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“Mean When Hungry and Other Stories” is a collection of short stories set in Appalachia. Here there are mining strikes, bootleggers, lovers of Colonial times, and formidable dogs in short story form, told through a variety of different narrative structures.

MEAN WHEN HUNGRY AND OTHER STORIES

by

Judy Caldwell-Midero

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by JUDY CALDWELL-MIDERO has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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MEAN WHEN HUNGRY

I

Lovey knew the mine had exploded the minute she heard a knock on the door and her mother's primitive yell in the blue cold hour before sunrise. Lovey could not move, felt pressed down to the warm spot her body had hollowed out in the bed. December is so dark, the sun arrives late and confuses the mind as to what time it may be, but she reckoned the knock came an hour or so after her daddy had gone down underground for a long day of work. Her father had been without work for weeks, long weeks the miners had been on strike and Christmas was coming. He was getting antsy with no work and his wife despaired over stretching the food to last until things picked up, despaired over having him constantly in the way as she went about her business in the small three-room house.

The time her father was without work, was, for Lovey, a respite from the job of worrying that she had taken up at a young age. Walls caved in and earth shifted regularly in her ten-year-old head, trapping him underground because she knew it could and would occur, and she was a child who worried. My worrywart, Mama called her, but the newspapers did not lie and Lovey had been reading them since she was seven. "Five Men trapped in Rose's; No Signs of Life", and "Explosion Traps Logan Miners." Sitting

curled up in her daddy's lap while he read the paper she had seen the headlines with her own eyes. A cavern is like a medieval dungeon she reckoned, and pictured her daddy winding his way down Blue Creek Mine each day, a knight in a labyrinth, winding and winding down deep and then winding back up at the end of the day, not a headline in the newspaper.

No one knocks on a door before dawn unless something unspeakable has happened. There was a knock that brought the news about John Wesley, the brother she'd had who died when she was three. He'd gone down into one of the big Huntington operations at 17 and had not made it out of a surprise methane blast after six months on the job. She was too young to remember what John Wesley looked like when he smiled. She knew John Wesley from a vague memory of being tossed in the air and caught, and by the photograph on the wall in the living room, sober and dark-eyed, with their mother's sunken cheeks.

"Well, who's fault was it the mine exploded?" She'd asked Carol when she found out what had happened to John Wesley. Carol didn't want to talk to her about it, but Lovey pressed.

"The energy company said it was a sudden surge of natural gas," Carol said. "But the government investigated it and gave them two-hundred and some citations."

To Lovey, John Wesley was a sudden surge of natural gas, a citation. He was the most dire of the headlines, and he was in her gut and made her know that her know that it had happened again, and on her father's first day back on the job, no less. She also knew that her mother and sister were already plotting how best to keep it from her because she

was the baby. She would get there to see how she could help, Lovey vowed to herself, covers still up around her chin.

That early morning Johnny Mayo's footsteps had echoed through the house just like every morning of the world except Sundays, gathering his lunch box and his red and black check Woolrich coat, her mother's voice a low and happy murmur as the front door shut and his boots crunched the frost-covered grass outside Lovey's bedroom. No sooner had his truck rumbled to life and tore out of the gravel driveway, it seemed, then the knock came; Lovey figured no more than an hour had passed since her father had gone. Carol was up already, but Lovey could only lie there underneath the pleasant weight of the heavy quilt, staring at the same corner of window until she willed some weak sunlight to filter through the curtain to give her strength to get out of bed. She was up and shivering, alone with her visible breath puffing out into the cold bedroom.

"Mornin' Johnny," Calvin Harris walked beside her father into the great mine; their metal lunch boxes and thermoses of coffee were nearly identical. "

"Mornin' Calvin." A nod and wide, crooked-toothed grin from Johnny, with his clean morning face and red and black-checked coat.

Lovey walked on tiptoe, crept toward the familiar morning talking of her mother and older sister Carol. "Take her up to LaVerne's and you come back for me as quick as you can, hear me?" Lovey heard Mama say, and good Carol did not say anything. Lovey knew they could see her feet underneath the curtain so she flung it aside and stepped into the stove heat of the big room. There was coffee, Lovey smelled, but no oatmeal, only already-cold biscuits from her father's breakfast in the wee hours of the morning. Carol

and Mama both had their hair skinned back in ponytails. Their faces were bloodless and Lovey knew she was right. “What’s happened? Is it Daddy?”

“Baby, you go on and get dressed. I’m sending you up to visit LaVerne today. I have some things I need to attend to.” Mama said. Her mama’s face was set in rock. Her craggy cheekbones were white pale and she did not meet her younger daughter’s gaze but for a flash second, enough to for Lovey to see the weight in them. Her mother did not want to ask any questions. But asking is all Lovey wanted to do.

“What’s happened down at Blue? Why are we not going to school today?” Lovey spat out, but Mama was pouring herself some coffee, her back to them.

“You will mind what I say. There is no school, not today, Lovey Ann.” Mama still had her back to them. Then, turning, turning slowly around and looking old, she said to the air, “You make sure that little girl eats, Carol.”

Carol swatted Lovey’s bottom, not hard but playful, trying to act old and grabbed her sister’s wrist, pulling her toward their bedroom. Lovey made herself heavy and dug in her heels. “Carol, has the mine fallen in?”

Carol was busy pulling a sweater over her own head, and then a sweater over Lovey’s head, both of their breaths hung in the air like fog in the bedroom.

“Put on your pants and your warm socks, Love.” Carol told her. “And your fur cap. We’re taking the mule.”

“Carol, you tell me who that was knocking this morning.”

“Hush. Mommy says not to talk about it. You get your fur cap.”

II

The mule Andy could take them where an automobile could not on a day like that, more safely and without as much jostling. The main route had been iced-over for days, days since the sun had slipped behind the mountains and left everything in the blue cold, and had Lovey and her sister set out that morning in an automobile, they would have been just as cold and probably ended up stranded round the curve by the mill road. So, they went by mule, winding up and around toward their mother's aunt LaVerne's, the two story white house that peeked out atop the mountain and that could be seen from the main road down below on a clear day. Lovey had been to the house exactly two times in her eleven years, and both of those times LaVerne had sat like stone on the side porch and said nothing to anyone. It was not out of meanness that she didn't speak, Mama explained, but because LaVerne's mind was not right sometimes. She had spells, at times. A bad spell sent her away for a long while to Roanoke, where her son, Lovey's mama's brother, was looking after her. The house had been shut up for a long time, five years or more, until earlier that winter when LaVerne returned to her mountain and her house. Her mind was better, they said.

Lovey's arms wrapped around Carol's waist; the two of them bobbed gently up and down on gentle Andy, as he plodded, head down, on the trail through the woods and upward. It was now full morning but the sun had not grown much in size and its light was still wan and white, prevented from doing much else by the low gray clouds. Lovey looked back over her shoulder at the house as Andy took them into the woods on the

well-worn route leading up through the mountain. A single plume of smoke rose up out of the chimney and everything was still.

Johnny's face was dirty and his breath came quick. He had been knocked off his feet for a minute, everybody had, twenty-five men or so all knocked down and crouched for a minute, debris falling all around them in the darkest spot in the mine. Their headlamps shone weakly through all the dark and the coal dust. There was coughing and swearing and panic. For a second they all of them wondered if they were still alive after a busting, a great letting go of pressure that rendered them near-blind and with hurt eardrums. It was up to Johnny. "Hey, men. You all stay with me, now. You all stay with me."

Lovey said, "Carol, I'm going to jump off this mule right now and run to town or you can take me to town but we have to get over there and help."

She held off jumping and stared at Carol's shoulders, broad and puffy with two layers of sweaters and her car coat. Carol was silent. Everything around them was spare and pointed. Leafless branches darted out and threatened to poke their pink cheeks if they didn't keep their shoulders in and heads tucked. Lovey would not jump quite yet, she decided. There could be a bear, or a panther nearby, and there she would be by herself with no mule and no Carol. No patient sister, stout and motherly to shoo away the panther. Let her sister take her to LaVerne's, anyway. Perched on top of a mountain there is a clear view of town and she could break free and run down, run down to town to Blue Creek Mine and aid in the rescue.

“How did it explode?” Lovey asked.

“I thought you were jumping,” Carol said over her shoulder.

“Well, I didn’t.”

“Lovey Ann, you are too young to know everything.”

“I am not,” said Lovey. “And now is your last chance to tell or not tell me because I will run down there anyway and get to Daddy.” It was Carol’s last chance to say something. Andy had gotten them to LaVerne’s and there was LaVerne, standing there in the front yard hanging a bed sheet on the clothesline with a man’s coat on and no hat. Her hair had turned white and it was loose all around her head in the morning fog. She didn’t say hello or wave, nor did she seem startled to see them. Lovey slid down off of Andy and looked up at Carol.

“If you think I’m just going to stay here with her and wait till you come get me and there’s trapped miners and Daddy’s down there with them then you’re crazy.”

Carol stayed up on Andy. “Lovey Ann, Daddy’s crossed the picket line and some other guys did, too, and there’s other people calling them scabs. Mama says we’re all liable to get our heads bashed in so you just shut up and do as I tell you.”

III

It was the closest she had ever stood next to LaVerne. LaVerne was two heads taller than Lovey, stout and barrel-chested like a boxer. Under her outspread hair and man’s coat there was the hem of a dress, and under the dress brown work pants tucked into a pair of western wellington boots. She didn’t have any gloves on and her knuckles were large and chapped on long, straight fingers. The threadbare floral bed sheet she had

hung on the line, heavy with water and half-frozen, made whip-like sounds in the wind. Lovey had not been invited in. She stood, and LaVerne regarded her standing for a while and then spoke. “Have you et?”

Lovey was hungry. The morning had afforded no time to think of breakfast, and she had refused the cold biscuit Carol had handed her when they left the house. Her hunger was such that the mention of food stirred up in her a wave of basic need that for the moment washed away sudden flashes of gas, washed away letters and women. “Yes, I am,” she said.

Laverne’s cold house was the house Lovey remembered. Big wood floored sitting room with no curtains up at the windows and beside it a sparse kitchen with its table made of rough-hewn boards set up on trestles, a stove that burned warm. It did not smell like food. LaVerne grabbed a stool from the corner and set it down by the stove. Lovey sat on it and it felt good to sit and be warm. She kept her coat on and watched LaVerne, who appeared to be still crazy, despite reports to the contrary. LaVerne did not engage Lovey in conversation, did not smile or patronize or ask her what grade she was in. She moved about the kitchen as if Lovey was not there.

LaVerne had a Ball Mason jar in her hands from the pantry and in it were small rounds of sausage. Upon opening the jar, the cold kitchen air was at once thick with sage and fennel. LaVerne set a cast iron skillet on top of the stove and Lovey sat wordlessly beside her as she cooked up the sausage.

“Are we scabs, boys?” What about going to work today is wrong? Don’t let them tell you it’s wrong. Our stoves need wood and our children will have Christmas gifts. Who says we are scabs? Let them try something.”

The smell of sausage filled Lovey with what she thought might be a false sense of security. The anticipation of eating gave her something to think about other than work and trouble. She wondered what was taking LaVerne so long. Lovey could not remember ever having been so ready to eat. LaVerne knew she had grown impatient. She cocked her head a little and narrowed her gray eyes. “You’re Mary Evelyn’s girl, ain’t you?” Lovey stared at her right back, sat up straighter on the stool and said, “Yes ma’am,” testy on purpose, equal emphasis on both the yes and the ma’am. LaVerne blinked less than anyone Lovey had ever met. She held the girl’s gaze for what felt like a full minute and said, “I can see that. All of ya’ll get mean when you’re hungry.”

She watched LaVerne’s big hands work the skillet, the bones of her wrists as she wrapped a towel around the handle and slide the skillet off the heat. The sausage was on Lovey’s plate and though it was hot and she had no fork she pinched it between her thumb and index finger and ate. The eating was pleasurable. Lovey ate one patty with closed eyes, and the second one she held up close to her face and stared at the half-bitten center, where bits of red pepper flakes and green anise seed mingled. The heat on her tongue was good and she ate and ate until she was full and pushed her plate back. Her thoughts came back to her and she looked up to find LaVerne sitting in the other chair, still looking at her, expressionless except for what might have been a quarter smile.

“That’s good sausage,” Lovey said.

“It is the first bunch I put down after the frost this year,” said LaVerne.

“Alright, then. I guess I’ll be going now. I’ve got to get down to town to see what I can do about whatever it is that’s going on.” Lovey’s words did not seem to register with LaVerne. An adult should have said, “No, you’re not going anywhere, missy,” but LaVerne did not.

“You want a glass of buttermilk?” She asked Lovey.

“No, I can’t stand buttermilk, thank you. I will take some water.” Hadn’t LaVerne heard her about going to town? She did not seem concerned, as she brought out a pitcher of water and poured Lovey a long glass. Lovey drank it down.

“Ms. LaVerne, I’ll be going now. I guess there’s trouble down at the mine.”

Lovey stood up, pushed back her chair. She had never taken her coat off, was ready to go and did, she walked right out of the kitchen and back through the sitting room and went out the front door. The cold stung her eyes as she stepped out on the porch. She lingered there. LaVerne was on the other side of the open screen door. Lovey’s spicy fennel breath puffed out and around her as she faced LaVerne.

“They brung you up here for me to look after you today and if you mean to go then you’d do well to listen to me. I’m the one who knows how to get there and what to do if there’s trouble down there.” LaVerne said. She came outside and Lovey followed her past the clothesline with the frozen bed sheet, past the two big pines and over to the pasture’s edge, the ridge that looked out and straight down to the town below. Lovey could see life in miniature, tiny squares of buildings and smoke from dollhouse chimneys.

“LaVerne. Point out the mine to me. I do not know what it looks like from up here,” she said. LaVerne took Lovey’s finger and with one eye squinted placed it in the air above a long, dark rectangle on the grid down below. It didn’t look like anything to Lovey. “Can we see from here if there are people getting their heads bashed in?” She asked.

“It’s hard to say,” said LaVerne. “Things look different to them that’s down there. We could stand right here and wave and holler and they will never pay us any mind and it’s the same for them down there.”

Lovey was not going to let Carol and Mama be down there and doing all the work and worrying, all the knowing of what was going on when she was hidden away up at LaVerne’s and they could even see or hear her if she yelled. “My place is to be down there, heads bashing or not,” she said and turned to LaVerne. “Are you coming with me, or not?”

It was still cold and Lovey’s fingers ached inside her gloves, but the morning fog had lifted and the sun was out, not full but getting there through scattered clouds. Lovey on top of the mountain was within minutes of heading down and toward the labyrinth, to the place where she could be heard and seen.

“I’ll get you down there,” said LaVerne. “On foot the path is slippery this time of year. And we’ll need to bring some things.” She was headed back toward the house.

“Like what?” Asked Lovey.

“Citronella, chewing gum, some change for the pay phone . . .” LaVerne rattled off as she stepped up on the porch. Lovey stayed waiting for LaVerne, looking down over

the ridge at town, at the main road, where it appeared that cars, so many more cars than there would be normally, were winding around in the direction of the mine. She wondered if she shouldn't eat something more before they set out.

DERECHO STORY: LU'S NARRATIVE

Everyone knows where they were when the storms that were not tornadoes hit, because they had to be there for a while. Me, I was out to lunch. Everything was still, hotter than it had ever been and the air was heavy when my co-workers and I pulled into the Bob Evans. Looking back I suppose it was the kind of day when something had to have happened, when coming up on my cousin Davies in the parking lot was inevitable.

Davies was in the back of his Chevy pickup and he was singing, which is not unusual and so it did not surprise me a bit. He wasn't just up there in the truck bed singing for singing's sake; he was on the clock, doing some wiring for Bob Evans. So, he had his work boots and jeans on, and was getting some tools and things straight. Davies was bent over, rifling through some stuff in the truck bed, even had some pliers in one hand, but he was belting out "The Battle Hymn of the Republic. Davies has a fine, tenor voice and he sings just about anywhere he goes. His singing is all that remains of his former career as the boy preacher.

I guess it was just past noon when the three of us, Faye and me from sales, and our supervisor Helen, had to walk right up to the truck since it was parked in front near the entrance. We have an hour for lunch, and Bob Evans is the place to go if you have a

long lunch break. And this day, it was so ungodly hot and close that we needed to sit someplace cool. I could tell Faye and Helen were nudging one another, but they did not nudge me. West Virginia mountain towns are small and Davies and I are both Kirks; the name was clearly emblazoned on the side of his truck. And Davies is known, as I said, for his singing and also because of his early fame as a boy wonder. He is known because of a PBS documentary. The same documentary whose panoramic background shots of the Blue Ridge and mandolin-tinged footage of Davies' righteous adolescence drove an even bigger wedge between Davies and me and all of our cousins. Because of his work he was never a normal kid to begin with, did not get to run wild with the rest of us in the woods behind our grandmother's house. My brothers Bill Joe and Wayne behind Davies' back called him "Jerry Lee Lewis." They knew Jerry Lee wasn't a preacher, but it was the hair, they said. I didn't call him names. He was the closest in age of any of our cousins and I wanted to play with him, but as I got older I got it, knew Davies' gift meant we would not be playmates. So, Davies and I were not close cousins by any stretch, but at least his distance was familiar. Then that documentary aired. That was fifteen years ago and I have seen it only one time.

Faye and Helen knew who Davies was, sure enough. I knew they knew and I've never been one to get embarrassed, so I stopped right in front of him and spoke.

"Hey Davies. Long time no see."

Davies stood up straight and looked down at me, nodded at Faye and Helen and said "Back at ya, Lu. Looks like we're in for some weather." He had no sooner spoken but a thunderclap rolled through the mountains.

“This is my first cousin Davies,” I said to Faye and Helen. “He’s my dad’s sister Ginny’s oldest boy.” It was not a completely necessary introduction, but that’s the way I wanted to do it, like there was nothing strange about the situation, because there wasn’t. I did not need to tell them that Davies and I have the same name because his mother never married his father, and was wild for some years before accepting the word of God and joining the Pentecostal Holiness Church, where her son was discovered to have a gift. Nor did I tell them that Ginny was fanatical and overbearing and homeschooled her son to allow for his busy circuit-riding schedule when he should have been playing little league baseball. All that went without saying.

I caught Faye pushing her hair behind her ear and her usually sallow cheeks were flushed. She reached up to him to shake his hand. She smiled with all her teeth showing, eyes wide. Oh, hi!” She said. “It’s nice to meet you. Lu here’s told us so much about you!” That was a total lie. In the seven years I had been working at the Subaru dealership I had never uttered Davies’ name unless someone had asked me about him. I would have to have a talk with Faye.

Helen is my parents’ age. She went to high school with my father and Davies’ mother, and knew all about their not getting along on account of Aunt Ginny’s holy rolling. Helen’s heard all about the film and knew better than to make a big deal of it there in the parking lot in front of me. She just said hi Davies and that was it. And just like that the three of us went into Bob Evans.

“It’s been years since I’ve seen that boy,” said Helen. “He’s kind of handsome with all that curly blonde hair, and those eyes! Like Paul Newman’s eyes.”

“Those are your same eyes, LuAnn,” Faye said.

“I am aware of that.” I said. I am not one bit embarrassed by my resemblance to Davies. You put me in a room with Davies and other non-relatives and the two of us are going to stand out. We both look like Kirks and that’s how it is.

We ordered food, three soup and sandwich platters. We were sitting in the atrium, surrounded on three sides by windows and the sky had turned three shades darker from the time we sat down. The lunch crowd’s heads were turned toward the glass, taking in the rolling clouds, the picking up of wind for the first time that day when all had been so still for hours. Helen and Faye were not looking at the sky.

“So Lu.” This was Faye. “Why didn’t y’all want to be in the movie?”

“The PBS documentary.” I said. “It was a documentary.” Outside Good sized tree branches flapped sideways in the wind. The leaves flipped over in unison, revealing silver underbellies. Still no rain.

Davies at four in a little brown suit, up at a special kid-sized podium, preaching the Gospel. Davies standing on a chair with his hair slicked back, laying hands on Minnie Bell who could barely walk with her swollen diabetic foot. “He is here! He is here!” shouted Minnie, talking about Jesus, as she skipped a little and everyone in the congregation gasped over her sudden mobility. A wordless scene with Davies in profile sitting cross-legged staring into campfire. The PBS reporter asks him, “When did you first get the call to preach?” And Davies looks away from the campfire, looks right into the camera with those blue eyes and says, “I don’t know. I don’t know if I ever did.”

But three days before the film aired, Davies had showed up at a high school basketball game and joined me and my friends and we stood elbow-to-elbow singing “Another One Bites the Dust” at the top of our lungs. It was the first time I could recall ever hearing him sing a non-religious song; he sang and sang and stomped his feet with everyone else until the song ended. He ate popcorn and drank a Coke. I wanted badly to tell him “It surely is nice to see you,” but instead I told him I didn’t think I’d ever seen him in jeans before. His eyes were lit up and he threw his head back and laughed. It felt good and right that he was there and it made me wish he’d been doing stuff like that all his life with me, instead of being away a lot and saddled with a gift. That was a Friday. When the local PBS station ran the film the following Monday, every single person in this county who had a television watched it. Davies didn’t come to any more basketball games, or anywhere after that.

Faye was pressing. “Lu? Why weren’t you all in it?”

“Well Faye,” I said. “My daddy just told them that we didn’t have anything to say, because that was the truth. We couldn’t have told them anything they didn’t already know. We’re Methodists.”

PBS was fine. They didn’t stretch the truth, didn’t sensationalize anything. A boy preacher from deep in the holler just happened to hit right around the time the outside world discovered Appalachia and then all of a sudden newspapers and magazines crept into town, wanting to do profiles on Davies just as he pushed away and left the ministry. Is this a leave of absence, they wanted to know. A sabbatical? They just had to look at the final scene of the documentary. It was all right there. There is Davies in the middle of a

sermon at a revival in Roanoke. It is deep in the summer and he is sweating, preaching on God's commission to Joshua from the Book of Deuteronomy. An overweight man in a short-sleeved dress shirt chimes in for emphasis every few seconds on an electric piano. Davies' speech is a near monotone and he keeps his eyes down at the microphone. A few 'amens' ring out from the crowd, not out of any religious fervor but politeness, encouragement because even the faithful under the tent could tell that Davies doesn't have the feeling. There's another close-up of his face, and then his hand flies up, palm out in a stop motion. He doesn't say anything. The man on the Wurlitzer plays him out. Davies shut down even more than before, just stayed put and kept his head down, got into flooring and lighting. Davies keeps to himself. I've seen him a handful of times in the fifteen years, and our meetings are always by chance like it happened the day the storms hit.

The rain arrived with our salad bowls, wailed against the glass in sheets. Brought Davies in, too. From our booth I could see him up at the front of the restaurant, looking out at the rain with the manager, whose first name I do not know, but he is married to one of the Cavanaugh girls. It was right around this time when everyone seemed to sense that we had a weather event happening. Faye stopped asking about Davies and the documentary, and we all stopped eating and stared out into the reams and reams of water. A heavy tree branch snapped and fell on top of the glass. Then there was more snapping and falling and it was all obscured by the rain. We could just hear and see movement, dark and falling. This must have been that first gust of wind over 58 miles per hour, which we now know is the mark of a derecho. That's what Davies said, anyway. There he

was by our booth with his little yellow weather radio in his hand. He sat down next to me and took off his hat.

“They’re saying this isn’t a tornado.” He told us. “I’ve never seen anything like this in all my life. I think we’re all going to be here for a spell.”

Helen peered at Davies over the tops of her glasses. “Davies,” she said. “What else are they saying? If this isn’t a tornado, then what is it?”

Davies said, “Channel 5’s not telling me anything, and I don’t trust them anyways. Accuweather keeps saying to seek shelter, that the winds are in excess of 70 miles per hour now, but they won’t name it. They refuse to name it. I think we need to move out from under all this glass, anyhow.”

We got out of that atrium real quick, took our sandwiches into the main part of the restaurant. Branches, tree limbs and God knows what else were hitting and bouncing off of the Bob Evans faster and faster. Me, Davies, Faye and Helen, we perched on stools near the kitchen.

The power appeared to be out all along the strip. The Citgo station, Walmart, the car dealership were dark. It was just us in the Bob Evans with power. It did not stop raining. The constant gusts of winds that we now know are the hallmark of a derecho were at that moment peeling roofs off mobile homes, lifting SUVs right off the road, leveling carports, and killing eleven people statewide in a bow echo of straight-line winds.

Everyone seemed to get that we’d be there for a while, and slowly we all resumed eating, though the storm had somehow cast off any previous formality and people were

sitting with total strangers, chatting, others sat cross-legged on the floor. The restaurant staff did not mind. Some of them were sitting, too. A guy brought out fresh coffee and walked around asking if anyone needed topping off. Faye, Helen, me and Davies sat elbow-to-elbow, taking it all in.

“I’m real glad ya’ll came to lunch here today, Lu.” He said. “Just think if you were over there at the dealership you’d all be roasting in there without power.”

Faye leaned over and spoke low. “I don’t think it’s any coincidence that we’re in here in the air conditioning.” She was looking straight at Davies. “I think these lights are protected by a higher power.” Oh God, Faye.

Davies knew what she meant, too. But he just said, “Shoot, I hadn’t even started working over here yet. If the power’s on it ain’t because of me. It must be the grid we’re on.”

Helen was settled back drinking her tea, Faye was consciously playing with a strand of hair, probably trying to be flirty and smiling across at Davies; we all sat as the storm plowed on. The lights flickered for just an instant and then came back on, sudden panic followed by relief. Then they went out again and did not come back on.

Spoons dropped, friendly chatter turned edgy. Without the hum of electricity we were suddenly privy to the horrible nature sounds happening all around us. It was another gust hitting us, and no one spoke because the snapping and ripping going on outside could not be talked over. It was then that the structure we were sitting in did not feel so secure. The four of us just perched on our stools, listening. Davis’ weather radio was all static.

“Do something.” This was Faye, talking to Davies. “Do something, please.”

“What do you want me to do?” He wasn’t mad. He said it simple and honest.

Helen said, “Come on, Faye. It’s a storm. What is he supposed to do?”

Faye leaned forward on her stool and put a hand on Davies’ arm. She looked at him, challenging him, I thought. “Why don’t you pray?” She said. Her voice was louder than I liked and everyone looked over at us.

“Davies, just forget it. You don’t have to do anything,” I said. “This is just crazy.”

An older guy at the table across the way leaned over and said, “Little prayer couldn’t hurt, youngblood. I saw you bring a message when you wasn’t even big enough to hold your own Bible and buddy, the Holy Ghost was in that church. I’ve never heard a message brought like that before or since.”

Davies still wasn’t mad. He was just resolute. He looked tired. His words were loud and even for anyone listening to hear. “A prayer’d be fine. But any one of you all could pray. It doesn’t have to be me. If somebody’s led to offer up a prayer, then go on ahead.”

Who had ever seen so much rain and wind, it would not stop. We’d been there for over an hour, and if this wasn’t a tornado then what was it? And Davies there with all eyes on him wanting him to do something. And he didn’t want to do anything. I didn’t want him to, anyway. I’d have been fine sitting there in the dark with the heat creeping in, with all those tree parts and other things raining down on the roof until the storm passed, until we could make sense of whatever was left outside and go back to work or

home. Davies slid out of the booth. He put his radio on the table and said, "I'll be back in a minute, Lu."

"Where are you going?" I said. "What are you going to do?"

He was just going to step outside real quick and see, he said. See what? I wanted to know, but he was already a shadow slipping through the tables.

Faye, the old man at the table and the rest of the diners were on their feet and crowding toward the front entrance, looking at Davies getting soaked and pushed around by the wind just outside the door. His hat was gone. His hair pulled straight back and he held on to the side of the building to steady himself.

"Well, I'll be!" Someone said. "What's he doing?"

Faye, dreamy with her hands clasped together, said, "He's offering up a prayer!"

Helen whispered to me only, "Is that what he's doing, LuAnn?"

"It doesn't look like it to me," I told her. "I think he's just trying to hold on."

And then he wasn't. The chunk of siding he was hanging onto was whipping through the air and left Davies staggering around a little trying to get his footing back. People I saw nearly every day were smushing into me, breath was on my neck and it was stifling. Outside, Davies spread his arms wide and pitched forward, his head tilted back. He was liquid. The rain came down on him so hard it made little dents in his face and arms. He was letting himself get beaten up by the rain, or it was healing him, I didn't know which but then I found myself saying, "I'm going out there."

It didn't feel like rain, even. The water blanketed us, pinned our feet to the ground. I wasn't sure that I was breathing, such was the power of the storm raging. My

clothes, my hair were instantly soaked and heavy. Davies was beside me shaking his head in a scream or a laugh, I am not sure which. “What are you doing out here?” I tried to yell, pushing against the wind and rain. He let his arms fall loose and turned toward me. It was the closest we had stood together in years. Down the hill the town was dark and paralyzed and just steps away all the faces in the Bob Evans window were just shadows.

A green plastic kiddie pool whipped past us, and then some newspaper. Davies was right up in my face, where he had to be for me to hear him. “Lu!” He shouted. “Lu. I’ve never seen the likes of this!”

The lights came on in the Bob Evans right then, of that I am sure. It was dark one moment and then the lights were back on and faces in the window were lit up. There was Helen, and beside her, Faye, wide-eyed. Davies and I were bolted still to the ground, drenched and wondering at the savageness of the storm around us.

“Davies! Did you come out here to pray?”

He was still close enough to hear. “It’s the grid we’re on. I told you.” He had to bear down and took a few steps backward to steady himself in the wind. We were two bright spots in the wall of grey in the parking lot, and I could feel everyone’s eyes on us. We had to go back in but I could not move.

Davies was talking, but I could not hear him. I hollered, “What’s going to happen now?” at him, but my voice was lost to water

WHEN WE WENT TO THE CIRCUS

Cato would do something to stop Mama's wedding; she was sure of it. Mama was trying hard to put on and be light, going about getting the final details worked out with the General Lewis Inn, the florist, but she was all wound up inside worrying about what Cato would do and we were not fooled. Her face was tight and she was smoking again. She made a big show over Jeff, took his arm when they went out to the grocery store, out to eat, but her eyes were everywhere, half-expecting Cato to show up. Last month she was touching Jeff's face and said I don't know how many times, "Lord, I'm so happy," sitting cross-legged on a red-checkered blanket on the prison camp lawn a few weeks before the wedding. We were at Jeff's company picnic and so Mama acted the part of a happy bride-to-be, but her purse was open and I could see the handle of her Bowie knife.

"What's that doing in your purse?" I asked her privately, while my brothers and Jeff were playing football with some of Jeff's co-workers. I've never understood that part of Mama that makes her put on a show when there's trouble. I want to ask her how can you go about acting like there's not a thing wrong in the world. Flash your left hand around so that everybody can see your ring, but keep that right one hidden deep in your purse, wrapped around a blade.

“He’s said a million times to anybody who’ll listen that he will stop it,” she said. “And he’s just about shot his brain to pieces drinking. I have a terrible feeling, Howard Lee.”

I had some feelings of my own about Mama and her wedding. Your track record, I wanted to tell her, isn’t so hot. You’ve been married twice and two times it’s ended bad. Jeff seems alright, but Mama’s made some regrettable choices in men before, and it’s early still. Third time’s a charm, she says but there she goes already with a terrible feeling. But I kept my mouth shut.

Later I told my brothers about her knife and what she said to me about Cato and asked them if they thought he was really dangerous. Rocky said if I even had to ask if Cato was dangerous then I didn’t know Cato, or I had forgotten things about him. Rocky was wrong. I knew Cato, alright. I hadn’t forgotten anything.

Cato’s land and our land butt right up next to each other and he had for years been staying in the old cabin way back in the woods, in the in-between space that was so grown over and thick with pines and copperheads that nobody went there, and that suited Cato just fine. He was once our stepfather. He married Mama when I was not yet old enough to be in school and my brothers played Little League baseball. Our dad drove a truck and met a woman in Michigan. He left when I was a baby, and there was Mama with three young boys and her not even twenty-five yet, and pretty, with her black hair and pale blue eyes.

Cato in those days was tall and fit, kept his hair and beard neat and all of Mama’s friends talked about how handsome he was. He’d been working a steady job at the mine

for nearly ten years when he and Mama got married and he saved his money and didn't cat around. Cato's family and our family had known one another and lived next to one another for a hundred years. Rocky and Von say they don't remember things being good at first, but they were. Mama and Cato went out to movies while our Aunt Lou watched us. I liked to picture Mama and Cato sitting in his pickup truck, winding their way down on Percy Mill Road to get to town. The sun would be dipping low behind Morlunda Farms, the backside of the mountain blazing gold. We'd stay up late and pretend to be sleeping when Mama and Cato got back, and we could hear them out on the porch. Cato's voice was deep like an actor in a western, and he called Mama Juanita, and not just Nita like everyone else did.

One hot night we tried to keep quiet and listen to them and heard Cato's deep laugh and then he said, "Juanita, the time is now."

I didn't know what he meant by that. Rocky said to hush and it probably meant something about sex. The time is now, the way he said it, sounded so mysterious. I couldn't stop thinking about it, and the next day when Mama told us they were getting married, I knew that's what he meant.

Mama said he'd confessed to her that he had loved her since high school just never got the nerve up to talk to her. He had roots where she had roots and there was no way he'd ever leave.

They got married by a justice of the peace a few months after the movie dates started and Cato moved out of his place and into ours. He didn't know what he was doing acting as stepfather to three young boys. He spoke as little as possible to us. Von and

Rocky were old enough to have memories of our father and they chastised Cato for not being him. My brothers didn't use Cato's name or look him in the eye when they addressed him, and always kept their guard up around him.

Cato's lungs were giving out on him, even back then, the price miners pay for years spent underground huffing coal dust. He couldn't move as fast as before, and he was doubled over by fits of coughing. The liquor got a hold of him hard and he and Mama started fighting when I was around ten. He was a miserable drunk, switched back and forth between catatonic and berserk for days at a time and then would sober up for a while, long enough to mend things with Mama and talk about walking the straight and narrow. He went to church with us during those repentant times, built me, Rocky and Von a tree house and taught Von to shoot a rifle, just Von because Rocky could already shoot and Mama said I was too young. That was about as much time as he spent with any of us and he didn't ever stay straight too long.

When I was eight, Von was fourteen and Rocky sixteen, Cato's dad died and he left him all their land, the big house and the cabin. Cato started running liquor out of the cabin and tried to get Von and Rocky to help. Rocky was a man, near as tall as Cato then and Von was Von, not afraid of anybody and both my brothers knew right from wrong. It was fall then and the sun went down early. Mama was working a long shift and we were at the table doing our homework when Cato came in with his coat on and told us to come on with him that there were some things he needed to do at the cabin. Rocky said, "I've got football to go to." Cato nudged Von's elbow and said for me and him to get ready, then, that the two of us would be help enough, then.

Von looked up from his algebra book and stared Cato right in the face. “We won’t go anywhere with you, you drunk son of a bitch. You are not our father.”

Von was right. Cato was drunk, wobbling and slow. Cato swung his hand out to give Von a smack, but Von reached up and caught Cato’s wrist with one hand, squeezed hard and stood up so that he was as tall as Cato and not afraid. I stopped doing my spelling words and watched my brother get in Cato’s face just like Jean Claude Van Damme in a movie, twisting Cato’s arm up good and making him feel small.

“Boy, I’d kill you right now if I didn’t have your mama to think of,” Cato said, coughing. He knew Von had bested him.

Von knew, too. He smirked and loosened his grip and sat back down at the table and just finished his homework as easy as could be. He knew Cato didn’t have any fight in him, and that’s how I knew, too. I can still see Von in his AC/DC shirt catching Cato’s arm in the air. Von twisting and Cato giving. That was what it was mostly like when Cato lived with us; there would be a smooth patch and then Rocky, Von or Mama would get into it with Cato, with me watching.

Cato shot his back out and was laid off at the mine and things were purely miserable after that. We didn’t ever see him sober from then on and the fighting was terrible. It wasn’t a year after Von beat him at arm wrestling that Cato took off for good. Like any woman raised in these mountains, Mama could always hold her own in a fight, whether it’s sparring with words or fists. In the final days of her and Cato, he’d come at her over anything and she’d give it right back. One day we got off the school bus and first thing we saw was Mama running out of the house holding a skillet and then Cato run out

after her and lunge at her. She held tight to the skillet and hobbled Cato with a blow to the back of the knees. The bus driver radioed for the police, who came and took Cato to town. Mama said it had been about her throwing out his whiskey. Cato came back only long enough to gather up his stuff while Mama watched, her arms crossed tight on her chest and our front door open.

The last thing he said before he walked out of our house the last time was, "I will haunt you, Juanita." He tore out of the driveway and as we watched him go Mama said if he didn't get in a wreck and kill himself then she'd never know a moment's peace. He survived and tried to win her back, to make her see him again, but it was too late. She didn't waste any time filing divorce papers. After Cato, and our dad before him, Mama said she didn't want to know anything about a man ever again. She kept her word all through our growing up years, sending Rocky off to the Army and Von to veterinary school and me now in my second year of HVAC training. We did all of this with the shadow of Cato tucked away down the holler in his cabin hanging over us. He hasn't worked a day since the roof, just runs liquor across the mountain. He's a ghost slipping through the fog back and forth to his cabin, to his copper pots and corn.

As long as Mama was without a man Cato didn't do much except for show up places she'd likely go. Alderson's a small town, and people have told her how he goes to drink at Spare Time and talks crazy about winning her back, how he'd kill any man ever got near her. Jeff didn't know anything about Cato or Mama, or any of us until last year when he got a promotion and transferred to the women's prison. Jeff walked into the Blue

Butterfly one day for lunch and Mama took his order and when she brought him his ham and eggs he held her gaze and said, “thank you.”

Rocky got back from the Army and lives with his girlfriend in town but Von’s in his last year of vet school and he and I live at home with Mama.

Since Mama and Jeff announced their engagement, we’d been keeping an eye on Cato. There’s nothing anybody could do about him showing up places they went in town or driving past the house, and his drunk talk at the bar doesn’t amount to anything, except to the other drunks. They believed what he had been saying. Rocky and Von believed it too. Its not that I disagreed or that I thought Cato wasn’t out to get back at our mother, but Cato was so broken and sick and plastered all the time I couldn’t see him carrying out any kind of plan.

A week before the wedding, I woke up to find Cato sitting in the chair by my bed with his head lolling down over his chest, snoring. There was a rifle in his lap.

I was frozen and couldn’t breathe or make sound. I hadn’t ever wet the bed as a kid, but waking up and seeing Cato a foot away from me and everybody else gone to work, I pissed right there in my bed. I tried reaching for my phone and made some kind of noise and he woke up with a start.

“Howard Lee. Howard Lee, it’s alright I ain’t gonna hurt you.” He was a mess, tall and stooped over in his overalls, all hair and bones.

I still couldn’t move, just sat there in the wet sheets. I tried to come off like I wasn’t scared, like it didn’t bother me at all waking up and seeing him there by my bed, but I knew my hands and legs were shaking and I hated it.

“What are you doing here, Cato?”

“I come to kill myself as soon as your mama gets home.” He was blurry-eyed and sweating alcohol. “You go on and get yourself cleaned up. You pissed yourself.”

He got up out of the chair and turned his back while I put on some dry things. My head was splitting and I could not stop shaking. I shook so hard I couldn't pull my t-shirt down over my head right, and Cato asked when had I started drinking.

“I don't have the shakes,” I told him. “You just scared the shit out of me is all.” He told me again that it wasn't me he after, it was himself and could we go sit down. Everything in the house seemed frozen, useless, like when the power goes out. Everything looked the same but it was not. I need coffee first thing in the morning on any given day, but this day I guess you could say it was a matter of life and death.

“Go ahead and make you some coffee, Howard Lee.”

He sat down on the sofa and I stood in the kitchen and went through the motions of turning on the faucet and filling up the coffee maker and measuring out the last three scoops we had of the Maxwell House. I flipped the on switch and looked out through the kitchen window above the sink. Cato was coughing behind me. There was nobody around. I didn't like my back being to Cato, so I turned around and rested my hips against the sink and looked straight at him. His coughing fit eased up. He still sat on the couch and stared looked at me and said nothing. The coffee started hissing and bubbling. I was wide awake then but so help me I couldn't ever remember being so conscious of the coffee maker and praying for it to finish. Mama was doing breakfast at the Blue Butterfly at that moment and had no idea what her ex-husband was up to. Her knife in the purse

was tucked safely in her locker while she served pancakes. It was me alone with her bogeyman, not her. Her terrible feelings aren't worth shit.

I got my cup of coffee and tried not to spill it as I gulped it down, standing with my back against the sink, facing Cato. My nerves were still jangling but I settled down some when it became clear he was interested in talking. He wanted to know if I remembered him taking us to the circus when we were kids. I told him I did.

“You were just a little feller, couldn't been older than seven or eight, and the boys wasn't too much older than that. The circus came to Huntington that year and not any two-bit circus; it was the Ringling brothers, the real deal. Well, I took you kids and Juanita over there and we had third-row seats. You remember that?”

“I think I remember being up right close, yes.” I said. We were right up close. I was scared of large animals and I kept my face hidden in Von's lap for most of the show.

Cato kept talking. He was looking past me, over my head, not really seeing me, but he wasn't finished with the circus.

“There was a white lion, Howard Lee, an honest-to-goodness white lion they had there and it didn't do a damn thing the lion tamer told it to. All them other animals did tricks and jumped through hula hoops and the elephants stood up on their hind legs and danced but that fuckin' lion, he tore around that ring and roared just like he might have in the wild. You could see his muscles working, see his eyes. They were on fire, Howard Lee. That cat was so pissed off you could look right in his eyes and see it. And we was so close you could hear him breathing. That tamer couldn't do shit with his whip at that lion. Guy finally gave up and stepped aside and just let the lion run and carry on. Your mama

was so scared he was going to jump out of the ring. But I knew we was seeing something.”

I lied and told him that Von and Rocky remembered it fondly. Rocky still had a ticket stub somewhere, I said, and it pleased him. Was that what he’d come to do, besides blowing his head off? Talking about a lion.

“A white lion is a rare animal,” he went on. “It’s not everybody gets to see a rare thing like that in these hills, Howard Lee. Y’all got to see something that day. You remember that.”

Tires in the driveway. That was Von’s car crunching in the driveway outside, home from his morning class. Cato heard it too. I knew that Cato knew he could keep me in check but not me and Von together. He was up and on his feet and stuck the barrel of his gun out the door and fired. He aimed away from Von, shot just as a means of warning and I could see Von stop cold and get back in his car to grab his phone. My nerves spiked again and Cato’s breathing grew ragged. He was close to me and his hands were tight on his rifle. We had ten minutes at best before somebody would get to the house and Cato said so himself.

“It’s going to get bad, Howard Lee,” he told me. “They’re going to come for me, but I will see your mother when she gets home. I’ll let you go as soon as whoever’s coming comes and you can tell ‘em that I didn’t do you no harm, but I will stay here until Juanita comes.”

“I will tell them,” I said. “I will tell them you didn’t do me any harm and that it was just a misunderstanding. I will tell them about the lion, Cato.”

“That’s right,” he said. “But I can’t let you go out just yet, now. I will not be alone in this house. You just wait until someone comes.”

Cato was there to die. He was a man who didn’t want to live anymore, but he was a man who was sick and drunk and hadn’t done anything right in a long time. My thoughts were of Mama, of Von outside and of myself, all of us on the side of another of Cato’s plans that was bound to go wrong. By then it was late in the morning and I hadn’t had anything except coffee, and could smell myself and thought about my wet mattress. I was tired and I didn’t want to look at Cato anymore, but I had to, because he was the one holding a gun.

I think Cato imagined there would be one car pull up but three whipped off the road into the yard and I could see Von, frantic and pissed off beside Banks the sheriff and some more guys. Cato had me by my shirttail and we walked to the door. Banks was on the porch, sounded casual like he was just dropping in to shoot the breeze.

“Cato? Cato, you in there?”

Cato stood on the other side of the door and yelled so hard the chords on his neck stuck out. “I ain’t coming out until my wife gets home! I will not leave here until Juanita sees me.”

Cato was there to die. He was a man who didn’t want to live anymore, but he was a man who was sick and drunk and hadn’t done anything right in a long time. My thoughts were of Mama, of Von outside and of myself, all of us on the side of another of Cato’s plans that was bound to go wrong. By then it was late in the morning and I hadn’t had anything except coffee, and could smell myself and thought about my wet mattress. I

was tired and I didn't want to look at Cato anymore, but I had to, because he was the one holding a gun.

Cato released his grip on my shirt and pushed me back. Banks was knocking on the door. He held his rifle with both hands and pressed it longways against my chest. If he was going to shoot me he would have shot me, I repeated in my head. He held it longways and gave it to me. He was giving it to me.

“You take this and shoot me with it, Howard Lee.”

I kept my arms to my sides. I would not take the gun.

“I am not going to do that, Cato.” I could not hear my own voice. I was past tired, past scared. My muscles ached from tensing. He took his rifle back and cocked it and I walked backwards. Banks was yelling.

I stood at the back door for half a second before I turned to run, long enough to look at Cato and have him look at me and past me, into the slip of blue sky behind me, and then he turned back around and I knew he was going out. A shot was fired and I knew it was Cato's, and then after that it was over.

On Palm Sunday just like she planned, fifty guests gathered in the garden at the General Lewis Inn and watched Mama and Jeff get married. She was in her cream-colored dress and had fresh Lilly of the Valley wound through a clip on one side of her hair. Rocky walked her down the aisle and Jeff smiled as he took her hand. Mama did not smile. She looked brave and her lips were set in a line. When she brushed past me and Von I heard her breath coming hard from her nose. The preacher began to talk, but was

not listening. I looked at my mother and followed her gaze over the ivy toward the mountain.

Us at the circus in Huntington was not like how he remembered it. Cato did not even drive because his license had been taken away so Mama drove and Cato sat in back with me and Von and snored and slept until we got there. It was the Ringling Brothers, true enough, but it wasn't the greatest show on Earth. The arena was so hot and close that I got sick to my stomach after eating a snow cone. I was scared of the animals, and Rocky and Von spent most of the time trying to calm me down.

Cato was wobbling still and slunk in beside Mama, and I sat on his other side. Mama stared straight ahead, stone faced and Cato kept leaning in and whispering at her, wanting to her to look at him just once. He wasn't paying much attention to the action in the ring.

A lion tamer went out in the middle and there were hoops and little stands and the lions came out. What Cato was talking about was white, but it was a tiger. It didn't have a mane. It stood out from the rest because it was different and it sure enough didn't pay any mind to the hoops and things but there was no tearing around the ring, no flashing of sharp teeth that I recall. I saw a white tiger who did not jump like the rest and maybe that's why he stood out. Maybe he was sick, Von said.

Mama looked at the tiger and she looked at us boys, and I could not wait for the big cats to be over with because the big cats looked scared and Von was right, the white one was likely sick. We were small and Mama wrapped her arms around all three of us.

Cato was looking at the lion and then not looking at the lion, and then mostly looking at
Mama.

“Ain’t this good, Juanita. This is the way it could be all the time if you’d let it,”
he said. And she would not look at him.

THE CARPENTER

The orchard was all Von could think about. The trees were already producing fruit, abundant and soft yellow Jonah Golds and some Macintosh. Acres and acres of apple trees smack in the sunlit valley, for sale, and Von was this close to buying it. The orchard was money, for sure, but what lay just behind it was what had his wheels turning. Just visible through the last rows of trees was a grown up place of more trees that did not bear fruit, but sheltered the remains of an abandoned amusement park that never opened. Began twenty-five or so years before Von was born, the site contains a concourse for carnival games, a small Ferris wheel, a tilt-a-whirl, and the skeleton of a train track, all of it nearly swallowed up by the trees now, and overtaken by rust and moss.

The ghost amusement park is included in the apple orchard, which is why, probably, it had not sold yet, but Von drove past the place every day, knew all the haunted stories that everyone local knows, and his business head prevailed. The second he had set foot on the property he knew he and Ginger could make something of it. Agro tourism, he knew it in his gut that they could do it. Apples bring in steady money, and overhauling that amusement park would birth something that he knew for a fact did not exist in all of the Blue Ridge. He'd quickly put together a business plan and showed to Ginger's dad, and he said it looked sound and put forth a nice sum for a deposit. Von's

next step was to call the real estate agent and make an offer, but first he had to pick up his brother from the bus station.

This was the second time Von had picked up Rocky from the bus station, coming in from North Dakota. Picking him up from the bus station really meant picking him up from prison, because that's where his brother was coming from, prison in North Dakota. The first time Von was eighteen and drove his first paid off car, the little red Suzuki Samurai, to get his older brother, drop him off at their mom's with just enough time to get to work and clock in. When he was eighteen he worked at the gas station and his hands were never clean no matter how often or hard he washed them but it was those greasy gas station hands that put him through business school. His brother had just done a stint in prison for trafficking, and came back to the mountains just long enough to get some money together and back on a bus to where he'd come from.

This time picking Rocky up Von was thirty, with a wife and baby and pulled into the lot at half-past six, even though his brother's bus didn't arrive until seven fifteen. He hadn't seen his brother in four years. Two of those years Rocky had been working in whatever construction outfit he'd taken up with, doing honest work, Von and his mother, Juanita, surmised, based on phone calls and a few letters with a Minot postmark. The calls and letters petered out, and then they knew, he'd gotten into some shady stuff. "Let me have a picture of you, son. Send me a picture at least to see you and how you're getting along," Juanita had written her oldest boy, and her wish was granted with a single Polaroid in an envelope. Rocky was stark in a stark place in the snow, his hair grown out

and back in a braid. He was bone thin and standing in front of his motorcycle, with an arm around a blonde girl.

“He’s in a bad place again.” Juanita said as she showed Von the snapshot. The next they heard from Rocky was a collect call from jail. Then letters stamped “Correctional Facility,” from Bismark.

Von stood in the ancient bus depot square in the middle of the waiting area, where he would be the first thing Rocky saw when he came through the double doors from the buses. If Rocky wanted to stay at their mom’s that was fine, but Von hoped his brother would come and stay with him and Ginger, see the baby and live with a normal family for a while. But before going home, or to see their mother, he would take Rocky down to the orchard. That’s where Rocky would find redemption and be a carpenter again. His brother’s pulse would quicken at the sight of it all, with the electricity of opportunity, where he could forget about North Dakota and prison and fall in love with honest work. They would leave the orchard again as brothers and go home and Von wanted his brother to sit on the porch with him in the Adirondack chairs he had made before he ever went to North Dakota. They would drink beer together, watch the sun go blazing down the mountains and Rocky would call him Junior and say I am home. He would work his long fingers across the quartersawn wood of those chairs and say again I am home.

And then there was Rocky, walking to him and he to Rocky. They were close enough to touch, but Von was struck and for a second could only stare. Rocky was so changed. What had been rangy and lean was now gaunt, shadows. His hair was grey, long

and in a neat braid. Rocky did not yell out or charge forward and his shoulders were not squared and confident. Von only knew his brother once he smiled.

“Hey man, how you been?” Rocky slapped him on the back.

“Well, fine, I guess. Pretty busy with the baby and all. You know I think I got a job for you. I want to show you something here in a minute.”

“Shit yeah.” It was Rocky’s voice alright, low and lazy, but Rocky did not look at him at all as they walked out of the station into the gloaming. Rocky had one bag, a long duffel that he hitched up on his back and steadied with his arms as if he were a crucifix. He didn’t say a word about the mountains he could still see in the waning light, or the crisp note of wood smoke in the air.

The orchard was cast over in long afternoon shadows as Von pulled his truck in the driveway.

“You thinking about buying this, Junior?” Rocky asked.

“I’m going to buy it. I want you to see it.”

Von and Rocky walked into the orchard, into darkness. The ground was thick with apples and their steps were uneven and labored. “I don’t know anything about apples,” Rocky said.

“This isn’t all there is,” said Von with the voice of a salesman. “You know what’s on up here, don’t you?”

Silver light from the moon poked through the trees and played over everything without distinction. Apples gave way to grass and rocks and soon they stood with the toes of their boots butted up against the aged train track.

“Ok, now don’t say anything until you hear the whole story,” said Von. “This place is a gold mine. I’ve gotten it all figured out. I figure everyone knows about this place and there’s all these stories and superstitions, so we’ll just play it right up. Keep this place haunted. The orchard and store will be steady, year-round, that’s business that’s already set to go, but we spend some time here in the park and get it ready to be an attraction, and it’ll pay out in just one season per year. October/November. And this right here,” he kicked the track, “this is going to be a haunted train ride. This’s going to need some nice carts made for it. What do you think, maple maybe? Oak?”

Rocky was lit up and made taller and gaunt by the moon; he knelt, ran his hand over a bit of track. He looked like he’d sprouted out up out of the rust and lichen, otherworldly. “I think this is a good place to hide or get found, Junior,” he said.

Ginger and the baby were in bed, and Von sat with his brother on the porch just like he had imagined, but the sun had long since set, and there was no brilliant sun illuminating the hills. They sat in darkness save for the porch light, which flashed across his brother’s face and made his cheekbones jut out, his teeth too. They nursed their beers and spoke of small things for a while. Rocky didn’t say anything about being back home and Von asked him if everything was alright because he felt it in his gut that it wasn’t.

“What do you mean hide, Rock?” He asked. “Who’s after you?”

“The devil is, Junior.

“ I just got to lay low for a while.” He lit a Marlboro.

“You got a girl out there? Is that what it’s about?”

“Yeah, I got a girl but I can’t go back out there right now.” Von didn’t ask more about the girl, he knew she’d have long blond hair, drive a Harley or ride with someone who did, was older and skinny and he bet she had kids she didn’t take care of. She’d shackled up with another guy while his brother was in prison, he decided, and for his brother’s sake, he hoped that was the end of whatever it was. It was late and there was no more beer. Von stood up to go inside. Rocky sat immobile and smoking, eyes resting on the top step, probably, or something just beyond. “Go ahead and turn out the light, Junior. I’m just going to sit here for a while.”

Von stepped inside and flipped off the light, called “Alright then, welcome home.”

His brother did not respond. All Von could see was the tiny red-orange circle of his cigarette.

The day they closed on the orchard, Von and Ginger took Rocky and met Juanita for lunch at The Blue Butterfly, the little greasy spoon in town. In the sunny, paisley wallpapered dining room they sat at a large circle table and ordered tea and catfish. Rocky slumped in a chair next to Von.

“I am so happy for you, son,” Juanita said. “I am happy for both of my sons,” she added, looking over at Rocky. “This is going to be very good for you, Rock.”

“Ms. Juanita, I don’t think he heard you,” Ginger said. Von, Ginger and Juanita all looked at Rocky, whose eyes were trained out the big window on the parking lot. He had heard her, he said.

“You are a million miles away, son,” Juanita said.

“I am out on Lake Winnipeg,” said Rocky, not looking at any of them but still out the window. “And that’s where you say I am at if anyone asks about me.”

Von did not waste any time after closing on the orchard. He got straight to work. He put Rocky to work. Rocky needed to get his hands dirty again and move things, push things around and clear spaces to feel right again. On the one-week anniversary of his ownership of the orchard, Von stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his brother in the middle of the overgrown place where they were hauling and clearing with a rented Bobcat loader. The hot sun on their shoulders felt good and Von was glad for it, for having Rocky close enough to touch, but hard work between them that didn’t need talking over. Von had a blueprint. He held it out with both hands. Something like a twig snapped, somewhere among the trees and Rocky held his finger to his lips.

“Hush,” he whispered. “Did you hear that?”

“An animal, I guess,” said Von. “Come on, forget it.” Rocky turned toward the tree line, watching like a cat watches.

“What has you so spooked?” Von asked.

“They have got to me all the way back here like I knew they would,” said Rocky to the air, his back toward Von. What if this wasn’t really his brother but a shell who wore his clothes and spoke with his voice but swallowed him up in that North Dakota prison? Von held tight to his blueprint and kicked a tire on the Bobcat. He figured there was four or five hours of daylight left in which he could clear and haul and it would go so

much quicker if his brother could help but he couldn't or wouldn't. He was a cat focused on a twig's snap.

Later that night after everyone was asleep, his hands rough but clean and his teeth brushed, Von climbed into bed next to Ginger. She was sleepy but talking. "Somebody called for your brother but wouldn't leave a name."

Von was on his side. His head hadn't hit the pillow yet. "What did you tell them?"

"I told them he was out on that lake."

Von was not sleepy. He padded out into the hall, put his head up to Rocky's door and whispered, "Hey, Rock. Rock?" There was no answer. Von's heart picked up a little and his breath came quick as he crept into the living room and saw the front door ajar. He opened it wide and pressed his face against the screen door. All the world was dark, and the harder he strained to see the orange circle glow of a Marlboro, the more he could not see it.

HERDING INSTINCTS

The dog is why. Jens cannot sleep nights. Rambo. The dog with the anvil-shaped head and steel blue patchwork coat is not a barker; he's an aloof and ceaseless pacer. It's his disconnect and the chronic back and forth that has Jens on edge. Even when he cannot see him, Jens knows the dog is out there in the side yard, running up and back as long and wide as his chain will allow. Alister, Jens thinks, will know what to do about the dog. If there's one thing Alister knows about, it's dogs. He is a wildlife biologist and has launched successful wolf sanctuaries throughout the Southeast.

Alister and Jens have been neighbors for fifteen years and what Jens knows about Alister is limited, mostly due to what Jens interprets as Alister's oddness. Jens rises early every morning, makes Folgers coffee for himself and heats the teakettle for Glenda, who takes a cup of Earl Grey when she wakes up. While his wife sips her tea and sees about breakfast, Jens takes his coffee out on the side porch of their two-story white farmhouse and looks to his left just up the hill where Alister's slightly smaller, more tumbledown house catches the morning sun. Alister is without fail out on his porch and Jens hears the humming, Alister's humming. On mornings when there is no wind and the mountain is silent, Jens can pick out tonal shifts in the humming. It sounds like a chant. Alister sits motionless, cross-legged there on his porch every morning, humming or chanting, and

Jens drinks his coffee and watches him and listens, trying to pick up what it is that's coming out of Alister's mouth.

Glenda doesn't much care what Alister is doing out there, at least that's the impression Jens gets when he's asked her. It is just the two of them now. The house is bigger than it should be and when Jens is not at work he is faced with the weight of Tony's absence and what to do about the dog. More than once he's asked Glenda: "What do you reckon he's doing up there?"

"Who cares?" Glenda shrugged yesterday, reading the newspaper and drinking her tea. "I don't know why you're surprised by anything he does. Remember the wedding."

When Alister bought the farmhouse up the hill he brought a woman with him. Her name was Angie, and she was sociable. She made a few trips down to Jens and Glenda's, once carrying a basket of apples, and another time with a verbal invitation to a wedding. The wedding was held out in Alister's back pasture at dusk one evening in September. Jens and Glenda took Tony, who was five, and a gift-wrapped blender and walked up the hill to join a smattering of bohemian-looking people in colorful clothes. Jens felt bringing Tony to such an outlandish scene was a mistake, with him being so little and impressionable. The preacher wore corduroy pants and a leather vest, and as far as Jens could remember, did not quote anything from the Bible. There was a drum circle, a bagpiper, and Alister was in a kilt. Tony's curly head turned this way and that, taking it all in, perched atop Jens' shoulders, his small warm hands slipping down over Jens' eyes.

Now Tony is twenty, and he is at Fort Benning in the middle of Basic Training. Jens and Glenda have still not heard a word from him. He is more the Army's than theirs, now. Tony's room is just as he left it a few weeks ago, still smells of cinnamon gum and Old Spice deodorant. Jens imagines the same scent lingers still in Rambo's fur, but how would Jens know for sure since the dog refuses to be touched by anyone other than Tony? Tony came home one day last summer with the dog in the back of his pickup, said someone had left him in the Walmart parking lot. Tony'd arrived for his early shift and found the dog chained to the fence by the back entrance. He rinsed out an old Tupperware container he found and poured the dog some water. Eight hours later he left work and loaded the dog into the truck and headed home.

"Look at this guy, Dad!" Tony said, as he let the dog down out of the truck. Rambo's feet had no sooner hit the ground then he broke into a full run, paying no mind to pretty Juniper, the Collie. He started running and did not stop, save for the times Tony brought him food or water. He would sit for Tony, bow his head for Tony to pet him. When Tony was gone to work, Rambo ran for hours on end, and now that Tony is gone, Rambo runs incessantly and has grown meaner, snapping at Juniper when she gets too close or friendly, and he'd knocked Jens down flat more than once when Jens was feeding him.

Jens needs Alister to look at the dog. Alister He drains his morning cup of coffee, calls "I'm going to see Alister about the dog," to Glenda, who pays him no mind because

she is putting on her shoes, getting ready for her Saturday morning aerobics class in town.

Jens sets off through the yard, past Rambo and Juniper and onto the gravel road up to Alister's. It is still early morning and Alister, as usual, is out on his porch. July heat is slowly creeping up the mountain. It'll hit 90 degrees today, thinks Jens as he comes up on Alister's mailbox. Alister's humming stops as he hears the gravel crunching and Jens comes into view. Alister is up on his feet. Up close he is rangier than the last time Jens saw him face-to-face. His hair is white and long and in a ponytail. He is smiling. "Howdy Jens."

Jens puts a foot on Alister's bottom step. "Mornin', Alister."

Alister wears a long john shirt despite the heat, and heavy weight sweat pants. He is barefoot. Alister does not use the steps but hops down off the porch and stands before Jens. "Glenda alright?"

Jens says she is fine. Alister may keep to himself but he follows rules of neighborly conversation. He asks Jens, "Heard from your boy?"

"He can't call us or write to us right now, and we still don't have an address for him, but it shouldn't be long before we know something," says Jens. Jens can't help himself. He looks at Alister. "What's that you were singing . . . is it singing? What you were doing just now when I walked up?"

"Om mani padme hum," says Alister.

Jens cocks his head and says, “Om mani . . .”

Alister says, “padme hum. It’s a Tibetan mantra. Starts my day off right.”

“Like a prayer.” Jens says.

“A prayer, yes. Kind of like that. I noticed you all are keeping Tony’s dog for him,” says Alister, talking about Rambo. It is exactly the way Jens had hoped his and Alister’s conversation would go. Angie left Alister ten years ago. She left quietly and Alister never spoke about her. His naturally aloof nature lent itself to being left. He never brought Jens and Glenda bushels of apples and keeps to himself, but here he is up there at his house being mindful of Tony, the dog. Jens is altogether pleased, genuinely content to be standing in front of Alister this morning.

Jens tries to come off friendly and animated, doesn’t want to sound needy. He wants Alister to want to help him out. “Actually, Alister, that’s what I come to speak to you about. The dog.” Jens picks up on a note of interest on Alister’s part and it pleases him. “We’ve been having some trouble with him. Sure like to have you come and look at him and see what you think.” Jens expects Alister to say tomorrow or Monday he will, but Alister is beside him now and they are walking.

“Let’s go see what you’ve got there,” Alister says.

Jens and Alister walk down the road together and around to the side yard. Glenda’s already left, and good Juniper, who is unchained and runs free in the yard, is at once solicitous, her tail wagging. Rambo does not break his stride. His muscles are warm

and loose from running all morning and his breath comes hard. His is not a carefree run. He is possessed, or obsessed. He barks at Alister, who studies him with narrow eyes.

Jens explains to Alister that they don't know what to do with Rambo. The dog just runs all day long, and he won't be coddled or petted. The chain bothers him, Jens tells Alister, but what can they do because the dog will surely hurt someone or run away and it is Tony's dog, after all. They keep him so far away from Juniper, Jens tells Alister, because they're worried he'll hurt her. "Why do you figure he runs like that?" Jens asks Alister.

"That's an Australian Blue Heeler," says Alister. "He is the world's greatest cattle dog. He needs to herd in order to live. If he cannot herd, then he will go insane."

Jens suspected the dog might be crazy. "So, you're telling me he's crazy?"

"Not crazy," says Alister. "But, his instinct is so strong that he will not rest until he has something to do. He needs a job. Something to chase after."

Alister stands closer to Rambo than Jens or Glenda had ever been able to get since Tony left. Rambo paces and huffs, his breath is audible in the morning stillness. Alister is slowly lessening the distance between himself and the dog. He inches closer and Rambo runs harder, up and back the length of the white fence. Juniper's sweet bark rings out and Rambo lurches teeth bared in her direction, pushing full force against his chain until she retreats, slinking up to the safety of the porch. Rambo is agitated now, his huffing is quicker and he shakes his massive head as he runs. Alister comes closer, still, so close that Rambo's tail grazes his pant leg, on purpose, Jens thinks, and the next time the dog

circles back Alister is closer than before and Rambo's track is interrupted. He squares himself in front of Alister and sounds a warning bark. They are two men standing off, one low and aggressive and the other tall and patient. Alister is patient, standing above Rambo but Rambo is gunning for Alister. He is annoyed.

Jens apologizes for Rambo. "We can't do anything with him," he says. "I'm afraid he'll end up hurting somebody."

Alister has one arm straight up in the air, palm up. He looks down straight at Rambo, looks him in the eye, which is a mistake, Jens thinks, looking a dog in the eye. Rambo seems to buck a little, backs up and picks up where he left off, running his usual trajectory, his grassless arc. Juniper lays on the porch.

"That's what he needs, a job. It'd be easier on him if we had more traffic up here. He'd keep busy chasing cars."

"That's what Tony said. About the cars," Jens says. "What can we do about him? Is he just going to keep running back and forth, going crazy?"

Alister scratches his chin and looks up and to his left, toward his own house up the hill. "Let's get him off that chain. Got some cows out back. They don't wander much, but maybe we could try him out back there, so he could run around some. We'd have to try it out a little bit at a time, though. It'll let him run free, though."

When, Jens asks, when will they try this out, and Alister says they'll take him now and see how it goes. Jens grabs hold of Rambo's chain. Rambo, Jens, and Alister exit the safety of the fenced side yard. Rambo pulls hard, and Jens feels as if he will let

the chain slip right out of his hands and the dog will run and run through the mountains and not stop.

“Alister,” he says. “I can’t hold on to him.” The skin on Jens’ palms is chafed and red as he hands the reigns over Alister, whose hand is steady. Rambo’s head is up and he sniffs hungrily, new air and new ground beyond the fenced side yard he’d occupied for all these months. He is distant and savage, still, by no means grateful acting, but Jens imagines he sees a spark of something different in the dog, like maybe he knows he’s going to do something he’s meant to do. They circle Alister’s house and near the back pasture, where Jens and Glenda and Tony saw Alister married long ago. Alister’s five cows are grazing, docile in the mid-morning heat. They barely notice the entrance of the dog, who sets off at a flying trot, barking, but not menacing.

Alister and Jens do not speak, but stand at the gate and watch Rambo, who is quicksilver in the back pasture with the accommodating cows. This is still Tony’s dog and this is a temporary situation until Tony is home again to see about his dog, thinks Jens as he makes his way down the road toward home. He is sweating and hungry and the air is thick with heat and laurel. His house looms larger and larger in front of him as he stands in the middle of the gravel road. Glenda’s car has stopped right before turning into their driveway. Jens stands still under the sun as he watches his wife lean out the window and open the mailbox. Her arm emerges, her hand empty. There is no mail this Saturday.

IMPASSE ON THE PETERSBURG-SALISBURY ROAD

The “Butter Churning in the 19th Century” living history exhibit was going straight to hell, but it was not Mary Nelle’s fault. It was a snowball effect, she’d concluded; the museum hadn’t been as aggressive as it could have in advertising the event, and the morning was so intensely cold that right off the bat one of the Mason jars had shattered upon being shaken by a pre-teen boy, member of the blond family of homeschoolers who were thus far the event’s only visitors. And then there was Jessamyn, hunched miserably on the Blankenship House hearth crying her eyes out.

The bitter cold and lackluster attendance were to be expected in Virginia in early February. So was the historical museum’s tepid advertising campaign. Things such as these did not usually rattle Mary Nelle, who, in her twenty-seven-year-long career as a professional historical interpreter, had learned how to handle crises with the best of them. You drew yourself up a little higher, made your petticoat swish a little more purposefully when you led your group through the house, and above all, you kept in character and made those folks live and breath 1776. But a broken butter jar before 9 a.m. and the girl flat out sobbing on the job had cut Mary Nelle to the quick. This mess would never happen in Williamsburg.

Her being cooped up in the Blankenship House with a newbie would never have happened in Williamsburg, either. She and Heinz had thrived in regular spots in the Governors Palace for twenty years, guiding group tours through all the ins and outs of the mansion with ease and historically appropriate elegance. Both had started out in the detached kitchen and scullery, and then how quickly they moved up into the big house and into coveted roles as members of the gentry, Heinz lean and refined in his waistcoat, and Mary Nelle chipper even during peak season up and down the Governor's stairs in her kid leather slippers.

Mary Nelle liked to say that Betsey, their daughter, had practically been raised at the Governor's mansion. It was true. All through Betsey's childhood and growing up years they had worked and lived, practically, at the mansion, and danced with Williamsburg's most prestigious dance troupe, the Colonial Contra Dancers. They danced beautifully together, she and Heinz, always the star attraction always at the Governor's Christmas Ball, gliding across the blazing hardwoods in The Duke of Kent's Waltz. Mary Nelle would set off their presentation with a polished, yet friendly introduction. They used their real given names; she would graciously extend her arm and he would take it and kiss her hand as she smiled. "Allow me to introduce my dear husband, Heinz."

Heinz had begun to falter a bit while dancing two Christmas Balls ago; he was tired, he said. Betsey was gone, living in London with her British husband and baby boy. Mary Nelle and Heinz knew only from instant messaging and a monthly phone call during which they could hear his, Casey's, gleeful baby gibberish.

“This empty house is far too big,” Heinz had said, “and there are too many memories for my liking.” Mary Nelle wondered for a moment if he weren’t talking about the Governor's mansion, instead of their own home, but in the end it meant the same thing, she reasoned.

So they began studying the possibility of moving, landing someplace new where they could do good work in their field in the last few years before retirement. The brutal pace of Williamsburg, on which they had thrived in their prime, had become a little taxing, Mary Nelle had to admit, when a pair of opportunities opened up for them in a small, historic town near Roanoke, notable for its key position on the Petersburg-Salisbury Road. A change would do them good, Mary Nelle said, though she began to long for the Governor’s mansion before they even left. Now Heinz wore a suit and oversaw the entire historical complex. And Mary Nelle is Mrs. Blankenship.

Jessamyn was having a fit.

“Jessamyn! Good Lord. What is it?”

The girl had scarcely moved all morning from her place at the hearth; her hair was done up in a half-hearted bun and she was greenish. Her lips were swollen and chapped from crying. She was breaking one of the cardinal rules of historical interpretation in stepping out of character like that and she knew better. Jessamyn was a sober girl of eighteen and a quick and eager study. In her six months on the job, she had been placed under Mary Nelle’s tutelage and made remarkable strides. She had good bones, too; long, ginger-colored hair, a high forehead, delicate white eyelashes and freckles had made an

impression on Mary Nelle the minute Jessamyn had walked into the museum in her jeans and tennis shoes. And her name. Jessamyn. The girl was practically born to interpret history.

Mary Nelle had settled into a nice routine with Jessamyn in the Blankenship House and she was proud of her protégé. Jessamyn stayed in character, left her phone in the car, and did her best to keep with the standards of professional conduct for historical interpreters. “Remember, you’re not just a tour guide.” Mary Nelle said to Jessamyn the first time the girl stepped into the Blankenship House in full period costume. “We’re not just interpreting history. We’re interpreting emotions. Not yours or mine, but the emotions of those who lived in this house and worked this land, and what that means to the people who will walk through these doors wanting to learn about it.”

Mary Nelle saw the effort, the care that Jessamyn brought to her role as young Mae Blankenship, newlywed bride of Colonel Blankenship of the Second Virginia Regiment. She did a fine job and supported Mary Nelle’s Augusta Blankenship, British-born widowed mother of the Colonel. It was just the two of them in the four-room house. There was no ballroom or elegant staircase, and Mary Nelle missed the professionalism and bustle of Williamsburg. On slow days, and they were frequent, she would rustle her skirts on over to the museum offices and check in with Heinz, and just as often she would be startled at the sight of him, sitting at his desk literally pushing pencils back and forth. The sight of his wife did make him smile. He would look up from his desk and genuinely smile.

“Hello my dear, how are things on this end?” She would ask him, and how the sight of her, trim in her Mrs. Blankenship dress made it all make sense as it always had, but he was bored.

“I am bored silly.” He would reply, and though he said it jovially and Mary Nelle pretended to receive it as such, when she waked out of the office she knew he really meant it. And she knew because she, too, was bored. The Blankenship House was amateur operation; she and Heinz had walked in there with their history degrees and their decades of experience and on a good day, maybe twenty people came and with each one it was like starting at square one. But Jessamyn’s arrival to the house gave her something to do, some care to take with someone, at least.

“Jessamyn. Remember, dear, we must remain in character.”

Jessamyn looked up at Mary Nelle with red-rimmed eyes. Her delicate skin was splotchy, her nose pink as a rabbit’s. “I think I might be pregnant!” The word reverberated in the near-empty stone house.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” said Mary Nelle. Jessamyn’s boyfriend was an overweight farm boy named Darren. He came to pick Jessamyn up from work sometimes, and Mary Nelle always pretended to be busy when he came in. Probably nice enough, she thought, but the less she knew about him, and what Jessamyn was like outside of work the better. She didn’t want to hear anything about it, but Jessamyn’s words spilled out. She had missed her period, felt strange, was sick.

“I’m scared, Mary Nelle,” she said. “What do you think I should do?”

Mary Nelle felt the hairs stand up on her arms and her gut told her to shut it down. She was old enough to be Jessamyn's mother which meant Jessamyn's mother was out there someplace, likely clueless about her daughter's condition and Mary Nelle owed it to her, to Jessamyn's mother, to say give absolutely no advice to the girl, except to say, "I don't know, Jessamyn. Go to the pharmacy and get a pregnancy test." She told Jessamyn to go, go now and take the rest of the day off. She was in no shape to greet the public and Mary Nelle could handle the house by herself. Jessamyn gathered her things. Mary Nelle noticed a pair of Nike's poking out from underneath Jessamyn's skirts and looked away. Jessamyn walked out of the Blankenship House and Mary Nelle was alone. She could take in the entire house in once glance without having to leave the hearth, it was that small. The Blankenship House had no stairs.

In the car on the way back to their economical pre-retirement cottage that evening, Mary Nelle remarked, "What time is it in London? I'd like to try and get up with Betsey and Casey tonight." Betsey had just quit her job at the magazine to stay home, at their flat, she called it, with Casey. Betsey was sounding more and more British and Mary Nelle had never held Casey. Heinz said perhaps they should wait until the weekend. "Remember, when it is sunset here, there it is the middle of the night."

Jessamyn was officially pregnant. She arrived early to work the next day, pulled together, to her credit, but pregnant per the stick test she had purchased the previous afternoon at the pharmacy. The cold snap held, and visitors were as scarce as ever. With just her and Jessamyn in the house, Mary Nelle busied herself with rearranging all the cookware and place settings, and gave the entire kitchen floor a good sweeping with the

small, multi-color hearth broom. She had to bend straight over from the waist to do it, but it was worth it, to keep from having to deflect Jessamyn's attempts at personal conversation.

“Do you think we should get married?”

Mary Nelle swept harder and faster. She did not want to hurt Jessamyn's feelings, but this was slipping into the danger zone. Keeping in character is a cardinal rule of historical interpretation, one that Mary Nelle had intrinsically understood and respected from the beginning of her career. It was not a struggle; she did not want to get to know the real Jessamyn or hear about her modern outside-of-work problems. She straightened up and grabbed her raspberry wool cloak from the hook. “I've got to run to the office, dear.”

Heinz's office had a beautiful bay window overlooking the historical park. As Mary Nelle strode through stone path winding through the herb garden, she could see Heinz standing at the window before he could see her. She navigated through the winter savory and rosemary and headed down the main path to the museum office. Heinz saw her then, she knew, because he lifted a hand and waved. He met her at the door. “What a surprise, Mrs. Blankenship,” he said.

“Heinz, we are languishing,” she said.

He did not object. “It is a rather slow season.

“Do you know there has never been a dance at the Blankenship House?” Mary Nelle had looked into it. There was occasionally square dancing in the museum auditorium, but the park had never hosted a proper English contra dance.

“It has been a long while since we’ve danced,” said Heinz. “My knees are not what they used to be.”

“I am not worried about your knees. It is your dancing suit that needs attending to. It will need to be let out.”

Back in the house, she hung her cloak up on the wall and smiled brightly at Jessamyn. “I’m going to need to teach you some key waltzes and reels.”

Mary Nelle chose March 16, a Saturday, conspicuously just after the Ides, at 2 p.m. for the date of the Blankenship House’s First Annual Spring Contra Dance. She had willed the weather to be lovely, and it was, if a bit chilly. He was in her off-white gauze with the robin’s egg blue sash, and wore one of her finest dancing bonnets. She and Jessamyn were setting up in the museum’s large conference room. Tables and chairs had been removed, to allow space for dancing. A single slim buffet table with a lace mantel was arranged on one side of the room. Jessamyn had carefully placed plates of ginger snaps and jam thumbprints, tiny napkins, and a large punch bowl full of lemonade with real lemons.

The museum’s sound system was surprisingly wonderful, and the CD of late-Georgian party music sounded like a dream. It was ten to two and so far there were no attendees. Jessamyn fit into one of Mary Nelle’s old Governor’s mansion gowns, just barely, but altogether respectable-looking. A few people meandered into the room, and Mary Nelle greeted them amidst the opening strains of a Celtic jig. A pair of middle-aged sisters, an older man with a cane and thick glasses, and behind him a family of four. Still no Heinz.

“Welcome, friends!” said Mary Nelle, as the guests gathered bashfully in a clump at the edge of the makeshift dance floor. How many were there, seven total? They could have held the dance in the kitchen of the Blankenship House with an attendance like that, but Mary Nelle pushed forth.

“Welcome one and all. The song you hear playing is a waltz from the Regency period,” she said. “And in a moment, I’ll have you all come here and join me and we’ll learn some popular contra dances. But right now,” she addressed them. “Right now, it seems my partner has been detained.”

Heinz was detained. It was half past two when he entered the conference room, resplendent in his white knee britches, starched shirt and green brocade vest. Mary Nelle was irritated but relieved when he joined her, linked his arm around her waist and leaned in to say, “I had a phone call from a donor. I highly apologize.” The neck of his shirt was a bit tighter than usual, and she knew the britches could have been let out more. He was uncomfortable, but only she knew. To the sisters, the old man, the family, and even to Jessamyn, Heinz was striking, and he was.

She said it for the first time in two years. “Allow me to introduce my dear husband, Heinz.” And Heinz kissed her hand and bowed before they began their signature waltz. It was emotional. If Mary Nelle had closed her eyes she could have sworn they were back in the Governor’s ballroom. But there was business to take care of, dances to teach. The time had come to invite the guests to join them and learn a simple reel. Tentatively, the seven people shuffled out in the middle of the floor and complied as

Jessamyn put them into two rows. Mary Nelle, Heinz and Jessamyn filed in to make two fairly decent rows of five each, though unbalanced, gender-wise.

“You see, it’s all about sets and numbers,” Mary Nelle instructed. “Heinz and I are at the top of the set and Heinz is what is known as ‘the caller.’ It seems complicated at first, but you simply trust your partner and keep track of your number,” she said. It was slow going, this one, with everyone confused as to their number, dumbly turning around and facing the wrong way, but happy, Mary Nelle could certainly say that. The guests were happy. They did not even notice when Heinz missed two or three important calls. Mary Nelle noticed. She wished the whole thing to be over and quickly.

“Heinz,” she whispered, head close to his chest as they moved in sync, outside the row and down, then turning and down the center. “What is wrong?”

Heinz held her wrist, not lightly, but hard and his hand was hot. “Mary, my jacket does not fit me anymore, and I told you so last week when you took it to the cleaners. It just does not fit.”

Life in the Blankenship House had picked up a little with the stirrings of spring in the weeks following the contra dancing demonstration. Mary Nelle and Heinz had not spoken of the demonstration. Neither one spoke one word of it, though the museum staff had congratulated them on such a nice event. There was a photo in the local newspaper, Mary Nelle in her gauze and slippers, smiling and in control of the room. Half of Heinz is in the photograph, and Mary Nelle was struck with the grimace on his face, as if he were

in very real pain. His middle was not smooth at all, there were gaps and bunches amidst the buttons of his waistcoat. He did not look like himself. The newspaper clipping chilled her. She could not look at it. Would there be another dance demonstration? The museum had a smattering of telephone calls asking. "I will leave that up to my wife," Heinz replied.

"No, heaven's no," Mary Nelle had said, when the topic was broached. "No, I don't think the facility lends itself to dancing."

Attendance was up, anyway. Mary Nelle could expect a handful or so of people to pass through the house each day, pulling her out of the state of mild contemplation she had fallen into since pregnant Jessamyn quit over corsets and too much time on her feet. Mary Nelle tackled several house projects in quick succession, with no one to around to slow her progress. She swept out the hearth, really swept, which had obviously not been done in years, revealing a lovely under-fired salmon color that set the room off just so. She stood in the center of the kitchen with hands on hips, in her homespun dress, with a white house wrap on her head. She heard the front door creak open. And here I am with soot on my face, probably, thought Mary Nelle, but that is how it is in Colonial times in a place so remote. Augusta Blankenship would indeed have maintained her own hearth if the girl had been indisposed. She walked purposefully into the great room and there was Heinz. He was large in the doorway of the Blankenship House, and in the unforgiving noonday light he was ashen and lumpy. He had his dancing waistcoat draped over an arm.

“Well, hello my dear,” Mary Nelle said and squeezed his hand. “What are you doing with your coat?”

Heinz touched her cheek. “Dear heart, look at you. You have soot on her face.” Mary Nelle laughed and pushed his hand away. “Never mind about my face. I have been at work. Now please tell me what you are doing here at this time of day and with that coat.”

“This coat does not fit, and I thought I would take it to be altered.” He said. Mary Nelle was transfixed with this. Heinz in the house in his modern clothes and at this time of day away from his office. The sight of him was jarring.

“You’re taking the coat to be altered and why, dear?” She asked. He had never taken anything to be altered. And his dancing coat, of all things, which had no place being let out. She told him so. “There is no point in letting out that waistcoat, Heinz.” She heard herself as Heinz heard her, spent. She was spent. She spoke low and wanted air.

“Might we not need it for another demonstration?” He said. His gentle words were flat and did not form a question.

“No,” she said, her words and breath puffing out in the stillness of the high-ceilinged great room. “Put it away. The people do not dance here.”