for trophies. That old bullshit, if it was even true. I imagined they were backwards city folk moved out

here who thought they'd try to fit right in by following stereotypes. I'd have to listen at night and see if I could hear dueling banjos or something like that.

As I smoothed the lip of the new gravel road onto our driveway to level it off, the sound of a two-stroke dirt bike flared up. There was a sound I'd heard a few times at night and throughout the day. Never was sure who it was. A whining roar crept closer and closer as I worked the gravel down and before long I had the lip of the road smoothed into our driveway. The dirt bike pulled up in front of me and stopped. The driver cut the engine and left it in the middle of the road on its kickstand. He was wearing jeans, a T-Shirt with a wolf howling at the moon tucked in behind a scratched belt buckle with a worn-off rebel flag emblazoned on it. He seemed at home placed against the backdrop of the few trees behind him and the cow-path chiseled hill of Steve's farm across the valley through the trees. It was men like him that did nothing to prevent stereotypes of rednecks from roaming the area; a McAllister, I was sure. I'd probably summoned him by thinking about them. I wondered if he'd take it as a compliment if I called him a redneck. I went to high school with guys who dressed like him, proudly driving their father's tractors to school the last day before summer recess; a tradition I was never allowed to participate in. Waste of fuel, Dad had said.

"Good morning," he said, standing a foot over me on the gravel.

"Moring. What brings you down so early? You one of the McAllisters I keep hearing about? Moved in up the road?"

"That's right, I'm Ray," he said. "And you are?"

"One pissed off son of a bitch. That's who I am. Fixing what that gas company calls road repair."

With a ball cap tight over his face that shrouded most of it, I could see only that he nodded his head like he knew what I was saying.

I went on, "I'm Bobby. Lucky heir to the Miller farm, which rules this hillside behind me. It isn't much nowadays though."

"Farms have a mind of their own, don't they?" he said.

To make a statement like that meant he might be a local after all. May have worked on a farm once upon a time, whether it was his or a friend's.

"They do," I said. "What brings you on by?" I asked him, raking more gravel down onto my driveway. I was close to being happy and done with the job.

"Oh, just scouting the road. Watched them dump trucks all morning. Nearly a dozen of them by my count."

He turned his head slightly so I could make out more of his profile. Ray's face was unshaven and his whiskers were dark grey, some darker than others. His face was long, sunken and wan. His cheeks looked hard. I wasn't sure what he did for work, but it didn't require any grooming. Some of kind of labor maybe, like what I did. I could let my beard get as thick and curly as I wanted and nobody would tell me to cut it until it threatened to get caught up in some machinery. His hair had a grimy tinge to it. He looked as though he maybe hadn't bathed for a few days. No ladies at his house would be my guess.

I leaned on the butt of my shovel handle and placed one foot on the blade's step. "That ventilation shaft up the way keeps me up so much at night, I'm surprised the trucks didn't stir me this morning. But we are way up on the hill. Dee didn't hear it either, I guess."

“My brother and me got right up—well, we was already up. Hadn’t yet been to bed. Friday nights is drinking nights, you know?”

“Sure do. Finished off three quarters a case of Miller last night myself. Probably why I slept so well.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. Hell, Bobby. Why don’t you come down one of these nights and drink with us?”

“My old lady wouldn’t be impressed by me doing that.”

He paused and didn’t seem to understand what I meant.

“Sure, sure. Anyhow, me and my brother grabbed us up some lawn chairs and put them down right on the bank over the road near at place with some beer and a couple joints and watched the trucks go by, dumping gravel ever so slow.” He moved his right hand through the air like he was icing an invisible cake. “We chucked our empty cans right at them fuckers.” He laughed.

Wailing empty beer cans at the coal company workers did sound like fun.

Ray jumped down off his perch and joined me on my driveway.

“Say, you need any help here?” he asked.

“I’ve got it pretty squared away now, thanks.”

He nodded his head. I couldn’t help but think that he was trying to figure something out about me. I looked at him and grinned, nodding my head to confirm whatever it was he was drawing up in his mind.

“Figure I’ll pass you a more formal invite. Bring your old lady along too If you like. Come to a bonfire next weekend? My other two brothers, Mike and Ryan, just opened a new business in Washington and we’re throwing a little congratulation party for them. We might even roast a pig. Who knows?”

Maybe he was starving for a new friend or hoping I'd bring something new to his circle of friends. I guess he didn't really know much about me though. Why wouldn't I like to go to a bonfire party with cheap beer, moonshine, and guns? He probably thought I looked just like him. I couldn't turn his invitation down in person, but that didn't mean I didn't have to find something else to do so I didn't have to go. But I suppose I should value what neighbors I have left. Maybe it was time to make new friends. He didn't know anything about my history and my outlook on all the drillers just come in. He couldn't hope to have a lease on a rental property owned by the coal company. Maybe he wouldn't care if I was a stick in the mud about it all. Usually gas drillers rented all the housing out there were so many. Maybe he was one? He seemed like he was from the area though, and I didn't know many men his age from here who'd been hired to do the work.

"As of right now," I said. "There's no reason for me not to come. I'll drop a line if things change."

"If you're coming early afternoon make sure you bring a shotgun. We got a bunch of clay pigeons to get rid of."

Now there was a popular local pastime. I did have a few guns, but I didn't usually shoot them for pleasure. I used them for hunting and keeping groundhogs out of my gardens and fields. Some nights when the plants were young and tender I'd have to sit out with a spotlight and keep things away the whole night. Then Dee wised up to our problem and we started using a homemade concoction of vinegar, Cheyenne pepper, and a few other things on the plants. That kept hungry pests out. Wasn't worth the acid on their tongues. Guess they weren't as hungry as they made it seem.

"I'll have to get some shells, but why not," I said.

"Great," he said. He walked back to his dirt bike, then turned and said, "Maybe we can shoot the tires off these dump trucks when we run out of pigeons."

He cackled and slapped his knee. Then he hopped back up on the raised gravel road and started up his dirt bike and cut a ditch with the back wheel, flinging the loose gravel all over. He zipped back up the road towards his house. I had a feeling he was checking for places to take gravel to add to his own personal store. He and his brother would be back with a truck and shovels.

Before heading for my truck, I got up on the road and surveyed what I could. Our mailbox was visible, but I was sure our mail lady wouldn't be able to reach it from her car. That would definitely be something I brought up at the next township meeting a week or so away. I'd have to come back down and take a picture for proof.

Ray's dirt bike was buzzing along the valley when I noticed him down off the road going up the hill across from our shared hill. He stopped halfway up. He was in one of Steve Price's cow pastures looking through something on the ground. It looked like dirt from what I could see, but I knew it was a cow patty. I'd heard rumors before that psychedelic mushrooms sometimes grew under the droppings, especially when the weather had been moist. And after the torrential downpours of yesterday, there might be something new shooting up from the ground. I wondered if the floodwater was trickling all the way to the mines or not. I hadn't seen a water truck go by yet, but maybe I hadn't been down here long enough. There was no way for me to tell. I kept watching Ray fiddle with the cow shit. Clearly the lengths this guy went through to have a good time left something to be desired. That bonfire, if I

went, might be more excitement than I was prepared for. Bunch of drunk men acting like they were fresh out of high school. There was an air about Ray that took me to my own drunk high school nights, like the one when I was pressured into kicking Shuggs in the gut as he slept. I almost kicked my friends instead. I would have if it didn't mean I'd be made an outsider. Kind Bobby Patrick Miller, animal lover, maybe even called sheep fucker. I did what I had to. But for what now? Most of those guys moved elsewhere, away from the township and the community. Those who stayed, like Vern, had signed leases with the gas company and no longer needed anyone's help. Their only role now was to sit out on Jim's Stop 'n Shop and sip coffee and shoot shit with the geezers. Didn't need to worry about their jobs so much now, or their farms if they had them. What would happen when I didn't have any more neighbors who needed my help? Already it'd been a long time since I'd stopped by to see how my neighbors were, if they needed any help with anything, if I had the equipment or tools for a job they couldn't do.



### Chapter 3

Vern's incident with trapping Bigfoot gave me a mind to try some trapping myself. It had been a long time. On Monday, after a less rainy day at work, Vern absent and Bill gloating over, a great big bald man kicking back with his feet on the shed's main room lunch tables and saying he hoped Vern managed to get eaten by Sasquatch. I searched the barn for my dad's old traps. I didn't anticipate seeing Bigfoot, or the Hairy Man as he was often called, his stories circulating around the Boy Scout camp near Plumsock. If I did have to return to selling beef next year, I'd need to start looking out for my unborn calves now.

Another thought had been fidgeting in my mind. A different livestock, one that might be worth more. Would be a long shot since I didn't have any idea how to raise them. A nearby farm had started raising llamas to sell wool and I'd heard from Danny Crowe who owned the farm that he pulled in a healthy bunch of cash for each bushel of llama wool he sold. At one time I would have laughed at the idea. Lots of farms raised sheep for wool, I just couldn't bring myself to take care of an animal so dumb that it would bowl over its caregiver and trample him to death just to escape a thunderclap.

I found the traps in the basement level of the barn, littered with straw and dirt, with the other old farm equipment; a scythe my grandfather had used before he could afford to haul a mower or buy a tractor. Had to do it all the old-fashioned way, a lot like how the Amish still do it. He'd use horses to haul machines before he invested in the old tractor sitting out at the end of the property rusting. Considering the ease of replacing a scythe to replacing the nuts and bolts and components of a mower deck, it's cheaper, maybe more effective and less stressful.

Pap preferred to do most things by hand, as I've found among most of the men in my family. We liked to have control over the things that could sever our limbs. It's awful hard to cut yourself with a scythe or sickle and as long as there's no one near striking range, all is good. It's unfortunate when you hit a nest of bunnies, but not as bad as when they're hit with a mower. A freshly cut field can be blotched red sometimes. That was a sight that could be avoided with a scythe. And with a dull scythe, you can just whip out the whetstone and straighten out the blade. When pins break on the mower, you have to replace them before you can use it again, and if you don't have the replacement parts handy it's a real set back.

I hadn't visited this part of the barn for some time. There was a web of straw and hay covering much of the old equipment. Some mouse homes were tucked out of sight. I pulled some out when I pulled the traps free. I was always amazed by the amount of fluffy material mice managed to find for their plush little homes. It was like they sneaked into the house and stole the filling of our pillows. I'd check my winter clothes later on. It looked like some shreds from a few flannel shirts of mine were laced in with the fluff.

With the traps free, I could inspect them a little better. I'd clean them off with a wire brush and use some WD-40 to get the hinge parts moving. I'd heard Vern say something about waxing, though I didn't think my dad ever did. It wasn't a sport for me anyhow. These were your standard foot traps, painful as all hell. I'd leave them out for a week and see what, if anything, came up. The dogs would be kept in the house and outdoors on their chains until I got these traps back out of the woods and fields.

I knew these things had to hurt. I'd seen them in action. Setting traps with my dad when I was younger was everything I could hope for in a learning experience on a farm. Thank the Lord I had paid attention, because I still had an idea of what I was doing. It was really pretty straightforward. Like a mousetrap but a little more elaborate. Dig a fake hole, bury the attached stake deep into the ground in the same hole, put the trap in with the appropriate weight rating set—four to five pounds to avoid trapping small things and giving you the ability to cover it up with sticks and leaves, provide some kind of lure. The hole behind the trap was made to look like a burrow that a coyote might want to inspect for food. But I didn't have any coyote lures like urine, a common one, so I'd have to go into town and get some later, make a stop at the hunting shop.

I took the traps from the barn's basement and set them on the workbench on the barn's main floor. I'd leave them there until I had them working properly. I wasn't exactly in a rush to start hooking animals. It wasn't uncommon to catch more than you wanted. Once my dad had caught one of the barn cats when I was just old enough to go with him to check traps. I had bugged him and bugged him to tell me where the one cat, the biggest cat, who was never named, had gone, and my dad told me he 'd caught him in a trap and shot him. The following week, my dad brought me along to check the trap line.

When we had a few hundred head of cattle on this farm, my dad and I trapped often and came upon lots of critters in these traps that weren't coyotes. We caught deer, foxes, stray dogs, raccoons, and so on. I always hated that. Most of the time we could let the animal go as long as it wasn't injured, but if it was, well that

was why we brought the shotgun. Getting them out of the trap was a trick. One of us had to subdue the animal in some way while the other one pried the trap open.

On one occasion, my father and I had walked, side-by-side, up to a young doe caught by one of the hidden traps. Dad looked at me from the cavern made by his huge black beard and the hunting cap he wore, and he gave me a sad sort of smile. He had a gun with him, but the deer was standing and its foot and leg appeared intact in the trap, nothing broken. He put his gun up against a tree a ways back and he and I went within ten feet of the doe. It cowered, never letting its eyes leave my face, and it looked ready to head butt anything that came near it. It was a little bigger than a fawn, its spots almost gone.

"I hope mamma's not near us. She might attack us," Dad said.

He removed his heavy Carhartt coat in the brisk November wind.

"Bobby, I'm going to put this over its head and hold it down. Hopefully it's not too strong. I want you to pry the trap open and get its hoof out, okay?"

Flurries of clumped snowflakes fell around us and the ground was slightly muddy because it hadn't yet frozen solid.

I shook my head to say yes.

At the time, I was only ten years old and neither of my siblings had been born. It always felt lonely in my childhood, but it had always been all mine. When brother and sister came along, those cold days checking traps no longer felt like they were part of my childhood. Putting up hay was more of a chore and I couldn't play around as much in the hay as I once did. I watched Dick and Colleen romp in the hay, and being my quiet self, I knew then that I was expected to be an adult by age twelve. I would watch the two of them sometimes and picture myself as a five year

old running around with my little brother and sister, the same age as them, getting to know them and grow up the way I might have if they'd been born closer to my age, not stuck on the sidelines doing men's work with Dad. I felt like my few memories of being a child haunted the farm more than the ghosts in the farmhouse.

The deer squeaked and fell over.

With my cheeks growing rosier and number by the minute, I spoke to my father with cold lips, unable to form proper words. "Its not going to hurt it is it?"

He bent to my level, holding his heavy canvas coat and said, as the doe hunkered, its dark eyes unwavering, "She'll be all right. But you should know that the next animal we get in a trap might not be so lucky. That's why I bring the gun. The coyotes will be shot and you shouldn't feel bad for them. They'd just come and kill our calves if we didn't do this. But sometimes we have to kill deer and foxes that get in the traps. But only if they're real hurt. And this is something we have to deal with. It's our responsibility to manage the traps and everything we catch in them. Never leave an animal to suffer, not even the coyotes."

Most of what I remembered him saying to me came back like lectures. I didn't say anything and nodded. I knew he'd have me shoot the first coyote we came across in our traps. I knew he'd expect it of me.

He walked to the deer and wrapped its head in the coat then bent over it quickly and pushed it to the ground. It squeaked some small noises and struggled but seemed weak as if it had been here for a while and was starting to starve and dehydrate or freeze.

"Come on Bobby! Get this thing free."

I hurried to it and pulled the trap apart.

“Watch your fingers when you open that!”

I opened it and the deer slipped its hoof out. I opened the trap until it clicked and stayed open. I’d never been so close to a live deer. I’d always seen the ones my family hunted hanging upside down from trees, sometimes bleeding out into buckets. Their black eyes open and empty. I jumped back and my dad stood up slowly and jumped away from the deer with his coat. It took a second to take in what had just happened then hopped away with a slight limp.

“Good job,” he said. He put his coat back on, grabbed his gun and then we went on to the next few traps. They were empty that day.

I wasn’t looking forward to reliving experiences like that. But if I wanted to get a few livestock options going on this farm it’d have to be done.

In honor of revving this farm back into shape, a drink was in order. I had an old bottle of whiskey that I kept above the workbench. Normally I’d do a shot after a long day of work, but it felt appropriate now too. A toast to doing some more work on the farm for the spring. I didn’t take it all at once. I sipped it instead. A friend of a friend had made it, closer to grain alcohol really. It was smooth and hot in my throat, nearly flavorless. My eyes watered a little.

There’s something to be said for living out the same life differently. My father was born on this farm and didn’t move until he was too old to manage. He stayed and cared for it and made it his life and I’ve always wanted to do the same, though I haven’t kept it a real working farm, with almost no livestock. Without the deed in my name, I’ve never felt right, like all the work was just for my Dad and not for me. As soon as the farm was finally mine, it’d be up to me to decide whether I allowed gas drillers to install a well or not. Could there really be money in that?

Could this place still be a farm when it was done? I didn't want the money that bad. I felt like kicking myself for waiting so long to have a working farm again. I already felt better just thinking about really doing it.

We did all right for ourselves. Never wanted for nothing. I don't have any kids, and I'm sure that helps our finances. Money hadn't been that important when I was growing up either. Something had changed that in most homes today. I felt like the definition of rural living was changing. You couldn't find a private mountain anymore. Not for free anyway. I heard talk from public figures and politicians that jobs would increase because of the drilling. I was pretty sure women were finding jobs more than anyone else. Meanwhile, the men, like me, who've never earned a degree in anything and knew only physical labor, have no experience with drilling. Because we've never laid our hands on drilling practices or well technologies, we can't get hired. The companies aren't taking the time or spending the money to take us under their wing. They picked guys from all over the country. Jobs were increasing, this much was true, but what does that matter when the population increases with it? There was hardly a house for rent around that didn't have a Texan, Alaskan, Alabamian, or what have you, living there. Chances were good that Ray was a gas driller himself. A few of the hotels in Washington had been rented out by the drilling companies to house their workers. In my father's day he'd never hear a southern accent that wasn't the local accent.

I've seen good things wasted. I've heard of farms, torn up so they're no longer useful. And the once gorgeous state parks were slowly dwindling. Ryerson State Park shut down because the dam there had split and the lake had to be drained. It was worthless now. The company responsible had a drilling site nearby

and refused to admit that the dam cracking had been their fault. Deny it long enough and people will stop giving a shit about it.

Some whiskey jollies began to cluster in my brain, helping me stop my thought trains, and I left the barn and found Dee out in the driveway, sitting in the gravel with Hops in her lap, purring.

“Enjoying the rays?” I asked her.

She looked up, scratching Hops under his chin. He purred loudly and didn’t look like he wanted to leave her lap for anything.

“That’s right. Thought I’d just plop down right here out of the shade. Hops thought it was a good idea too.”

“Hard to believe you let that mangy furball into your lap. He still have burrs on his haunches?”

“Not Hops. He’s a clean little kitty,” she said as she picked him up and brought him to her face to nuzzle. He didn’t object.

Barley came out from the barn behind me and rubbed against my jeans. I picked her up and walked with her to where Dee and Hops sat and we joined them. The gravel wasn’t too comfy but somehow it didn’t hurt either. And it was warm in the cool air from the sunshine that’d baked it all morning and afternoon.

“Look at these two. Some fierce barn cats they’ve become,” Dee said.

“They’ve got the barn cat manginess about them, but they’re lazy as hell aren’t they? I found some abandoned mouse houses in the barn basement though. So they must be doing something. Never thought I’d see traps turned into homes.”



Barley didn't want to stay in my lap anymore. She jumped out and ran to Hops who shot up out of Dee's lap and tackled Barley, biting here and there with his tail erect. Hops was a fluffy orange tabby, and Barley a shorthaired orange tabby.

Dee eyed me up. "Traps?"

"Well, if we do get on with this farm, I think we might want to see what the coyote situation is around the farm. Haven't heard any coyotes but that doesn't mean they're not around."

"I can't believe you want to trap coyotes."

"It's something we have to do if we want llamas in the spring. Or sheep or cattle or something that might bring us some extra cash. It's been so long since this farm has seen any work anyway. I think it'll at least be fun. Character building, you know?"

"I thought coyotes weren't in this area anymore? That's what Trevor's told me anyway."

"For a long time they haven't been. All the farmers and hunters killed them off. Drove them away. But they're coming around again. Vern caught one a few weeks back."

"Look at you with that big beaming grin on your face." She paused and seemed to recall something because she looked away and gave a smile of content. "Seems like you're in a hurry to prove how useful this old farm still is. Gas company drops a lease in the mailbox and you want to prove it's worth something more."

I shrugged my shoulders and stood and moved to the house. I wondered how things could be different around this farm today if we had divorced or had kids. Dee and I had been married for close to ten years, married at 28. Kids weren't

something we ever talked about. She was happy with dogs and cats and the lifestyle we enjoyed without the costs of children. I wondered if it was too late for kids.

"I think I'd hate to leave this place ramshackled for whoever inherits it," I said.

"You're awful confident that someone will want to inherit it."

"It's not too late for us to have a happy little accident, you know."

She threw her head back and laughed.

"I suppose you're right. Since when do you want to bring kids into this crummy mess?"

"Never said I wanted to. But it could happen. You never know. Those little accidents happen to kids in high school, and it could happen to us too. That's what happened to most of my friends. I'm not holding up my end of that local curse. Nobody leaves really. Having kids so young often seals that deal."

"I think you have a different curse. This place, Bobby. We could go anywhere you know. We don't have to stay and deal with it if you don't want. We don't even have to worry about selling this place since we don't own it."

"You speak like you think I'm losing my job for sure. I'll have you know, Vern didn't bother to show his bruised face today at work."

"He was probably meeting with lawyers. I've heard how those Brownlees can be."

We were almost back to the house and out of the hot sun.

"I have to get some lure from town for the traps, do you need anything or want to come with?"

"Sure, I'll come."

## Chapter 4

During our trip to town, I could do nothing but stay lost in memory of the farm. Pulling out those old traps had pulled something out of me.

When I was a kid I could hear coyotes cry out at night. To a farmer this was the worst sound heard in the hidden darkness of night. I'd sit by my bedroom window, a frosted single-paned one, now a storm window of the spare room with a desk and computer. From there I'd watch my father go out with a flashlight and his shotgun. He'd tramp up to the pasture where the cattle were and walk around, inspecting the herd and watching the fence lines for movement.

When I turned twelve he let me go out with him. Again it was a winter night and there was a foot of snow on the ground. The night was clear, and with no light pollution from neighboring towns or mining portals the expanse of the sky stretched from tree line to tree line across our hilltop, billions of stars crackling through the clear cold of the night, their light wavering in the condensed atmosphere above us.

"Listen," my dad said.

I did. I heard only the deep breathing and snorts of the cattle and the slight breeze that shifted through the empty skeletal trees that shook like the bristles of my father's unshaven whiskers.

Earlier in the day I had playfully wrestled with my two-year-old brother Dick in the snow and he'd landed on my left wrist, pushing it into the frozen ground too fast, leaving it sprained. My mother, who'd been nursing herself with spiked tea—to keep warm, she'd said—had wrapped it in an old flannel shirt my father had ripped up for rags. Outdoors, my wrist had swollen and the cold of the night soothed it. I held a flashlight with my right hand and kept my left tucked close to my

chest. I was scared the coyotes would be attracted to the flannel for some reason and rip into my bruised flesh first, releasing what I thought would be black blood. My wrist wasn't the only bruised part of me that hurt. I had pushed Dick down in the snow after he landed on my wrist. Before my mother dressed my sprained wrist, she'd spanked me with a paddle for pushing him. It was hard to walk and as much as I felt like staying in bed, I let my dad rouse me at midnight when we heard coyote howls and pack yips.

Listening in the dark, I sat in the snow on my swollen rump and it felt good. My dad sat down beside me. The steers that stood nearby moved silently and huddled together. I could feel their warmth radiating, slowly melting snow. When I turned sixteen I'd bring my girlfriend out in the winter for hours and we'd stand near them, watching the skies for shooting stars and piecing together what constellations we could as we sipped from a Mason jar of moonshine soaked peaches my father kept in the basement of the barn. Sitting in silence in the snow with slow moving giants around us, calm because we were among them.

"Bobby," my dad said. He handed the shotgun to me. "I'm going back to the house to fix us something warm to drink. I want to stay out here for a while tonight."

There had been nights when my dad would hear the coyotes, go out and check out the grounds, return to the house, then hear their calls again and have to return. He'd never actually see them. I could only imagine his frustration, but I also knew he loved his job and taking care of the cattle was his top priority.

I sat in the snow, holding the shotgun in my lap as he stomped back to the house through the snow. He walked through the fence gate and shut it behind him.

I wasn't sure that I could actually hold the shotgun with my bum wrist. I tried and could sort of balance it, but I couldn't hold it firmly and I knew if I had to fire it the kickback of the full-choke 12 gauge would either fly up and smack me in the face or soar out of my grasp. I prayed coyotes wouldn't be brave enough to stalk the herd. All the calves were small enough to still be good targets, but you couldn't see them really. They were at the center of the herd where it was warmest. Still you could never trust a starving coyote not to try. I hoped they were chasing down something else in the woods.

As I sat, the cattle knelt down, front legs first then rump to the snow, sides pressed against one another, and they settled down for sleep. In the starlight I could see the other hilltops and the snow on trees. I heard crackles as branches bent and snapped under the snow's weight. The occasional snort of each steer buffered the otherwise silent night.

After some time, I wasn't sure if my rump was numb from cold or pain. Nothing approached us until I finally heard the two-step crunch of snow of my father coming from the house. I heard the fence gate creak slowly shut and then latch and then I could see him. In each hand he carried a steaming mug that lifted starlit vapor into the dark and quickly evaporated into nothing.

"Get any of 'em?" he asked as he sat beside me and handed me a mug of hot chocolate. My lips were frozen so I took a swig to loosen them and was greeted by a taste like none I'd had before. It burned my mouth like menthol and I found that my lips and cheeks could move with general ease again after a few more sips. It was much more bitter than sweet.

"There's some whiskey in there, so slow it up, son."

"Whiskey?" I said with excitement.

"Yes. Don't get used to it. But it'll keep you warm."

He sat back and looked up to the sky while he pulled the hot chocolate and whiskey into his bearded mouth. He let loose a satisfied sigh full of visible breathe that dispersed as quickly as the steam from the mugs.

"Don't worry," I said. "I don't like it that much." I shifted slightly in my snow seat, my butt was still numb. "There weren't coyotes. I heard something scraping snow in the woods every now and then but that's it." I repeated his actions, wondering when my own face might start growing hair.

He nodded and we remained silent, listening to small sounds in the snow.

The cattle next to us were brown, but were gray in the star light and their sides heaved and pressed hot air from their lungs, more clouds of vapor that floated in the air twice as long as our own. I liked to imagine that they were our flock of dragons and we were watching over their eggs, rare and easy to smash.

The cattle began to grunt and moan in time and I knew there must be something on the other side of them. The coyotes walked in near silence, their paws padded with fur and sinking noiselessly into the snow. My father looked to me, the one with the gun. He put a finger to his face and motioned for me to stand up slowly to look over the herd. The coyotes wouldn't be interested in a full-grown steer but there were those few latecomer calves tucked away in the cattle mass somewhere.

Four coyotes stood ten feet away from the opposite end of the cattle, but didn't seem to notice me because I rose only a few inches above the backside of the steer nearest to me. I raised the shotgun up, balancing it as best I could on my wrapped left hand. My rear started to ache from the bruised flesh and the cold jeans

pockets that rubbed against it. I didn't need to hit one, I just needed to scare them off.

"Bobby, hang on—" my father said, standing quickly.

But he was too slow and I had already moved to pull the right-barrel trigger of the shotgun, its hammer already pulled back. I fired.

The chaos that erupted surprised me. My father snatched me up and ripped me away and tore off down towards the house. The gun blast set the cattle into a frenzy. Each of them had bolted up and scattered. Hooves pounded the snow powdered field and tossed moon-glow white powder up everywhere. The coyotes disappeared in the explosion of giants that jumped out of the snow. As my father ran with me in his arms I wondered why he'd given me the shotgun, and then why he'd given me whiskey. Either he'd had an extra helping of whiskey at the house and wasn't thinking straight himself or he'd forgotten I had a gun.

Moos and yips sounded out and my father screamed too. I think the excitement had ignited the savage parts of his brain and it was his only defense from being smashed to the ground. It was a scream that signaled to anything near him that avoiding his space was a good idea. Even a simple-minded steer understood that a noise like that meant the promise of pain, even if it was only from flailing fists and elbows. I realized there was something I hadn't understood about watching over the herd for coyotes with a shotgun. You weren't supposed to just shoot when you felt like it. It was just in case you had to use it, and if that was the case, chances were that all the cattle would be frenzied already.

Somehow he managed to avoid the cattle and he launched me over the fence into the soft snow on the other side before he catapulted himself over the fence. In

my shock I stood and took off towards the house. He was right behind me and I ran until I was inside. In hindsight I don't think the walls of the old farmhouse would have protected me. A steer probably would have avoided running straight into the house, but in my childish mind I couldn't separate myself from a steer and I imagined they'd think the house was a safe place too. So, I ran to the first floor bathroom, where only I could fit, and dropped to the floor in front of the sink, leaving the door ajar, mimicking what I'd learned in school during our tornado drills. I stayed there and whimpered, fearing that I'd destroyed the farm somehow, that the cattle were ripping it asunder. I cried for a while and I cursed my injured wrist and bottom.

Once I'd calmed down I emerged, expecting to see cows running through the yard still crazed from the excitement. My father was nowhere to be found and I rushed outside fearing that he hadn't made it.

He was sitting on the front porch staring out into the field.

"Dad?" I said in a small voice.

The field beyond seemed calm again. I settled my mind more at the sight of a group of steers huddled together by the fence.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

"Yes, Bobby."

"I thought the cattle got you. Why didn't you come in after me?"

"They didn't bother trying to get through the fence. I'm just making sure they're all right before going in."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."



My mother appeared behind me in the doorway, wearing a long woolen nightdress and a knitted cap over her dark hair. I could hear babies crying somewhere upstairs.

“Harvey. What the hell is going on?”

“Nothing. Coyotes scared the cattle.”

“I heard a gunshot and yelling.”

“I shot a coyote.”

“Oh.” She stood, waiting for him to say something more, but he kept quiet. “I’m going back to bed then.”

She left and I stayed on the porch with my dad as the sounds of my crying siblings trailed off. Dad seemed mad though not at me. I’m sure he was regretting all that had happened, blaming himself for possible injury to me.

I found out the next day that one coyote had been trampled, a sad sight even though I looked at them as scoundrels and enemies of the farm. My shot had grazed the top of one of the steers’ shoulders without major injury though he had to be cleansed and put in the barn for a few days for monitoring. I spent a lot of time watching him and talking to him. I felt bad for hitting him and I also felt connected to him because of my own injuries. I named him Buck for the few pieces of buckshot that would remain lodged in his shoulder. I wondered if it would show up in the meat at the butcher, or on someone’s dinner plate.

## Chapter 5

I had grabbed a bottle of Deer Kleer from the game store. It was coyote urine. And it kept deer away but attracted coyotes. An interesting toss up there. Frankly, I didn't want either one around. The deer would eat the corn like they always did. I wasn't sure what my father had used as a lure, since we had in fact caught a deer instead of driving it away.

When Dee and I got home, I took the coyote lure to the barn and left it on the workbench by the traps. Barley was positioned there. She flicked her tail and pulled her ears back. I didn't touch her. I'd clearly interrupted a private moment. She jumped up, groaned like only a cat could, and scuttled off. Dusk was upon us and I'd wait until later in the week to set up the traps. As I laid the canister of coyote urine on the workbench I saw the rust on the trap and wondered if it'd been caused by blood. And I felt bad. I felt bad for the coyotes. Surely their family had been living on this farm for a long time, longer than mine. And we came in and set up shop so we could grow a buffet of food, which we penalized them for touching. We killed them, chased them off, caught them and shot them, sold their pelts a few times. They kept coming back. There wasn't anywhere else for them to go. If they had to leave, they'd have to disappear. I wondered if, like us with the coyotes, the miners and drillers might not relent in disturbing our peace. We'd have to cope. We might have to act like we didn't exist or die off. I worried that putting this farm back into action would garner the wrong kind of attention. Was there gold under this farm? Would they do more than ask us to sign a lease to get at it?

Dee came to the barn before I left it. Picked up the bottle of Deer Kleer and examined its label. Then she ran one of her fingers along the rusty edge of a trap. I

watched her in her silence and eventually she looked to the open side door and stared out at the pasture that ran along beside the barn.

She heaved. "Do you really love this farm this much?" she asked. "It'd be so easy to just sign the lease."

I stayed quiet with my arms crossed over my chest. It really was hard to ignore. "Do you have any idea what it's like to be the one Miller to have to make the call on whether this farm—where the family's financial safety has rested for two hundred years—stays with the family or burns down to nothing? Signing that lease," I said, waving my arms in front of me out of my increasing frustration, "Is going to feel like erasing all my ancestors and destroying everything they worked for from the beginning."

"But don't you think it's going to happen sooner or later?"

"Yes, but I don't want to be the one to make the call."

"Then I want you to go into the house and call your dad tonight."

We stood quiet for a while. She was right. The barn creaked here and there deep inside, the horses snorted and clomped their hooves. I pulled her close to me.

"Let's just wait until after the township meeting next week. IF it all seems like a bust, we'll start looking for a new place. Otherwise, I'll call my dad and tell him to give us the keys to the farm, or we're leaving. I can't do anything with it if he won't give it to me."

She didn't seem to like the idea of waiting any longer to get the envelope off our kitchen table and put in the mail or put in the trash. "Fine," she said.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," I told her. "It stresses me out."

"Me too," she said.

The sun continued setting through the barn doors over the grassy hill that was slowly turning brown with the changing weather. Field fires and harvest parties were just around the bend.

“Remember I said I met Ray McAllister the other morning?”

“Sure,” she said.

“Invited us to a bonfire this weekend.”

She chuckled and said, “You know I’ve seen Ray in Prosperity before. I don’t think he sees many women. Not sure what girl would take after his sort anyhow. You go ahead and do your neighborly duties. I’m staying home. “

## Chapter 6

Dee kept her word about Ray McAllister's hilltop bonfire. But there was some added baggage to her decision. Saturday nights, for me, were spent out at the bar or over at Trevor's place drinking.

"Why can't we just spend one Saturday night together here?" she had asked me throughout the day. I hadn't had a good response for her once.

I always wanted to go out Saturday nights, and usually I went out to bars with some of the guys from work, or some other, more secret places that I'd never shared with her, like The Body Shop—something of a brothel. There, at the Body Shop, you could get yourself tuned up as well as your truck. The Body Shop wasn't the only business in Dallas Pike, though it was the only brothel. There were a few restaurants (serving your average burger and steak), a tobacco outlet (where you could buy marijuana), a knock off Taco Bell called Joe's Tacos (where I'd heard you could also buy marijuana and anything else you might desire, be it coke or heroine), a Dairy Queen (where you could buy ice cream and hotdogs), and a porno shop that also sold drug paraphernalia (so you could smoke whatever you bought at Joe's Tacos).

The Body Shop, like the other fronts, was secret, and known only to locals and enlightened truckers that passed through. You had the advantage of avoiding most people you knew by going to the Body Shop and avoiding messy, one night stands at the bars (there were only a few to choose from); there was no chance of word finding its way home to your wife about being unfaithful. You might see other men from the area but there was an unspoken pact among us that when we saw one another at the Body Shop, we just assumed it was to get the truck's undercarriage

straightened out or to have the tires rotated. If I wanted to be seen publicly admiring nude women, I'd head to Jill's Lounge, the gentlemen's club.

As it was, most of the *good* stuff was just over the Pennsylvania-West Virginia border, and they could keep it down that way. It was about a forty-minute drive from our hill in Sparta, a small farming village along state route 18, just a couple miles from Prosperity, the township center. I didn't mind visiting the Pike but I didn't want that trash in my own back yard. We had a nice family-oriented reputation in the Prosperity area. And Dallas Pike, and that area of West Virginia in general, held your basic reputation for rascal behavior. It was a popular area among kids and young folk as well as the gnarled, smoky truckers and alcoholic drug users down and out in life who were just passing through or stuck there forever.

Knowing that Dee would never go with me to Ray's bonfire, I wasted no time in getting dressed for the walk up to the top of the hill where the McAllister's had their parties. It wasn't far off and this night would be one of the last few nights warm and dry enough for partying outside before autumn set in.

As I slipped boot strings though each other, I played scenes in my head of Ray's buddies standing near my truck and the murky scenes ended in scratches, dents, broken axles, slashed tires, bat-bashed headlights, or piss in my fuel tank. I'd seen the dirt hills they'd built up there for quads and dirt bikes, but I knew they jumped their old trucks on occasion too. These were all things they'd find hilarious and amusing, for sure.

As I tightened my boots for my walk up the hill, Dee stood staring at me, waiting for my reply. While she was right that there really was nothing appealing about this party, I couldn't expect her to understand the obligation I had as a

neighbor here. In her suburban child home her parents had probably ignored those neighbors who seemed untrustworthy and undesirable.

"You have a point," I said. "Trust me, I'd rather stay here." I already knew I wouldn't stay at the party long. Still, I didn't want to go alone. "I still think you should come with me."

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "And be the only chick there? No thanks. I think the McAllisters, whichever ones I've seen in Rinky Dink's, make it a game to see how unattractive they can be to women. Don't think I've ever seen anything remotely female near them."

"They might have a female dog or two," I said as I finished lacing my boots. I stood up from the chair next to our kitchen door. We had a heap of shoes and boots next to it. The TNT box was packed full of old shoes. I wasn't sure what was at the bottom of it. Could be a pair of my dad's shoes in there for all I knew. Sometimes a boot would go missing and I had to interrogate one of our dogs to find it. They did have a tendency to savor my boots; they never touched Dee's. My feet must lend some special essence to the flavor or their Nubuck leather. That or they just adored me more. "Of course dogs love their owners almost no matter what," I added.

She shuddered and shook her head. I inspected the bottoms of my boots, scratched brown leather with mud and straw caked in between the tread. Dee stood by the kitchen sink with a beer she had just pulled from the fridge.

"Why don't you have someone over while I'm out?" I asked her.

"House is a mess."

"So clean it."

"You'd like that wouldn't you?"

"Not especially."

She sipped her beer.

"I don't really want to go," I said.

"Then don't."

"Got to. They're the new neighbors and I've got to keep at least one Miller family tradition alive around here."

"So now you're fixing to manage two old traditions?"

"Guess so. Might be a few more on the way. Who knows?"

"You can't just replace all the people in this community with new dirty rednecks, Bobby. These guys don't know you. I get the feeling they won't care what you do. I get the feeling we can't really trust them. I'm worried they'll take you down the wrong path. I've heard stories about them at Rinky Dink's. How they play chicken with people on the straight stretches of route 18 past Prosperity. They've got the minds of high school boys but the bodies and experience of much older men."

She walked towards me and I caught a glimpse of her nipples, slightly erect through the gray camisole she wore. She didn't normally wear a bra at home. Her brown hair was down, still damp from a recent shower, and she smelled like coconuts. She stood in front of me and set her beer on the counter next to us by the door. I held her to me then backed off. I kissed her lips and tried to cup my hands under one of her breasts.

"Not if you're not staying here," she said as she snapped my hand away.

"I have to go. I'll try to get away early. It'll be dark and I'm sure no one will notice me slip into the woods and down over the hill and home. And stop worrying.



These guys. I've dealt with plenty of them before. I was just like them in high school. I know how to handle myself. I'll come back in one piece, I promise."

"We'll see," she said. "Have fun up there with the hillbillies."

She picked her bottle back up and frowned. I was used to her attempts at manipulating me and trying to enforce some circle of control around me. Most of the time I let her. But I wanted to know who to go after if anything ever happened to our property and I also wanted to try to make it known that we wanted nothing but good will between the McAllister house and Miller farm.

Dee wandered off towards the living room to sit with the dogs and watch some TV with her beer. The back of her gray shirt had watermarks across the shoulders from her wet hair. Somehow that sight made me want to stay more than the outline of her nipples and the wet kiss. I grabbed my light jacket and ball cap and headed out the door.

I headed straight up from the house towards the summit of our hill where our property line met just below the top of the McAllister's hill. There was a flickering of orange tucked away in the trees at the top. I marched toward it in the dark of the night. The air had cooled since sundown and the slight wind rustled trees and I caught the scent of drying leaves and grass. Summer was on its way out.

And then there it was. The white noise machine. The coalmine vent kicked on, hidden away on the opposite hill somewhere. I felt I could hear the turbine blades one by one as they sliced the quiet air and I must have imagined that I could smell the bitter gritty scent of coal. I stopped and looked back down from where I was. The McAllister's hill was higher up than mine and I could see most of the

landscape from there, though it was now dark and everything appeared as though it were charcoal sketches. I saw the beacon light of a gas-drilling tower, over on the Price's farm, the one that had lured fireflies away from my outstretched fingertips with its slow pulse this past July. Soon the tower would come down and the drilling pad would be complete, waiting to be tapped and sucked. Off in the distance closer to the nearby town of Prosperity was a flare lighting up the horizon like a stationary Armageddon. How anyone slept with that in their back yard was beyond me. I ignored it all and resumed my walk up hill. Once I got up there I was sure I wouldn't be able to hear a thing over the party noises. Then the revving of a truck engine, poorly muffled, quelled the industrial noises and I knew I was right.

My walk was brisk and much quicker than I'd expected. As I crept up the hill through our empty pastures and passed over my property line into the McAllister's tree lines, the sound of voices hovering at the top of the hill grew louder. I heard the engine of a quad and the same loud truck once more, and there were shadows moving around the flicker of a fire.

We had often heard parties go late into the night from our peaceful bedroom. It hadn't bothered us, even with the sounds of the occasional dirt bike and quad. Sometimes there were gunshots or fireworks. Those cracks in the night concerned us, but we never worried too much because most weekends there were gunshots heard throughout the valley as neighbors shot practice targets or clay pigeons. It always seemed like a way for people to establish a diameter of space for themselves, like they were marking their territory.

Finally, with some heavy breathing, I reached the top of the hill and made my way through the trees. I had a flashback of a KKK picnic in the woods that my

grandfather had once taken me to. I'd stayed far away from those types and I never really got the chance to ask my father if he shared Pap's beliefs or had allowed me to go to see and form my own opinion of it. It just wasn't a question I could bear to ask him. I didn't have any black friends growing up, but I didn't have any reason not to other than black people just didn't come to live in the area. Eventually some moved into houses nearby, but the locals never failed to show their disapproval. The nightmare of a burning cross in their front yards was a reality here. If I found out that this party was something similar, I'd leave. I'd heard enough chatter portraying people of color as objects or animals and not people. Never could make sense of that. I'd need to know if this party was a similar thing, though I didn't really have a reason to assume it was. Either way, I didn't want to think about dealing with clan gatherings near the farm.

Based on what my Pap had told me about the clan from his day, today's clan activities were focused solely on race and white supremacy, but when there were absolutely no black folk in the area, when he was just a little boy, the clan behaved more as a religious supremacy group, battling with the other churches in the area. Religion wasn't so important anymore. Lots of folks still went to church but most disputes between folks nowadays were property disputes or damage from loose livestock that damaged property. Bulls sometimes like to eat fruit and leaves from young trees, which can leave them looking like the Grim Reaper had a drunken field day with it.

As for disputes, the past week had been peaceful for me. Vern hadn't been back to work the whole week. I'd asked Bill and Dave if they'd heard anything about where'd he'd been but they just said nope. I figured he was on vacation, keeping his

bruised face out of sight and maybe going through details with the drilling company over his lease. He could stay away and feed off the money he got from his lease for all I cared.

I made my way through the trees and entered the clearing where the fire burned, incinerating anything that entered it.

"Hey there, Bobbo," Ray's voice came from a black silhouette directly in front of the fire. Nobody had ever called me that before, so I attributed it to a certain level of beer-blood and other substances, whatever they might were.

"Ray," I said with a nod.

I thought it was him, though I couldn't be sure. It sounded like his voice, just a little cheerier than his gruff, emaciated, growl. Still, I couldn't see the mouth and face of the voice and couldn't be sure until I was able to swing around to an angle where the fire's glow lit at least half the face of my greeter like the sun on the half moon.

"You're late, guy," the voice said again.

"I'm sorry. The old lady needed some time with me before I could get out. It is Saturday night after all," I said.

The Ray McAllister-voiced shadow came toward me, a beer bottle silhouette in its hand. I sidestepped so the fire would light his face. As I did, the shadow's left hand came out and grabbed my shoulder and clenched hard.

"We're running low on beer," Ray said. He stood in front of me, the blazing fire to my left, his right, and he somehow looked normal there, half in shadow and half out, like an old cowboy in the night from some spaghetti western starring John

Wayne. The flicking lights of the fire highlighted only half his features and covered blemishes, unshaven scruff, and kept his face in a static shadow. He was grinning.

"Guess I'll just stick to the flask in my pocket then?" I added. It wasn't clear to me whether this was a joke or he was trying to get me to head back home. I thought offering my flask up would force a straight answer from him. The flask of Wild Turkey wasn't something I usually had on my person, but tonight I brought it just in case they were drinking something that might have some spiked mystery ingredient. If the McAllisters were fresh out of beer, then that could mean that they'd move on to something slightly or entirely more wicked and unforgiving. If Ray had been looking for magic mushrooms the other day then surely there'd be somewhat of an assortment o drugs among his friends.

The half of a serious smirk I could see on his face curved up and he laughed.

"I'm just fuckin' with ya, Bobbo. Me and my brother are heading to town to the Wal-Mart down by Cabela's to reload. Might make a stop along the way, if you know what I mean."

Cabela's was just ten minutes over the Pennsylvania - West Virginia border past Dallas Pike. I was afraid that what he was referring to as the other stop was the Body Shop. I'd decline of course, or maybe I'd just head home to Dee. Beer couldn't be found anywhere at this hour of the night in PA. State regulations and liquor laws were tight. Maybe that was a good thing around here, but half the night's money spent wound up in West Virginia because of it. Wal-Mart was open 24/7 and the Beer Store, or Beck's, weren't open past nine or so on a Saturday night.

"Oh, well I guess I can head back home for a bit or stick around and stoke the fire," I said.

“Nonsense, you’re coming with us,” Ray said.

“Well, I’ve got a half case of Miller back at the house, will that do it?” I asked.

I wasn’t about to ride along to West Virginia with Ray and any one of his brothers. Dee would kill me if she found out. Especially if we wound up at the Body Shop of all places. I guess it’s not so uncommon to stop there for twenty minutes if you’re passing for beer at the Wal-Mart. I had probably done it myself once.

Judging by his jolliness and the dark pupil of his right eye, visible only by the fire light, a pupil so dark it seemed like part of the night around us, he was already drunk and unfit for the road. That would never change any of their minds though, and to be completely honest I’d done a fair share of drunk driving myself, though it was years ago when I was more like the McAllisters, mangy and wild. Back then most of my friends already had DUIs. They would have me drive most times because I didn’t have one yet. And if you kept to the right roads and paid extra close attention to what you were doing, you’d never see a cop. They didn’t spend much time out this way unless there was a wreck. For the most part we lived in a lawless land. West Alexander had a few cops, but if you stayed back on the deepest roads you wouldn’t really see them.

Ray chugged the remainder of his dark bottle and tossed it into the fire. He had a sideways smile but his strut was still straight. Maybe he’d be okay to drive. It was still early in the night and I was certain that he was a veteran of these parties.

“Mikey!” he yelled.

As he walked off in search of his brother I noticed the rest of the party. I was on the wrong side of the fire—the side where the woodpile was. It was mostly old beat up furniture and wooden palettes. Someone must work at a distribution and

shipping center or they knew where to find them. Some logs were there too, but they looked like they'd been sitting in a marsh or a bog for a long time. They were still dark and wet. The breeze picked up and the fire roared with the influx of oxygen. Everybody was far away from the fire and nearer an opening in the woods that lead down to Ray's house. There were six trucks parked there, a big blue Chevy Silverado, extended crew cab and bed, its four doors open and its sound system blaring the hottest country tunes from the favored radio station, Froggy. The song playing was something about driving on back roads. I felt like that was all people like us thought about. I was sick of today's country music. The messages I heard in it were always about being an American or drinking or driving tractors. All well and good. To think what outsiders think we cherish. Maybe they were right about most of us. Maybe we used this music like a manual for life. It was bullshit. Most people around here were trying to make this their image. They dressed like cowboys and rednecks, chewed tobacco, owned farms like mine and didn't use it for a living. I fell in that category for sure, but at least I recognized it. We were all poser cowboys. We were north of the Mason-Dixon line. What other identity could we have? There were hippies out here somewhere, but they kept to themselves. The country music coming from the truck made me cringe. I saw all the guys around it and knew they were comfortable with their image. They believed in it. I did not. I'd been digging up older tunes by singers like Hank Williams and Johnny Cash, a little Merle Haggard and even listening to old Americana like Woody Guthrie, and Doc Watson, the good stuff, a real nostalgia trip, the stuff my Pap listened to.

I thought about sinking back into the woods before Ray came back and scooped me into a truck, but instead I walked past the fire towards the trucks and

music and other men. They ignored me for the most part and stood against their trucks smoking cigarettes, Phillies blunts, old cigars, and a joint that hovered in somewhere.

"You Bobby?" a man asked. He wore a trucker hat low over his face so I couldn't see it.

"That's right."

"I'm Colt," he said. He lifted his face and I swore to myself that the night and fire were playing tricks on me.

What surprised me most about Colt was that he was an almost exact clone of Ray. Same face, body build, and crooked grin.

"Ray's brother, I can tell." I pointed to him like an oaf while I unscrewed the cap of my flask and sipped it.

"Twin brother," he said. "To be exact." He pulled a cigarette from behind his ear, stuck it in his mouth and flicked a hunter-orange Zippo in his palm and lit it, inhaling deeply.

"Didn't know any of you boys were twins," I said. This bothered me a little. Why twins should bug me I didn't know. I felt such a distrust of Ray growing in my gut somehow that for there to be two of him was just ridiculous. I could accept that he had three brothers and that they'd all be similar, but two of them having shared their mother's womb seemed beyond possibility. What woman could birth two men like Ray McAllister? I barely knew the guy, but I knew enough about his behavior to reach what I thought was a fair judgment.

"Yep," he said, holding the cigarette between two fingers and watching the smoke he exhaled. "Your last name is Miller, right?"



The other men around us were deep in conversation and Colt moved towards me then and took me aside to the bed of the blue Silverado.

"Miller's right. Pretty common name, why?"

Colt, though he looked just like Ray, moved differently. He moved more like liquid while Ray moved like tumbling rocks.

"I have a second cousin named Carl Miller. Know him? He lived out near Hickory."

Carl Miller was, in fact, my uncle. He lived in Hickory and for the longest time helped out at an apple orchard called Shreve's. He and my father didn't get along, though the reason had evaded me. I didn't press anyone about it.

"Second cousin, really? He's my uncle. Kind of estranged though."

"That's too bad. Anyhow, put her there, Cuz," he said, holding out a hand.

"Colt!" I heard Ray's more hoarse voice call out from the front end of the Chevy. "Let's go!"

Before I could consider shaking hands, Colt yelled back, "Coming!"

He walked back around the truck. "You coming too?" he asked as he walked.

Finding out that there were more branches of the Miller family, and right next door, I had to go along and see if they were the other side of the family, the one that Dad always grimaced at when his brother's name came up. They weren't too distant in relation from what Colt said, but I'd never met or heard of any McAllisters. Sometimes I wondered if it was my branch of the Miller family that had been shunned. Nobody ever called me up or wanted to stop by the farm. And I never went to our family reunions, held at the fire hall out in Amity. Chances were that

Colt's Carl Miller was a completely different Miller. Like I'd said, it was a common name in the area.

Besides all that, if I headed home now Dee would think she'd been right and she'd only resent me further, tell me how big a fool I was.

"Sure," I said to Colt. "Why the hell not? Might be fun."

I envisioned sitting around the fire drinking beer, speaking occasionally when spoken to by men I hoped wouldn't recognize and berate me over my encounter with Arnold Hayes last spring outside the municipal building, not hauling ass at a million miles an hour to West Virginia for beer in the backseat of a drunk redneck's truck with his hunting dog named Kugo. From my seat in the back of the truck, I had no way of seeing anything outside in the night. To ease my anxiety I helped myself to my flask.

"What kind of name is Kugo, anyhow?" I asked.

Kugo stuck his nose to my face, smelling the odor of the whiskey. I blew in his nose slightly and he licked his chops and partly shut his eyes. Then he sneezed.

Colt remained silent. The two of them hadn't really spoken about anything other than the party and what kind of beer to get. We were getting Milwaukee's Best Ice, it was around fourteen bucks for a thirty pack. Couldn't beat that, unless you didn't want a massive headache in the morning.

"Kugo?" Ray said. He had to think about it. "Just some made up bullshit, I guess."

"What's the other dog's name?" I asked.

"Red," Ray said. "My first dog's name was Red and I just liked it. Both are Irish Setters."

"I'm guessing the other one has red fur?"

Kugo, sitting beside me had white fur with some red patches.

"You got it," Ray said.

"Do a lot of hunting?" I asked. It was the easiest go-to question to ask, depending on the answer you could tell if folks were sportsman, family providers, or murderers.

"Of course," he and Colt both said.

"What else are guns for?" Colt asked.

"I can think of a few things," Ray murmured.

"Wouldn't know," I said. "What do you hunt?"

"Bobby, you ask a lot of questions. You know that?" Ray said.

"Just making conversation," I said. "And besides, I'm a curious guy and can't help it."

"Put it this way," Colt said. "If it's in the woods we hunt it."

"Sasquatch too?" I asked.

"Got four of them on our trophy wall," Ray said.

We crossed the PA border into West Virginia. The large *Welcome to Wild and Wonderful West Virginia* sign passed quickly by in the headlight glare.

Colt muttered something to Ray. Being in the backseat made it hard for me to hear anything they discussed in the front of the truck.

Ray said, loudly as though he'd already said it, "No, Colt. Mikey said he'd kick our asses if we didn't hurry right back."

"Come on, just for ten minutes," Colt whined back just as loudly. "It might be more than worth it."

"What's up?" I asked. I didn't like being kept out of the conversation, especially if it involved another special stop.

"Curious Bobby in the backseat again," said Ray.

"I said I can't help it."

"Remember that extra stop I mentioned?"

"Yes."

Colt turned in his seat to face me in the unlit space of the backseat where I sat.

"The Body Shop," Colt said.

A long pause. In my throat I suppressed a groan.

"Never been there," I said.

"Really?" Ray asked.

"Bullshit," Colt said.

"Honest."

"Hear that, Ray?" Colt said. "Now we gotta go."

The dog, obviously a talker, barked once as though in agreement.

Slightly confused and feeling the whiskey more, I looked at Kugo and shook my head, scolding him for encouraging them.

"Even Kugo agrees," Colt said.

I sat up and looked out the front window from where I sat. There was nothing but illuminated blacktop with double yellow streaks and a solid white streak coming at us.

"Then," Ray spoke, "It's settled.

I should have said I had been there, many, many times.

We got off at the Dallas Pike exit and the Silverado swerved around the crumbling roads of the truck stop exit until the headlights were resting in front of a gray concrete wall. My stomach was mixed up from the movement. Its contents weren't pleased. Ray turned the truck off then he turned to me in the only light available coming from a lamppost somewhere outside the building, and I saw his silhouetted form once more. I began to believe that this was a man who naturally dwelt in the darkness of the Earth. My whiskey dreaming was helping me see him as he might really be: a man whose shadow was his body.

He said to me, "Coming in?"

Colt was already outside the truck, his door slammed behind him. In a rush, he was off to the doorway. Two other trucks in the lot sat dead in the dark. This was all very familiar. I reached for Kugo and pulled him to me.

"Someone's gotta stay with Kugo," I said.

"Well," Ray said. "I'm going in to make sure Colt stays for no more than ten minutes. Holler if you need anything. Be back before long." He grabbed a green pouch that looked like a moneybag and took it with him. Some wallet that was, he must have had all his life savings in it. It bulged.

He followed Colt in the same manner and, before I knew he was gone, I was sitting in the truck's backseat in the dark with Kugo, panting slightly and locking his chops every once in a while. Kugo lay down and ignored me. It was only now, motionless in the parking lot that I noticed how the interior of the truck smelled strongly of cigarette smoke.

“Don’t care for me much, do you?” I asked the dog.

Kugo sighed.

A series of clicking noises came from the truck somewhere as it cooled off and beyond the crew cab I could hear semis Jake braking on the highway suspended over Dallas Pike.

It didn’t seem right to me that I had actually arrived in this parking lot on this night, a night when I was leery of even leaving my wife because of past nights spent at this very spot. I didn’t like it when everything felt like fate. I was stranded in a strange truck with a strange dog and a stomach full of strange liquids, just outside the walls of the Body Shop, where I tried hard not to imagine Colt or Ray lounging with nearly nude women, their attraction coming only from appealing lingerie. I hoped the McAllister twins would have no stories to boast when they returned, but I knew that might be too much to ask. It was my own fault that I’d tagged along. I’d just have to sit here for ten minutes, which would soon shift into half an hour.

Kugo scooted away from me and gazed out his window towards the entrance to the Body Shop and whined. A whine and glance at me let me know that he was jealous they didn’t serve his kind inside. Was he neutered? Maybe he wouldn’t be interested anyway. A swig from my polished flask entered my mouth. And then another.

I got out of the truck and headed to the main office of the Body Shop. Figured I could grab a pack of smokes to help my tension and to help the time pass. I hadn’t smoked one for a long time, but the smell of the truck was too much for me.

I walked in and found a cigarette vending machine in the shop’s lobby. The man behind the counter nodded to me and I nodded back, gesturing to the machine.

He went back to reading whatever dirty magazine he had hidden out of sight. Probably bought it from the porn shop across the way. It was probably a habit of his. He probably had a family back home and had to keep his mind occupied and his body kept away from the basement of the shop, where nude women ready to give anything you wanted rested like lecherous demons. That wasn't fair I knew. They had their own families.

I pulled the box of Marlboro reds from the machine's slot and felt in my pocket. When it came to habits, I figured we all had our own, some stranger than others. Some that made us feel secure, like nothing had ever changed from the time we first started them. It was a habit of mine from when I was about eight to carry a green aluminum waterproof match canister, kept stocked with strike-anywhere matches. Which, with enough practice I had managed to become master of lighting with the tips of my two front teeth.

The guy behind the counter of the Body Shop had no teeth. Why do they call it a toothbrush and not a teethbrush? Ask Chuck here at the Body Shop. I prayed I'd never lose all my teeth. I might never be able to light matches the way I liked if I did.

The match canister had started out being for camping and hunting with my dad. Can't get a fire going easily without dry matches. Dry matches made life that much easier. And so when I was younger I determined I'd always have dry matches because, lit with your teeth they were a fun party trick but also because you never knew when you might need dry matches. Right now was a good time to have them.

I stepped outside and I unscrewed the cap and flicked the white-headed tip of one of the matches quickly against the edge of one big tooth. A crackle, flame. I lit my cigarette.

I was twenty-one years old when I came home from college for good and all I'd learned was that there many different types of people in the world, not one of them was more right than the other, and I learned how to speak English in a way that made me seem like I wasn't good ol' boy from the rustbelt. I'd evaded the Washington, Pa—Washpa for short—drawl, feeling no need to say things like *warsh* instead of *wash*. Or *yins* instead of *you*. Or call Pittsburgh Pictsburgh. Or say *ax* instead of *ask*. *Expescially* instead of *Especialy*. When I returned, I had little learning left to do. I knew how to do everything that needed done on the farm. Mostly, I had stayed away from the farm as much as I could in those days, and every now and then I'd find myself here, in front of the Body Shop, too drunk to even remember anything valuable about the place. That was probably the reason I wound up here a few months after marrying Dee. I hadn't learned much about my time as a young renegade.

Wasn't anyone I could really talk to help me figure things out. If I tried to talk to Dad, or any of the guys at work, they turned a cold shoulder, unsure of how to deal with my problems. Men were used to keeping their emotions to themselves and if someone showed theirs, their immediate reaction would be to shrug shoulders and say, "you'll figure it out."

The last time I came here, before the wedding, loaded on whiskey, not too different from tonight, maybe that's why this all comes back now. Whiskey dreams, coming back to me. I came in and asked the mechanic at the desk if I could see Carly. There was no one else in sight, no chance of blowing the brothel's cover. Joey, or Ken, or whatever his name was, said, "Sure," his moustache and goatee all I



remembered about his face. He got up and led me through a door in the back that led to a lower basement level.

In the basement there was nothing but a small room with a few couches and a TV and then a long hall of doors. The place didn't look like a brothel really. Sometimes there'd be a guy sitting on the couch watching TV. The women at the brothel stayed in their rooms while they were there. Each door had a different plaque on it denoting brooms, or storage, or employees only, and so on. It just looked like the basement and break room of an auto body shop. Wood paneled walls and all.

Ken led me to the Employees Only door. He knocked. It opened. I went inside. It was dark inside and it smelled like someone had spilled a bottle of beer and never cleaned it up. I imagined the floor being sticky linoleum. The lights flicked on and I saw a bed near the far wall. The room was nothing special. Just about the size of a standard bedroom. There was a vanity and a chest of drawers off to one side. Perfume bottles and lingerie littering the surfaces. There were a few pictures of kids stuck to the vanity mirror. This was her office. Those pictures bothered the hell out of me. Carly must not have given a hoot if her clients knew she had kids. I guess I didn't care that much, just seemed strange for her to put those pictures out in the open. A woman lay on the bed and a TV was on, muted and flashing black and white on her. She said "Hi, Bobby," and asked me to come sit on the bed. I obliged. Most of this place remained swallowed by the whiskey or whatever it was I'd been drinking. 151. Something I'd gotten from a friend of my dad's. Maybe it was just beer. Maybe I was high.

"Carly?" I said.

“Mm hmm,” she mused.

I sat there on the bed and she sat up. She was wearing a silky gown, see through, no bra underneath. Dee’s face, scowling and unhappy, popped into my mind.

The room smelled like cigarettes.

“How are you, Bobby?” Carly asked.

I’d been to see her a few times and we only talked about local news, jobs, kids, or construction on I-70. I usually didn’t have to say much to her. She liked to talk and I felt like she’d talk and talk so long as she could keep a man from actually wanting something physical from her.

I just shrugged and grimaced. I was sure she knew that if I was in a good emotional space I wouldn’t have shown up.

“I’m feeling sleepy tonight, Bobby. Wanna watch this movie with me?”

“Depends,” I said. “What movie?” I was still wearing my jeans and neon-green shirt from work, sweatier and dirtier from a night at the bar and a scuffle out back with someone I’d gone to high school with who hated my face. I probably smelled. My beard was probably greasy and frizzed out in most directions.

“I dunno,” She said. “I’m not really paying attention to it.”

“What were you doing then?”

“Thinking.”

“About?”

“Moving.”

“Where to?”

“Closer to Pictsburgh.”

“Why?”

She just sighed. It was obvious why. No real job. Her kids went to a crappy school. She was too free spirited to be stuck here. I wondered if she'd continue whoring if she moved. I wasn't really sure if this was her only occupation or not. Just staying in this room with her for an hour would cost me more than I could afford after a long night of drinking. The rates were low because most people who came to The Body Shop were low on funds, but I was especially low. Few people had a lot of money to blow on this kind of stuff but we did it anyway. They'd buy nothing but hotdogs and knock-off Kraft Mac n' Cheese so they could keep their habits or feed their family, or both.

And the conversation went like that. It became more about her problems than mine. Not that I had any real ones. I was getting ready to marry Dee. But I was also at a whorehouse. And Dee's mother was constantly asking when she'd have a grand kid after we married. Each time I thought about kids I thought about my father and the way he looked at my siblings, like he wished they'd just disappear. The way he looked at me was like he didn't see me as a kid, not ever. He looked at me like I was him trying to become something all over again. I never wanted to look at my own kids that way. So I decided I'd probably never have them. And if that were true, why should I really marry at all?

“What'll I do when you're gone?” I asked her.

“Stay home with your wife and your family. Or, get a divorce and go back to school or live with the Amish. Do what ever you want. I'm sick of doing what others want. How bout you?” She slapped my kneecap.

We sat on the bed, propped up side by side against the headboard. Me in my work clothes and her in hers. I stole a glance at her breasts. Her nipples were puffy and sad through the purple silk gown. I felt no desire there. We just watched the movie on her old black and white TV. Muted.

I asked her if she could turn the sound on.

"The speakers busted," she said.

I slapped her kneecap and said I was heading home where I could watch TV for free with the sound on.

Years passed since that night. I can't say for sure when that night was. Or if it had even happened that way. I figured it must have been the last or one of the last times I'd come here.

Kugo barked inside the truck, and I realized I was slowly falling asleep as I leaned against the truck. My cigarette had long since gone out and fallen from my hand to the pavement. I had been staring blindly at the door of the Body Shop. Ray and Colt came out, waved at me and walked toward me quietly. Colt was muttering something under his breath. I caught a few words that sounded like cowboys and driller trash. I had no idea how much time had passed. The whisky was doing its job and I appreciated that.

"Worth it?" I asked.

"Yeah, Colt. Was it worth it?" Ray must have sat in the area with the couches. He chuckled. He had his green moneybag and stashed it somewhere under the seat as we all crowded in. Kugo was wagging his tail.

Colt stared at Ray. "That's for me to know and for you to shut the fuck up about. Let's get that beer and get back before Mikey comes looking for us."

When we got to Wal-Mart, I stayed in the truck with Kugo again, and Ray and Colt went in to get four cases of beer, which they returned with in a flash, or so it seemed. They put the cases of beer in the truck bed and we got back on the road. I was beginning to wonder just why it was that I had gone with them, or why they invited me to the party at all.

“So’d you guys bring me along to watch after Kugo here, or what?” I asked.

They waited a few minutes before answering.

“I’ll just come right out with it, Bobby,” Colt said. “Seems to me we might be family, and if not family, then we’re still neighbors, and we wondered if you needed any help with the farm, to put it blunt.”

“You brought me along so you could ask to help me with my farm?” I said.

“We see some potential in that place,” Ray said.

“Potential for what? If you wanna start some grow-op then I’m afraid I have to decline.”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Colt said.

“But if you change your mind—“ Colt cut Ray off, and he sniggered.

“We could help you raise a new herd of cattle.”

“Yeah it’s no big deal really,” said Colt.

“We just finished up helping out our other brothers setting up shop in Washington. Could use something else to keep ourselves busy now,” said Ray. “And, if the farm is anything like the old days, we’ll get some beef to put in our freezer for our efforts.”

"I have been thinking about getting the farm going again. I could probably use some help." I felt touched that they were more like the neighbors I remembered from so long ago, willing to come help out and receive what they needed in return.

"Figured you might not start the place up again, what with all the drilling and what not. Heard some pretty nasty stories about gunk in the water and cattle falling over dead," Ray said.

"That's a concern," I said.

"We've got some money set aside," Colt said. "In case you need some money to invest."

"Well, to tell you boys the honest truth. I don't quite own the farm myself. It's still in my dad's name. But I'm working on that and when it's mine I can do anything I want with it. I'd appreciate your help for sure."

"You don't own it?" Ray asked.

"Not yet. My dad has kept it in his name. He takes care of all the taxes. I'm really just the caretaker."

"Where's your dad these days?" Colt asked.

"Lives down in Virginia."

"How's he got the money to pay for the farm taxes?" Ray asked.

"He inherited some money when my grandfather died. Never did find out where that money came from. But he did have work on the side too. He ran an equipment rental company that he started when I let for college. Nothing major, just smaller stuff for people who needed to do jobs around their property. Roto-tillers and the like. Sold all that stuff before he left for Virginia where he and my mom live now. She's still working. Driving buses for a school down there."

"So you're gonna inherit some money too when he passes on?" Colt asked.

"No clue. The money he got from my Pap might be something he's kept stashed away. I think it was money to be spent on the farm. So when I get the deed to the place I might get that money. I don't think my dad has ever used it for anything other than to start a little equipment rental business he had before he left."

"Seems like it's time you got your farm put in your name," Ray added.

"You sound just like my wife," I told him.

I caught his eyes in the rearview mirror, refracting light from passing highway lampposts. There was no color there in the orange haze the lights flashed. Eyes like coal. Were they waiting to burn?

"Don't make me pull over," he said.

I laughed to show my discomfort.

"So, Ray. What kind of business do your brothers own?"

"Nothing fancy," Ray said. "Just a car detailing service. All those out of town boys from Texas and the south have these big fancy trucks that need cleaning. That's all. They're gonna take off with this business though. You'll see."

I could see how that might be true. Especially the rich bosses who could afford things the roads here had never seen before.

"You know, I'm about to set up some coyote traps around the farm, just to make sure it's safe for calves," I said.

Some help might be useful. Dee didn't usually help me out with anything but the horses, and she wasn't about to help me trap coyotes.

"We can help you with that," Ray said. "Hell. Why trap 'em? We can just set out and shoot the fuckers."

"I guess," I said. "Why don't you guys come by sometime on an afternoon and we'll talk more about it. Like I said, I've got to talk it over with the wife."

Colt snickered. Ray shook his head real slow from side to side.

Things went on like that and I was amazed that Ray managed to make the night pass by seamlessly, no swaying or delayed response. Then I remembered that I'd been feeding my own buzz with my whiskey. Maybe I just hadn't noticed or felt those jolts of drunk driving.

Coming around a bend on Route 18 past Prosperity near the town park, a deer's form entered the stream of light from the truck's muzzle and the right headlight disappeared just as the truck lurched back, throwing my head back against the headrest of the seat. The truck absorbed the impact and sent it into my spine. The sudden crunching grind of it made me clench my teeth. The deer's dark figure flung off to the side of the road like a shadow puppet thrown from its stage. Kugo whined.

"Fuck!" Ray yelled.

He brought the truck to a stop on the side of the road and let it idle.

A swarm of curses left his lips, almost indistinguishable but with a highly polished meaning. He swung his door open. Colt did too. They both got out and so did I, not wanting to be the odd one out.

"God damnit, motherfucker!" Ray shouted back toward the convulsing dark deer that writhed in the ditch. It was a buck, a six-point, though it appeared as though half of an antler was dangling, snapped by the force of the truck hitting it.

Ray got up in the bed of the truck by stepping on the rear wheel and hauling himself in. He rustled through whatever he had in the bed. He stood up holding a



shovel with a gleaming silvery head attached; a shovel they'd probably used to load gravel from the road from the other morning. He jumped the back gate and landed on his feet with relative ease. Colt stood by and watched, his arms folded over his chest, as though this was normal.

"What are you doing, Ray?" I asked.

"I'll show you," he said.

He stomped off up the dark road, the truck's engine still puttering away, and I followed.

The deer lay still, its back crooked and restraining it from standing up on its back legs. Its front legs still worked, but regardless it looked pitiful because its left antler hung down the side of its head.

"Ray—"

"Six-point asshole. I'll show you some glory!" Ray roared at the struggling buck.

He brought the head of the shovel high over his shoulder and swung it through the air, the shovel's blade hitting the buck in the broad side of its neck just below the busted antler. Blood spurted out and the once bright shovelhead was obscured with a dark red coat of blood. The buck toppled and became stone.

Ray spat at the deer and left it where it lay.

"You see that, Colt? That's why I sharpen my shovels." A wicked grin spread over his face.

"What's the matter, Bobbo," he asked me. I was still staring at the buck. I knew it was beyond help as it was, and that it needed to be put out of misery, but the violent end full of cursing was beyond reason.

“That might be the first deer ever to die by shovel,” I said.

“You think I did that without practice?” He cackled.

I hoped he was kidding. It was so impractical to use a shovel as an axe.

A car’s engine was fast approaching; it was like a car I’d never heard before, a tight growl ready to snarl. Two blue halogen lights appeared from the direction we’d been headed.

Ray’s shovel glinted silver and crimson as the light passed over it. The car didn’t slow and I caught a side view of it as it passed: cherry red, low to the ground, a profile like a racecar, a little yellow shield with a bucking horse on it, a spoiler like an airplane wing. It veered away as fast it came, disappearing quickly around the bend of road where we’d hit the buck.

“Was that a Ferrari?” I asked.

As if it was supposed to happen, rain fell.

*I stepped out of my truck, the pitter-patter of raindrops, silent before impact for a mile through the sky, falling around me and engulfing the turf. Dirt turf. It wasn’t that old really. It lay just a few hundred meters from the coal mine vent shaft. It was like the beacon I could see at the opposite end of the valley, but this one was much closer and I felt it’s pulsating red light radiate through every membrane of my body, burning its way in deep as though it was the light of God.*

*The light revealed my cigarette smoke as it blinked. Red smoke, filling in with holes of rain-cooled air. The raindrops made craters in each planet of thick smoke. I thought of Mars and what it must feel like to be so cold and red and always behind the*

*Earth in line, the Earth so vibrant and full of breath. Then no more smoke filled my mouth and I knew a drop had smashed into the tip of my cigarette.*

*I relit it with three matches from my little waterproof canister. I walked up to the base of the operation. What does it feel like to rape the Earth? These men did it all day, even if they didn't see it that way. Getting gas should be more like getting laid by a whore. You pay for what you get.*

*I put my face up to the sky and let the rain fall over it. After a few minutes of watching the smoke go up from my wet face, I reached up and tugged my face, releveled by grabbing hold of the longer parts of my beard and pulling down. Thick curled strands of my beard became taut and my skin went with it and then my skull and then my sight. My neck appreciated the lack of work on its part. My mind cursed at what it saw, wishing to remain gazing up into black rain clouds.*

*Dee would still be in bed when I got back. I hadn't been able to sleep after the McAllisters dropped me off. I got in my truck and went for a ride in the rain. Somehow I ended up coming by the ventilation shaft, silenced by the rain. A new drilling tower had been erected a ways up the road from it. The well being made for the lease that Steve Price had signed.*

*McAllisters would be my farm hands. Violent, shady, and combustible shadows would handle the meat I'd sell to people miles around. Thoughts like that are over the top. They were just local farm boys looking for some extra pocket money.*

*The light atop the tower beamed over my face again. I'd hoped the rain and cool air would wash the whiskey from my veins somehow and steer my mind straight. There was a lease for a gas well, a near-instant source of new money, still sealed away in its envelope on my kitchen table. Any other person would tear it open, sign it and*

*send it on its merry way, but I wasn't convinced by the promise it held. I wasn't even a full-fledged farmer. How could I turn that down so easily? That kind of money. What would it buy me?*