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This thesis is comprised of two pieces of fiction. Each takes place in the fictional Hinge County, North Carolina. The first story, “Winter, Keep Us Warm,” deals with the themes of fear and desire, and how they intertwine with one another. The second story, “Oh, What a Foretaste,” is much longer than the first, and may be considered a novella. It explores the various relationships between faith, family, community, identity, and geography.

NO NEW SNOW TO COVER THE SNOW:
TWO STORIES

by

Jonathan Williams

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This thesis 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 _____

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WINTER, KEEP US WARM

She led me across the street and along the edge of the Christmas tree field, over the barbed wire fence where it sagged down into the mud, into the woods and across the streambed that had just a slow trickle of water underneath the thin layer of ice, through the brambles on the other side, across a small clearing covered in dead leaves, through a thicket of mountain laurel, to the lip of the larger stream where the water was moving too fast to be frozen except for in small places between rocks and the edge of the bank.

“Where?” I said.

She pointed.

“A cabin?”

She nodded, pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Her hands were shaking. She flipped open the top and took one out, put the cigarette in her mouth and took a lighter from her pocket. She couldn't get it lit. I took the cigarette from her mouth and the lighter from her hand. I lit the cigarette and handed it back to her. She smoked. We didn't talk for a few minutes. I watched the water not glinting, the almost-not-there reflections of branches.

“We should go on while it's still light out,” I said.

We went down along the bank a little ways and walked across a log to the other side. The trees tall and bare. I couldn't understand why she wasn't crying. She wiped her red, chapped nose on her coat sleeve. A shame—she looked so good in that coat.

Three years of her living just up the road and never showing her face on our property. Talking to me every now and again in class but usually not. Here now, needing me. Me, the only one who can help her. Leading me by the hand into the woods; getting us to a place where no one can see.

“Which way?”

She pointed. We walked, came after a couple of minutes to an old two-room cabin surrounded by brush. The walls were still up but the wood was cracked and splintered, rotted or rotting. A tree limb rested on top of the roof. No window unbroken. We went around to the other side. Dusk was coming on.

There was a doorway but no door. I went inside. Brooke stayed where she was. The first room had once been a kitchen. PVC pipe piled in the far corner, broken glass strewn about, a rusty sink lying in the middle of the floor. Next to that a cheap guitar with a broken string, a folded-up tarp. Sticking out from the bottom left corner of the doorway into the second room, the thumbnail and curling back fingers of a hand. Crushed peanuts and tiny screws scattered on the rotting floor beside it.

I told her to give me her lighter. She came inside and handed it to me. I flicked it on and went into the second room. Charlie’s body looked different than how my brother Zane’s looked after he fell off his four-wheeler doing a jump and landed on his back and the four-wheeler came down on top of him. Some reasons why I have an easier time looking at Charlie’s body than Zane’s are Charlie has a face and Charlie’s insides are inside and Charlie is frozen and Zane was my brother and Charlie has flickering light on

him like a treasure in a cave in a movie and it's only part of his head that's caved in instead of all of him.

"I don't know what happened," Brooke said from behind me.

"Yes, you do," I said. I didn't know I was going to say this until I said it.

She didn't say anything back. I turned around. She was leaning forward a little, lip pushed against her teeth, a few strands of hair hanging down in front of her eye.

"What happened?" I said.

"I was outside when it happened." She walked to the corner of the room and sat down in some sawdust. I imagined Charlie sitting on the ground where he now lay, playing the guitar that's now on the floor in the front room. She sits a few feet away from him. She tells him to stop playing, she's getting hungry; they should go into town and get something to eat. He stops, takes a swill from the bottle between them, then starts back playing again. She says to stop again; he doesn't. He's not playing a song, just noodling, improvising. Trying to write a song maybe. They are drunk. She stands up, takes the cheap Johnson from his hands before he can stop her, carries it out to the front room; she listens to the quiet no-strum chord the guitar makes when she puts it down. She comes back into the room and stands above him.

I walked over to where she sat. I decided that if she was crying I would sit down with her.

"Brooke," I said.

She looked up. Her eyes were dry and clear, open wide. She blinked. She didn't look away. Then I felt her cold hand close around my ankle. A gust of wind came through the room. There is a body behind me; it used to be Charlie's.

"Where's Charlie's truck?" I said.

We walked back to the road and up a quarter mile to where the pavement ended and gave way to dirt and gravel. It was another quarter mile to the turnoff where Brooke had parked Charlie's truck before she walked to my house.

She told me as we walked that it had happened sometime after midnight. After she found him she went to his truck and got in and drove around into the morning and all day until she was running out of gas and decided she should come back. She didn't call the police because she was scared. She is still scared. She does not want to call the police. She needs me to help her. She needs me to help her and part of helping her is not calling the police. Part of helping her is not asking her any more questions.

It was clouded over and gray and cold.

"Dixon," Brooke said.

"What?"

"What are we doing?"

"I'm helping you," I said.

She grabbed my shoulder, looked up the road. The sound of a car coming. We ducked down into the ditch between the road and the embankment and let the car pass. We stood up and stepped into the cloud of dust it left behind. I looked at her through the dust. I looked at her cheeks. They came to ledges high on her face. They were beautiful.

Charlie and Brooke in the hall at school, arms around each other, her sort of pushing against him with her front so that he was flat against his locker. She kissed him on the lips; he kissed her on the cheekbone. And then he did it again and then again.

We walked the rest of the way to the turnoff and got in the truck. I drove back down the road, turned into the Christmas tree field and parked by the barbed wire. Full dark now.

“This is all wrong,” I said. “We can’t do this.”

“We have to,” she said.

I looked at her not crying, looking at me with open eyes dry and clear, her face level with mine, not looking up into my eyes but straight into them and nothing. Only the two of us to know each other’s knowing.

I found a flashlight in the glove compartment, took it and got out of the truck. I turned toward the woods. Brooke was standing by the barbed wire, facing me, coat fitting her perfect. I turned on the flashlight; we followed the beam back to the log, crossed it, went to the cabin.

I pointed the flashlight at Charlie’s body. Brooke stood behind me. I told her to tell me how he died; she said she didn’t know. I said she did. I handed the flashlight to her and told her to keep it shining down on the body. I turned to the body, kneeled down beside it. I put the tips of my fingers to the upturned forearm, by now as cold as the air around it. I tried moving it a little, but it was stiff. It occurred to me to get the tarp from the front room to roll him up in; and just about the moment I thought of it, the why of them of having brought it came to me. Charlie bending down to unfold it, Brooke

standing behind him; the no-not-now, the silence. All very fast and without stopping, I went and got the tarp—kicking the guitar by accident along the way, strings buzzing and jingling; came back in and unfolded it, laid it flat on the floor and flipped Charlie over onto it not gently. Not a word or sound from Brooke in any of it; she kept the light shining down steady. I took the flashlight from her and turned it off. We stood in the dark not speaking.

Then I said, “What was he doing when it happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“You have to tell me.” I put the flashlight in my pocket, reached out for her hand but didn’t find it.

“Where are you?” I said.

No answer.

“Where are you?”

“Right here.”

I reached again, found her hand this time. I took hold of it. She didn’t stop me, but she didn’t grip back. I lifted her hand and held it between both of mine.

“I can’t help you if you won’t tell me what happened,” I said.

She pulled her hand away. I heard her walking across the floor. A breeze picked up, slow and calm at first, carrying the smell of brushfire, then built into a stiff wind. The sound of leaves swirling together in columns outside. One leaf, from outside or already inside, I couldn’t say, came along and brushed against my arm as it blew past.

The wind died down. I turned on the flashlight and shined it around the room. She was gone. I checked in the front room, then walked outside and shined the light around. Nothing. I yelled her name. Nothing. I listened to the wind coming and going, the leaves swirling and not swirling. I thought I could hear a rustling in the brush from a little ways off. I couldn't be sure if it was really there or I was just hearing it in my head. And when I listened close I thought I could hear breathing.

“We don't have time for this,” I said, maybe to her or maybe to nothing, and went back inside to the body. I turned off the flashlight and put it in my pocket—I didn't want to see the body anymore. I set to wrapping the tarp around it.

After I had it rolled up tight, I went back outside and said, “I could use some help.” The rustling and breathing were gone. Everything still and dark. I went back inside, bent down, used my back and my legs both to raise the bundle up onto my shoulder. I could feel the head hanging back and moving a little against the rigor mortis. It was as hard to balance as I always imagined it would be to carry two buckets of water hanging from the ends of a wooden stick. It started to slip forward. I jerked it back too hard and lost my grip and dropped it, heard it come down hard on the head or neck—right square on the face, it seemed to me. I turned and vomited onto the floor; some of it got on my arm and pant leg and shoe. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, bent back down and lifted the bundle again. Then it occurred to me that I couldn't see anything, so I put it back down again, pulled the flashlight out of my pocket, turned it on, and put it in my mouth. Then I took up the bundle again and went outside.

I didn't know how long it had been since we'd gone into the woods the second time, but I was wishing by now that we had parked the truck somewhere more hidden, even if it meant I'd have had to carry the body further.

It was slow going: keeping the bundle balanced, fighting through the exhaustion and the taste of vomit and flashlight metal, keeping from tripping over roots or slipping on leaves.

I came to the stream. I thought of wading across but decided against it. I put the bundle down, went and found a long and fairly stout limb. I came back and moved the body to the edge of the stream and pushed it into the water, pinned it to a rock with the limb to keep the current from taking it. I kept hold of the limb as I straddled the log, moving the body against the water a little at a time and pinning it to whatever holds I could find, hitting snags here and there on my crotch, flashlight grinding into my teeth.

After I got the body across the river, I raised it up again, put it this time on my other shoulder. When I got to the edge of the woods, I put it down and went out to the field. The truck was still there; I'd started to wonder if maybe it wouldn't be. The cab was dark, but when I pointed the flashlight at it, I saw her inside. She didn't turn around. I went back and got the body, then brought it back and put it in the bed of the truck. I got inside, put the truck in gear and drove forward.

I kept my hands on the wheel and my eyes ahead, listened to the hum of the engine, the quiet crunching sound when the road went from pavement to dirt. The tires kicked up dust as we went along, hitting now and again rocks and small potholes. The engine hum grew and grew, filling the space between us and then surrounding us. I didn't

know yet where to take the body to get rid of it, but I wasn't worried; for now there was only headlight dust and engine hum. I took my right hand from the steering wheel and put it on the seat between us. After a few seconds, I put it on her thigh. She pushed it away and then shoved me hard; I lost my grip on the wheel and then caught it back, but too hard, turning the truck toward the drop-off into the woods; I turned back to the left, but overcorrected; we fishtailed around until we were turned back in the direction we came from, then skidded off into the ditch between the road and the embankment.

Once we were still, I looked over at Brooke. She turned and faced me, didn't move. My brother died alone. His body lay there a long time before anyone found it. Charlie's body hung backwards over the side of the bed, still wrapped in the tarp except for the head, slung back as if inspecting the rock in front of its eyes. Here is a human. This is a human. It was me who found my brother; I stood there and thought about did he have a face. I turned back to Brooke. My brother's arms and legs out like making a snow angel, except a hidden one, because it was only feet and hands not hidden under the upside-down four-wheeler. Brooke was turned toward me, but looked down at the seat. A cheap guitar with a broken string. No-strum chord, hollow and sweet. She looked so good in that coat. My brother died alone. Dashboard glow and engine hum. A cabin? Where? He lay there a long time. She couldn't get it lit. Water not glinting. I thought about did he have a face. Looking down at the seat, looking down at her hand. I went to my mother's bedroom and knocked on the door. It was my mother's bedroom and not my parents' bedroom because I did not know where my father was and still do not know where he was or is. I knocked. No answer. I went in. Crushed peanuts and tiny screws. He kissed

her on the cheekbone. Headlight dust. Turned toward me, but looking down at the seat. I slapped her across the face; she slumped forward and put her head in her hands. The bedroom was empty. I went to the side of the bed. I imagined my father lying there, asleep. Father. I rubbed my hand across the pillow, pretending it was his face. She slumped, she held. Father. His eyes opening, sudden and terrified and knowing. She looked so good in that coat. Where is Zane. Her head in her hands. Engine hum. Zane is dead. You do not say that to me, boy; you do not say—Cheekbones through the dust. Swirling and not swirling. Zane is dead Zane is dead. The engine hum swelled. Head in her hands. A man I didn't know came to take Zane's body. A suit and hat. Three other men with him in Carhartts and boots. He attached a chain to the underside of the four-wheeler. The engine hum swelled and pressed. She slumped forward and held her head in her hands. I watched from the hillside. He hitched the chain to his truck. Her cheeks came to ledges high on her face. He got in the truck and drove forward slow. She looked so good in that coat. The four-wheeler started raising up. A cabin? A tarp? At first, Zane's body raised up with it, then it separated. I slapped her and she slumped. A handlebar coming out of his face like pulling a foot from wet sand. Dashboard glow, headlight dust, engine hum. Charlie inspected the rock. My brother fell to the ground. Her cheeks came to ledges. She looked so good in that coat. I slapped her across the face. She slumped forward and put her head in her hands. Inspect the rock. Fall to the ground. The engine hum swelled. I closed my eyes. I reached for her. The four-wheeler kept raising up; when it passed the point of being straight up in the air, just beginning to fall, it seemed to freeze for a moment, like a rearing horse.

OH, WHAT A FORETASTE

It was all well and good that the shepherd should watch the sheep; but who then to watch the shepherd? It was George to do it or no one. He'd said to Pastor Thomas when he and the other elders had first hired him, "Sheep's only as good as the shepherd."

George was sat down now eating pancakes and bacon. Once a month there was breakfast in the fellowship hall before church, and just like last time he'd got up early and come and made all the food himself. Pastor Thomas had never once offered to help.

After George finished his food, he went over to him.

"Good morning, Pastor Thomas."

"Good morning, George," Pastor Thomas said, with that tone of his. That off-the-mountain, no-nothing-inside-it tone. All calmness, all patience. He'd hugged George the day they had hired him. No sir. No sir. George didn't know or by-God care how things were done out in Ohio, but no hugging here, not between grown men anyhow. But he didn't say this to him, of course; you had to forgive a man who was fresh from off the mountain, not to mention from the Midwest—a place George wouldn't know the first thing to do either if it was him who'd moved there instead of the other way around, it was true.

Another thing Pastor Thomas had done at first was to tell George he didn't have to call him Pastor Thomas, just Tom was fine, but George went on with calling him how he'd done before. You couldn't let a man—pastor or otherwise—forget his place.

“I think I may have gave your boy a scare the other day,” George said.

“Oh?”

“Went in the garage up there at the manse to make sure that mower was working alright—it’s given people trouble in the past, and I didn’t want you not to have use of it come spring—and Peter was in there and I figure he wasn’t expecting nobody to come in.”

Pastor Thomas put his hand on George’s shoulder. “That’s alright, George. I’m sure he’s fine. Just maybe give a call up to the house from now on whenever you’re wanting to come over.”

Come over. George couldn’t see what was coming-over about checking on a lawn mower. And *house.* That’s what you called it if it was yours.

“I’ll do that from now on,” he said, but Pastor Thomas was missing the point, that he hadn’t even once cut that grass since since he’d moved to River Oak in March. George had noticed it wasn’t getting cut, started driving up once a week over the spring and summer to see if it had finally got cut, each time marking down the date in his notebook. By June, he’d got sick of watching it grow, went and got the daggum mower from the daggum manse garage and cut it his own daggum self. It was December now, and it hadn’t got mowed one single time since.

Then he left the fellowship hall and went to the storage closet, got the clip-on microphone, took it to the sanctuary. People had been having trouble hearing Pastor Thomas; George had told him he needed to project his voice more, but it hadn’t done any good, so George had took some money from the church’s safe and drove all the way to

Asheville to go to RadioShack and get that microphone. He put it there on the pulpit, then stepped down from it and took a seat on the front row.

It was only twenty minutes till church, and again, like an idiot—oh man, was he dumb—Peter had slept through his alarm and was only just now getting out of bed. Why couldn't he just get up in the morning? Why couldn't he have just got his ass out of bed and gone early with his dad and had a nice, hot breakfast in the fellowship hall? Why couldn't he just not be tired all the time?

He flipped the lightswitch in the bathroom and squinted against the light. When he could finally see his face in the mirror—all red and droopy and pitiful, hair sticking up so bad that he didn't know how in the world he was going to get it to lay down without a shower—he got so angry, everything inside of him winding up so tight and fast inside of him and begging him to please spring it loose that he couldn't help it: he made a good, tight fist and watched in the mirror as he raised it up and punched himself a good one on the temple.

George looked up at the pulpit, remembered when he was little and it was his own father up there preaching. The smell that come off him, Fraser Fir and woodsmoke, as he stood up from that same pew George was sitting on now. How big a man he seemed as he went up those three steps. Shoulders wide, back straight. The blue blazer he wore. George it had hanging in his closet now and took it out from time to time.

George had helped him make that pulpit. They'd fell an oak from the bank of the Highlands River across the street from the church, carved the pulpit from it, and used the rest to keep them and George's mama warm through the winter.

"We're doing the work of the Lord," his father said the day they fell it. Ax in hand, breathing heavy and satisfied.

"But ain't it God who made that tree?"

"You listen to me, son," his father said. "Some trees He makes for standing; others for cutting down."

George looked at all them trees in the woods across the river, gone purple and yellow and orange and red, like a giant fire with the flames set still.

"But how can you know, Father? How can you know which is which?"

"He tells you."

People were coming in now and taking their seats. Peter, Pastor Thomas' boy, came walking by with his head down, walked between George and the pulpit without a word.

"Peter," George said.

Peter stopped and said, "Hi, Mr. Kenner."

George liked Peter. He didn't talk a whole lot, but when he did he was respectful. Played guitar in the worship band, and played it sweet. Had one brown sweater that he wore every Sunday. There was something in that. Pastor Thomas, it seemed, had a new jacket or sweater on practically every week.

"Know what your father's preaching on today?"

“No, sir.”

“Well, we’ll both find out together then.”

“Yes, sir,” Peter said. He stood there a moment, then turned and went over to where the band played. He took the guitar from its stand and set to tuning it.

Then Pastor Thomas came in. He went straight from the door to the front of the sanctuary, didn’t stop to talk to nobody, hopped up the steps and stood at the pulpit. Planted his elbows on it and leaned forward, gripped the front edge. George remembered right then that Miranda was in the nursery this week. It would only be him in the front row today, him and Pastor Thomas above him. He might have moved if he would have remembered it sooner, maybe sat back a few rows.

Up there just smiling. He waved at someone; George wondered was it Charlotte-Claire. Pastor Thomas’ wife had been dead some five years, and every woman in the church seemed to have just the perfect plan for him, knew just who was right for him. He never took any interest, said there just wasn’t the desire right now; but you couldn’t not notice the way he looked at that Charlotte-Claire, and her only twenty-seven years old—not to mention that baby boy, the daddy a man from Tennessee she hardly ever knew. Miranda kept telling him it was nothing at all between them, they just enjoyed talking to each other was all.

“That’s how it starts,” he kept saying.

“You’re imagining things,” she kept saying back.

“But what if I’m not?”

“Would it be so awful, them getting married?”

“The way he looks at her don’t look like marriage is what he’s got on his mind.”

“All you got is the look in a man’s eye; and it’s a look that I for one have never even seen a hint of it at all. You don’t forget that, George.”

Maybe she was right, maybe he was imagining. But if not—there wasn’t any deeper sin than trying to be shepherd and wolf both at once.

“Just you down there in the front row today?” He smiled down gentle at George.

“Just me.”

He picked up the microphone, looked at it a moment, then put it back down. “You know, George, I think I’ll work on projecting today.” He shuffled some papers, cleared his throat. It seemed like he was about to begin, say a word or two before worship, but then he looked down and said, “You look awfully lonely down there, George.”

“So do you.” It came so all-of-a-sudden George wasn’t sure it had actually said it at all. Pastor Thomas cocked his head and bunched his eyebrows all up—but not angry, more in a way of being about to laugh.

The drums cut through the quiet, and one big strum from Peter’s guitar. They stayed locked looking at each other for another moment or two, till George realized and closed his eyes and bowed his head. He listened to Peter’s guitar, prepared his heart for worship. Flow in on this music, Holy Ghost; be to this music as fog upon a river. *Better is one day in your courts*, he sang, *better is one day in your house; better is one day in your courts than thousands elsewhere*. George closed his eyes, let the music crash on through the walls and flood all around him. It swelled up and up, up and up—the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up, Father—then a sudden quiet, a steady whisper of guitar through

it, piano under it to give it something to weave all around and through. One quiet note at a time. Ghost taking slow form. Quieter than silence. Hovering Ghost, flow gentle in my soul.

Then the building-back, the bursting-forth. piano and drums and bass in all their power. Peter sending up notes to soar above it all. George opened his eyes—the zeal of thine house—and there was Pastor Thomas, hands in his pockets, just looking around, as if the Holy Ghost wasn't nothing to get worked up about.

He closed his eyes back, but he couldn't focus on worshipping. Zeal of thine house. Them that reproach thee. He kept opening his eyes to see if maybe now Pastor Thomas was showing any interest at all—surely by now, surely this time—but no. He was singing, George owned that much, but them hands stayed in them pockets, them eyes open wide. Just looking around.

Could be today it was the Father's will that George watch instead of worship. Maybe watching was a kind of worship.

But once Peter got going playing, whatever had happened earlier in the morning almost always drifted away, didn't matter anymore. He couldn't seem to ever make himself completely sure that it was all true, but in those moments where the rest of the band gave way for him, when those notes started flowing out of him without him having to think about it at all but only let it come—if that didn't prove it, if that wasn't the Holy Spirit moving, then what was it? And the way those three pieces of rosewood fit together

in the back of that Martin to make a sweeter sound than any other guitar you could ever hear. If that didn't point to a Trinity—

It is well, they sang, and that's when Pastor Thomas lifted up his head sudden and powerful from staring down at the floor—or wherever it was he was staring—and looked with longing toward the back, where Charlotte-Claire was sitting, eyes narrowing. *It is well with my soul*. Filling up with what couldn't be nothing if not desire of the flesh of a woman. And then, not till then, closing his eyes and raising his hands and peace coming over his face.

But George kept his eyes open. He couldn't take his eyes from Pastor Thomas. If I am wrong, Father; if it is Your Ghost filling him, Father, and not fleshly desire—do not let me be deceived. The more he watched him, the more he noticed it building up inside his soul. A furiousness—not him furious; a furiousness come from somewhere else or born of its own self. He had to look away. The wood grain of the pulpit, pure in the snow-light from the back windows. Whatever the Father would put upon him now, wouldn't He let it rest easy upon George's soul?

When the music ended and it was time for the sermon, Georg knew that now even more than before he had to keep his senses full alert and keep his eye and his ear both on Pastor Thomas. See were his words of the Father, or did they have the death-sweet taste of deception; see did he have holy light in his eye or the blade-shine of lust. Or just the dull swirl of plain waywardness.

Pastor Thomas leaned forward on the pulpit, so that his fingers curled over top of it, and his head stuck out from over it. As if George hadn't ever told him about working on it with his father, feeling the blessedness of the work so much that it was like the wood was alive when he looked at it and especially when he touched it, the color richer and richer every day, as they carved away at it, and then sanded it smooth.

It's hard for me to see Your ways in his, Lord, I confess it. If there they be, unblind me to them. If there they be, let him speak your words and show me. But if I'm right, Father, and his ways are not Your ways, send that light from Heaven and let it shine round about him. And if you need a vessel for that light, Father, you go on ahead and you send it through me; and if that light should blind him like Saul before he was Paul, if you need an Ananias to take that blindness away and fill him with the Holy Ghost, you go on and send me to do that, too.

"A few years ago, my wife passed away," Pastor Thomas said. "Most of you probably know that; some of you may not. It was an awful, the way she died, an awful car wreck. Peter and I were both in the car; we both saw how just how awful it was." Hadn't Peter said he didn't know what his father was preaching on? George turned toward him. Sat still, guitar still across his lap. Couldn't see his face.

"You know what I did when that happened?" George turned back to Pastor Thomas. Still leaning on that pulpit, fingers gripping the edge so that they were going a little white. "You know what I did? I blamed God." How much fuller his father's voice had been. "And I don't mean to say I simply felt anger toward God—though I did most certainly feel anger toward Him; I *said* it to Him. 'You did this,' I said. And I don't just

mean in my head. I said it out loud. I screamed it! ‘*You did this!*’ I screamed. Middle of the night, in my own bedroom. *Naked*. Ask my son, he could hear it, I imagine. Never asked him, to be honest; I was too ashamed.” Didn’t even look down at Peter as he said it. “And you know what? I still blame God.”

Had George’s attention. Everyone else’s, too. You could bet he had Peter’s. But what for? Come on, Pastor, why don’t you just gone and get to the part where you stop trying to shock us; why don’t you just come on ahead now and preach the Word? Word of the Lord not positive enough that it don’t need a negative out front of it? God needs the devil, that it? Have to play devil first before you put yourself on the side of the Lord? Just a game to you? You have to put a man’s hand on a hot stove before you take him outside into a blizzard? You think he needs the one to know the other?

“Do you know who else yelled at God in the middle of his suffering?” Pastor Thomas said, raising himself up from leaning on the pulpit. “Do you know who else blamed him? King David. A man after God’s own heart, the scriptures tell us. He shook his fist at the Lord as often as praised him! ‘How long, O Lord?’ David says over and over again in his Psalms. Why are you doing this to me? Why are *you* doing this to *me*? And what are we to do with this? What do we do with these Psalms? Are these the evil Psalms? Did Satan slip these ones in without us noticing? Should we cut these out of our Bibles?”

“Or maybe—okay, yes, I’ve got it—these are examples of David’s sinful humanity. He was, after all, a sinner. Surely this groaning and yelling and crying out at the Lord, putting it on Him, is not right—right?”

“But if we look at it this way we’re missing something. Something extremely important. For what was it that Jesus Himself said as he died? ‘My God, My God,’ He said. ‘My God! My God!’ He screamed. Just like I did. Just like we all do. Can you say with honesty—can you say that you don’t? ‘My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?’ Was Jesus a sinner? Did he do wrong in crying out?”

He leaned back down on the pulpit, gripped that edge.

“But here’s what Jesus didn’t do: He didn’t rebel. He cried out and kicked and screamed and pleaded. But He didn’t take Himself down off that cross. He didn’t listen to that Roman soldier; he didn’t say to the Father, ‘You know, I think I’ll do it my way; I think I’ll take some angels and just do it my way.’ Do you remember who it was that did do that? That was Lucifer, my brothers and sisters. Jesus, in the end, said, ‘Into your hands I commit my spirit.’

I get it in my head sometimes that God’s to blame. I do, there’s no point in lying about it. But in the end, when I finally remember who I am and He is...” He looked down at George. Right at him, no mistaking it. “I submit.”

Then, as the music started up for the offering, he stepped down from the pulpit, sat down right there next to George, put his hand on George’s shoulder.

“I project alright?” he said.

Soon as he was in his truck—he went straight out to it, right as soon as the service was over—George took his notebook from the glove compartment. His hand shook so that he could hardly hold the pencil. He wrote all that he could get hold of, fast as he

could get hold of it. *Call before you come to the manse—“house”. No microphone.*

Leaning on pulpit. Blaming God, talking about himself being naked and yelling at God.

Charlotte-Claire (mixing up lust and praise).

He looked out his windshield at snow coming down quiet on River Oak. Everything snow-covered already, but still it kept on coming. Nothing but white: land, sky, field beyond the river, river itself (not froze; white for how wild the water was). Couldn't even see at all Knob Hill through the whiteness. Only thing keeping the land from the sky was the leafless woods way off on the other side of the field. George could only just make them out; anyone didn't know to look for them might not see them. How do you know which is which? He will tell you. And the sermon from the day after they'd fell that tree, the one where his father told about Saul, how he set out down that road to Damascus *yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.* Are there not those among us, brothers and sisters—in our own county! in our own town!—who themselves do breathe that Saul-breath, that breath full of threatenings and slaughter? And let us not forget! Let us not deceive ourselves. Did Saul see himself as threatener? Did he proclaim himself a slaughterer? No, brothers and sisters; he saw himself as doing the Lord's own work! It's not them that calls themselves a threatener or a slaughterer that we must keep watch for through the dim-mooned night of this earthly life; it's them that calls themselves a doer of God's work, but that carries in their mouth and in their lungs—in their heart, brothers and sisters!—that deadly breath of threatenings and slaughter. And do not forget, we must not be deceived by the lies and flatteries which may sweeten the breath of one who comes to destroy. It is only the most godly of men

who can detect the deadly breath on the man of evil who would proclaim himself a worker of the will of the Father.

He'd go back in. He'd go back in now and talk to Pastor Thomas. Not say anything rash, not lose his temper, not say anything to him other than just make conversation and see what come of it. That's what he'd do.

So he got out of the truck and went inside, where most people were still there, all laughing and talking to each other. Wasn't it any of them that saw anything wrong with that sermon? If only him, maybe he was just seeing things. Or maybe—and he wasn't saying this with any certainty, no sense of superiority—but maybe it was, like his father said, a thing only the godliest of men could sense. Wouldn't the Lord give him the wisdom to know?

He didn't see Pastor Thomas, but—and of course, of course this was the one to talk to—he did see Peter. What he'd say to the boy after a sermon like that, he didn't know, but here he went on over to him; this is what God had in mind giving him the nudge to go back inside.

Peter was sitting there on that front pew over far side of the sanctuary, just sitting there by himself looking at that guitar, just like he did most every Sunday after church. Sometimes he played it; sometimes he just looked at the wood of it. How the boy loved that thing. It belonged to the church, had for some time, but there were times George had visions of giving that guitar to Peter; of Peter looking at him with a look of blue eyes gone near dead with disbelieving joy.

He made his way over and took a seat behind him.

“How’s it going, Mr. Kenner?” Always more outgoing after the service, having played so sweet. George wondered sometimes if the Holy Ghost didn’t do something to that guitar every time Peter played it—make some mark, add some layer, reveal some part of Himself for only Peter to see.

“Just fine, Peter,” he said. “You played it sweet this morning, Peter.”

“Thanks. But I—I mean, I guess I can’t really take credit, though.”

Couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Guess not, son. Guess not; but I can’t figure that it’s anything wrong with taking joy in it—taking joy that it’s you who gets to have it done through you. Nothing wrong with taking joy in your part, is there?”

Peter sat with that. Clear enough he was thinking it over—staring at the pulpit, mouth all bunched to one side—but no answer.

“Some sermon your father gave today, huh?”

And that made Peter freeze up like he’d just got told for the first time his mother’s dead, made him sit there eyes wide open and can’t move, then blink of a sudden and look down at that guitar, try to say he’s sorry through his choking up.

“He misses her so much,” he finally said.

It might have made you think that it was a sermon come from God that Pastor Thomas had gave, the way Peter cried like that about it, said how much his father loved his mother. That’s what it made George think right at first.

“I’m so sorry, son,” George said. “Didn’t mean to make you cry.”

Peter didn’t respond, only nodded a little, picked at the cushion of the pew.

“Didn’t you say you didn’t know what he going to talk about?”

He nodded.

“He didn’t tell you even that he was going to talk about your mother?”

“No.” He barely could say it.

George put his arm around him. “Every father does things sometimes that hurts their boy,” he said. “It don’t mean he don’t love you, Peter. But you’re allowed to be hurt by a thing done by you that’s wrong.”

Peter lifted his head. “You think—” he squinted a little, as if a bright light was coming from George’s face. “You think he was wrong?”

“I don’t know, son,” George said. “All I’m saying is there’s not a thing wrong with you feeling hurt by it not being run by you—if you are hurt by it; if not, then good, there’s no problem. Could be he was wrong; could be he wasn’t. But if it hurt you for him not ask you first was it okay, there’s no sense in pretending the opposite.”

“But then—”

“But then what, son?”

“But if he said something he shouldn’t have—or said it without doing what he should have before saying it, at least—would that mean that his sermon wasn’t, you know, right?”

“What do you mean, Peter?” George said.

“You trying to say you don’t think his sermon was from God?” Hurt to see Peter’s eyes go cold with so much anger and so much fear, but it wasn’t for George to not say what the Father had for him to.

“I don’t know, son,” George said. “Not for me to judge what’s of God or not. I mean, was it some things in there what surprised me? I’ll confess it, there were. But don’t the Father work like that, sometimes? Don’t he surprise us sometimes? Don’t he take what we think is black and show it to be white, or sometimes something we think’s white is black?”

“I guess so,” Peter said, then looked away from George and back down at the wood of that guitar, maybe for an answer he might find in it.

“Not trying to upset you, son,” George said. “Sorry if I am.”

“No, sir,” Peter said. “It’s fine.”

“Not trying to make you go and think your father doesn’t have his whole heart set to doing and saying what God would have him say. Not saying he’s got any intention of hurting you or anybody else. You know that, right, son?”

“Yes, sir.”

As they pulled out of the parking lot, his dad said, “Have you been crying?”

“No.”

“You look like you’ve been crying.”

“Well, I haven’t been.”

The heat in the car was on, full-blast; it brought back the feeling of greasiness that the cold had seemed to freeze away on his walk to church. He turned it down.

“Hey,” his father said. “Turn that back up.”

“I’m hot.”

“Well I’m cold, Peter. Turn it back up, please.”

“We’ll be home in like three minutes,” Peter said.

“Exactly. You can handle two minutes of heat,” his father said, and turned it back up. He kept his eyes on the road. Peter stared at him, tried to make him feel him staring. He kept facing forward; Peter reached for the knob and turned the heat all the way off. He waited for his father to react, but he didn’t. Not at all, just kept his eyes on the road.

Fine, then. He could be quiet, too. He looked at his father, tried to follow his gaze and see if he could look at the same part of the road he was looking at. He was sure he’d somehow know if he found it. But he didn’t get that sureness, so instead he just looked out his window at the hillside where people sometimes went sledding. New snow falling down on dirty snow.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going to talk about Mom?” Peter didn’t turn, kept looking out his window. Eventually, come March, maybe April, there would be that one last snow; it would get dirty, and no new snow would cover it. It would go to slush and melt away.

“Didn’t I?” his father said.

After winter, a wet world of mud.

He knew it was Pastor Thomas right as soon as the phone rang.

“George?”

“Yessir.”

“It’s Tom.”

“Good afternoon, Pastor Thomas. How are you on this good afternoon?”

There was a long, nervous quiet, and then Pastor Thomas said, “I wondered if I might talk to you about something, George.”

Then George held a little quiet of his own—let Pastor Thomas sweat a little more—before he said, “You might, indeed. What’s on your mind?”

“Well, it’s—I thought we might talk about it in person.”

“Hope everything’s alright.”

“Yeah,” Pastor Thomas said right away. “When would be a good time for me to come over?”

“Now’s fine for me,” George said. “No need to ask permission before you come to our house.”

There was a sudden, deep inhale come from Pastor Thomas’s end. “Fine, then. I’ll be there in just a few minutes.”

After he put the phone back on the hook, he took a seat in his reading chair that he kept his Bible beside. He asked that the Father be with him now, that no word from his mouth be anything else than the Father’s own; that still—even now, with it seeming so clear—if he was wrong, the Lord would show him and forgive him and help him to understand that Pastor Thomas was in line with the Lord’s will for River Oak. Help him see what he couldn’t now, if there was things he wasn’t seeing right.

He stared out the window on the other side of the room. Snow rising wild up from the ground and swirling all around the leafless tree in the middle of the yard. Rushing through, swarming among them branches like by-God locusts.

He heard the screen door open. "Come on in," he said. He stayed sat in his chair. Didn't turn to at Pastor Thomas when he come in the room. Just kept staring out the window and said, "Look out there at that tree. Isn't that something?"

"That's some pretty merciless wind."

"That right there, Pastor—I figure that's the only dark thing in River Oak."

"The wind?"

"That tree," George said. "That tree's the only thing won't let the snow cover it."

"Hmm," Pastor Thomas said. "That's something else."

Wind blowing holy breath against the panes. "Have a seat, Pastor."

Pastor Thomas got the rocking chair from over by the fireplace and brought it over, set it down in front of George and sat down. Eyes blue and hard and looking every bit as cold as his red cheeks. Like he'd spent the whole drive over telling himself to don't be a sissy now, Tommy, you look that mean old George in the eye now and you say to him just exactly what it is you have to say to him. As if George was a bully, and not a man desiring of nothing but the good of the Father's house and people.

Pastor Thomas looked around the room, like how you do when you're waiting for the doctor to come in. He didn't say a word. If he was waiting for George to say something, he'd be waiting all night. George wasn't going to talk first. Pastor Thomas come here to say something, so how about he goes on ahead and says it.

Finally he looked George in the eye and said, "Peter told me you had a little talk with him after church today."

“That I did, Pastor.” He was calm, not even any urge at all to look away from them hard blue eyes that was holding back who-knows-what frightful threatenings. “He’s a fine boy, one of the most thoughtful boys I ever met.”

“He is, George, I agree—and I appreciate you saying so, too. But you have to understand. What goes along with that thoughtfulness is that he’s extra sensitive.”

“I should say so, Pastor. I’d say that’s how it is that he plays that guitar so sweet. Sensitivity to the Holy Ghost’s stirrings.”

“I really do appreciate how kind you are to him, how much you encourage him. He does, too. But what I’m trying to say is—and it’s because of those very same things you compliment him for—you have to be careful what you say to Peter.” He was leaning in now, gazing up at George with his hard eyes gone soft and pleading, as if he was asking for mercy on his soul. Not the soul of another, not the soul of his son. His.

“I say something that upset him?” George said.

Pastor Thomas stayed in that posture. Kept blinking. “You did upset him a little.”

“What of what I said upset him?”

“Know that I’m not angry at you, George, it’s not that. I just felt it was important to come and talk to you about it, let you know. He really is upset, George.”

“I get that, Pastor; I’m asking what exactly was it of what I said that upset him so bad.”

“Well; he seems to have gotten the idea that I’ve done wrong by him.”

George let that settle. Let it have it a chance to ring around in Pastor Thomas’ head. “So this is more about you than Peter, then, sounds like.”

Pastor Thomas sat up, tucked his chin just the littlest bit into his neck. “No, George, it’s not. It’s about my son.”

“I’m sorry to of upset your boy, Pastor Thomas, but it seems to me you come down here because of something I said upset *you*.”

And didn’t those hard eyes bespeak a hard heart? The heart in commune with the Father, that was a soft and sensitive heart—like Peter’s, like George’s father’s.

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re saying, George.”

He knew it risked haughtiness to think it; but right now, those eyes how blade-shining cold they were, how could George not also own the purity of his own heart?

“Pastor Thomas,” he listened in perfect peace to himself saying, “I’m surely not trying to say you’re not a man of God.”

Pastor Thomas’s words come slow and steady. “I didn’t say you were, George; no one said you were saying that.” Eye of a storm of words not getting spoke.

“And it’s *not* what I’m saying, Pastor.”

“Then why mention it, George?” A dark tree in a white land.

“The way you’re looking at me, Pastor. The way you’re looking at me is why I mention that.”

Pastor Thomas didn’t have a thing to say to that. Thanks be to God that Miranda weren’t home for this. This thing brewing in her own living room.

“The way you’re looking at me, Pastor—it just seems like the kind of way I’d look at someone if they claimed I wasn’t a man of God, so I felt it necessary to make it clear that’s not what I was saying. That’s all.”

After a long time of still looking at George that same way, Pastor Thomas said, “George, I don’t know what you’re trying to right now. I came here to talk about how you upset my son. The only thing that upset me is that you upset my son. That you made him think I’d done wrong by him. You have something else you want to talk about?”

“But don’t you see that there, Pastor? What you just said? It’s not for your son you come down here; it’s about the idea of someone thinking you done wrong. That’s what’s upsetting you, seems like to me.”

“I didn’t do any wrong by him, George—and yes, it upsets me that you’d make him feel that way—but it’s him I came here worried about, not me. Look, George, he told me it was the conversation he had with you that upset him. That’s why I’m here, to understand what exactly you were trying to say to him, and why you felt it was—”

“Peter know you’re here?” If he don’t care about his own son, what of the sons and daughters of the Lord, them he’s supposed to be leading? “You tell him you were coming down here to talk to me about this?”

Pastor Thomas leaned back in the rocking chair, stared down at the floor, looked back up with one eyebrow low and wrinkled. Taking pity. No denying it how good a help-me-understand face he had.

“What is it that you have against me, George?” he said.

“I got not a thing against you, Pastor.”

“Have I done something to you?”

“Just because you’re making this all about you don’t mean I’m making anything all about me.”

“*This*. I’m making *this* all about me. What is *this*?”

“I’m just a messenger, Pastor, nothing more. It’s not about me or what I think; it’s about the will of the Father for his house and his people.”

“What are you talking about, George!” Pastor Thomas said then, standing up from his chair so violent that he tripped over it and knocked it over. “What is it you think I’m—”

“You don’t just leave that chair sitting on the ground like that,” George said, Ghost setting a fire blazing in him. “Have some respect.”

Then the sound of the door opening, a blast of cold air, Miranda coming in right in time to see him—her pastor, by God—standing over George like to do who knows what.

“Hello, Pastor,” she said, froze with fear.

That rocking chair. Lord Jesus, that rocking chair.

“Hi there, Miranda,” Pastor Thomas said, forcing out a laugh—a damn lie, a by-God deception of a laugh—“you’re just in time to see how clumsy I am. Can’t even stand up from a chair without knocking it over.”

Then he picked up the chair, set it back how it was, gave it a little pat like to say to them everything’s all better now.

“I was just about to get dinner started,” Miranda said, voice sweet as she could get it. “Won’t you stay and eat with us?”

“No, no.” Not even looking that sweet woman in the eye. “I—I mean, thank you, I appreciate you offering—I have to be getting home. I do hate to pass up on your cooking, though. I know I’ll be missing out.”

George waited till he heard Pastor Thomas’s car start up, then said, “There’s no doubt of it anymore. No doubt about that man.”

“What happened?” Miranda said.

“That man is not the man for this church.” Hadn’t said these words straight out to anyone till now; had told some of his doubts to Miranda before, but never like this.

“I don’t know, George,” Miranda said. “I think you’re too hard on him; I don’t think you’ve ever really given him a chance.”

“Is it just me? You don’t sense nothing, nothing at all? You can tell me in your heart of hearts there’s nothing about him puts you ill at ease? Is it only me the Lord’s nudging? If only you could of heard his sermon this morning.”

“I heard nothing but good about today’s sermon, dear.”

“Nothing but good? That is just—nothing but good!”

“Everyone kept going on about it at Margaret’s. How good that sermon was took up nearly half of lunch.”

“Who? Who was saying how great it was?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Savannah, for one. And, well—”

“Let me guess,” George said.

“Hold on, now, George; it’s not fair of you to—”

“If Charlotte-Claire says something’s good, it *must* be. Specially if it’s something Pastor Thomas did.”

“It wasn’t just them two.”

“You know what I think?” George said. “I think he’s got some kind of power over the women of this church.”

Miranda laughed.

“I’m serious,” George said. “I’m serious.”

She kept on laughing. If there was one person who should trust him, if there was just one person who should trust him to have prayed and prayed, trust him to have nothing but the will of the Father for his house and his people as his one and only interest. Won’t you show her, Father? Won’t you give me the words?

So he let her have her laugh—he let her finish. Then he said, “Okay, maybe I’m a fool to say a thing like that. Maybe I am. But won’t you just listen a little?”

“Okay, George,” Miranda said, wiping the laughing from her eyes. “Alright.”

“I just want you to know that I been praying and thinking and praying and thinking all about this. You trust me on that?”

“Of course I do.”

“And you don’t doubt that what I have as my desire is the will of the Lord? That it ain’t about me?”

“I know that, George; I don’t doubt you.”

“I been questioning myself at every turn, dear. I been asking the Lord over and over to don’t let me deceive myself. You got to believe me about that. Won’t you believe me about that?”

“I believe you. Of course I do.”

“And it’s just seeming to get more and more clear to me that something’s out of line about the ways of Pastor Thomas.”

Miranda looked at him now with all her attention. She took a seat now in the chair Pastor Thomas had been in. She took his hand in hers. “I’m sorry for laughing at you, dear. It’s just that thing you said about him having some sway over the women.”

“Okay, could be that was a fool thing to say. But won’t you just keep your heart open to any stirrings from the Lord about Pastor Thomas?”

“Of course I will.”

“Isn’t there anything at all that’s struck you as off about him? You told me yourself that that one sermon threw you, didn’t you? That one about the best mind being the one can hold two opposite ideas in it at the same time and not go crazy?”

“Did seem a bit odd, I guess.”

“Didn’t you tell me it seemed like doing that with your mind could let a person get all mixed up with ideas not from the Lord?”

“That’s true; I forgot about that. That’s true.”

“And how about that grass, Miranda? How about how he don’t take care of the manse? That don’t seem right, does it? That he wouldn’t take care of the manse? It being part of the church? It being part of the Lord’s own house?”

“Does seem he could take better care of it. But do you think that’s—”

“How about how he seems to never want anybody there? How he’s so protective of it, as if it’s his own house?”

“Okay, I see what you’re getting at. It’s just that I’m not so disturbed by him as you are, George. That’s all.”

“But he does disturb me. He does. What all did you hear about that sermon at lunch? What exactly did they tell you about it?”

“They said he talked about his wife, that he was very honest about his struggles; and they said you could tell how much he loved her.”

“That’s all they said about it? They said that for all of lunch?” Hadn’t occurred to him till now: Couldn’t it be—Lord Jesus—couldn’t it be that Pastor Thomas partly at least told that sermon for making Charlotte-Claire swoon? Lord Jesus.

“No, there was more.” She chewed her thumbnail trying to think it up, trying to find even one other thing got said. “Savannah told what he said at one point about knowing the Lord was in control.”

“You want to know something, Miranda?” She started up again with chewing on her thumbnail. “You want to know the thing about that?” he said.

“Yes, George; please go on and tell me the thing about that.”

“Why are you getting ill with me?” he said.

“I’m not getting ill; just come on ahead and tell me what you’re wanting to tell me.”

“All I’m saying, Miranda—all I’m saying is that he said nothing of the kind. Near to that whole sermon was just him talking about how he yelled at God after his wife died; how he was naked in his bedroom and screamed out loud at the Lord about how could He do this to him, how it was the Lord’s fault; how his boy could hear him screaming; how he was *right* to do it— compared himself screaming at the Lord naked in his bedroom to not only King David, but said his screaming wasn’t any different than Jesus screaming on the cross! Only thing he said anything at like what Savannah said—and not much like it, really; not the same thing really at all—was that in the end he realized he had to submit. And only at the end—only positive thing he said about the God of the Universe was that he—Pastor Thomas—finally submitted to Him. Wasn’t really even positive about the Lord, come to think, so much as about himself again. It was him who changed his own heart, not the Lord come in and done it. You believe that? If only he had said what Savannah said he did! Just that one little easy thing, and he couldn’t even say that—just couldn’t stop giving himself all the credit! Couldn’t, not to save his life!”

Miranda was listening, heard all of what he said, but she just sat there staring in his face. Maybe in shock.

“They tell you about any of that at lunch?”

Then there was water welling up in her eyes.

“Hold on, now.” She put her hand over her mouth, stayed where she was but turned away her face from him. “Hold on, now,” he said again. “What’s wrong? What is it?”

She turned back and said through her crying, “Why are you yelling at me? What did I do?”

“Hold on, now, I’m not yelling at you.” She pulled her shoulder away when he put his hand on it.

“I’m not trying to yell at you,” he said. “It’s just that—”

“You *are*—you *were*.”

“I’m sorry, Miranda, I’m sorry if I was—it’s just—” Couldn’t she just—
“Daggum it, Miranda! You know he yelled at me right before you come in, Miranda? You saw the look on his face, don’t tell me you didn’t.” He got his voice gentle as he could. “Didn’t you? Didn’t you see his face?”

“Yeah,” she said, calming down, just little sobs left. “Yeah, I saw his face.”

“And don’t you admit that you were scared to see that scene before you?”

“I was a little startled, maybe.”

“Come on now, Miranda.” She let him put his hand on her shoulder this time.
“You were scared, I could see it.”

“It’s just—” She looked straight in his eyes now finally, hers washed clean and oh Lord, what a woman. “It was just that chair, on the floor like that.”

“That’s when he yelled, right at the same time. Stood up so sudden and violent, he got his foot stuck in it somehow or other that I didn’t know you even could. It was terrible to see, Miranda. Honestly, I was scared he was going to hurt me. I mean, I don’t actually think he would of. I’m not saying he would of done a thing like that. But in that moment—I tell you, Miranda, I was scared.”

Couldn't she see now? Those washed-clean eyes he was seeing in front of him—
oh Lord Jesus the woman you wove for me—weren't they too clear to not see?

“Y'all have lunch together or what?” she said.

“No.”

“He come down here just a visit?”

“That's another thing, Miranda: I'm just sitting here—I'm praying for him, in fact, praying I'm wrong, begging the Lord to please let it be I'm just wrong, telling him how heartbroke it makes me to think such thoughts about a man as I do about Pastor Thomas—when the phone of a sudden rings and it's Pastor Thomas on the other line and he's asking can he come over, he needs to talk to me. Tells me once he gets down and here and he's taken his sweet time getting to the point that it's about Peter's upset about something—about something I said to him; but it come clear real quick that actually—”

“George!” Miranda near to shouted. She grabbed his wrist and looked at him with eyes gone hard of a sudden as rocks. “You best not be about to tell me—I swear—if you went to that boy and said things about his father...”

“Hold on, now, Miranda; you have to understand the situation.”

“What did you say to that boy?” she said.

“Daggum it, Miranda, listen now. You're missing the point. You have to—”

“I'm serious, George; you tell me what you said.”

“Peter come walking boy this morning before church, and I told him good morning and asked him did he know what his father was preaching on today, and he said no he didn't. So when that Pastor Thomas gets up and starts talking about his wife, about

that boy's dead mother—all I did was I talked a little to Peter afterward about it, told him it was okay to be upset about it if he was; that if it hurt him that his father didn't tell him first, that was okay."

"You can't do that, George," Miranda said, shaking her head; "that's too far."

"Boy was upset, Miranda. I could tell."

"You can talk to me all you want, George; you can say whatever about Pastor Thomas to me that you want. But don't you even think of trying to turn that boy against his own—"

"Listen, though: the timing of me seeing him sitting there, upset like that, it wasn't any accident. I tell you, Miranda, it was Lord-appointed. It wasn't me upset him; it was that father of his doing him wrong that upset him. I'm the one who comforted him, not the one who made him upset."

It was a long moment before she said, "But George, it's just not your—"

"Didn't I just tell you it was Lord-appointed?" he said. It was enough of her telling him he's wrong, with how much he'd been praying for the Lord to show him if he's wrong and the Father only making it more and more clear how right he was. "Didn't I just tell you that? You think I'd of talked to him about it except I was sure?"

"But it just seems like—"

"Won't you just let me pray a little about it with you?" he said. Should of said it in the first place, he realized. Wasn't him who could speak to a heart; that was the business of the Holy Ghost. "Won't you just let me ask the Lord to make things clear for you and for me both? It seems so clear to me right now, I won't pretend it don't, but even

now I'll keep asking the Lord to make things clear for me. I'm fallen like anyone. It may well be I'm wrong. Don't think so, dear, but I'll own it's possible I'm wrong, if you'll only own it's possible I'm not."

It was a long moment before she said, "Okay."

"How about we just pray?"

"Alright."

And George got to praying then. He prayed with all his heart, soul, body, and mind; asked wouldn't the Lord make the two of them, who were of one flesh—flesh of George's flesh, bone of George's bone—wouldn't He make them of one mind, one heart, one soul, them two who were one. He held her hands tight; she rested them in his. Wouldn't the Father send his Ghost, show to Miranda what George saw, give to Miranda's soul the stirrings of George's; wouldn't He make His will and make it theirs, too; wouldn't He have His Ghost come over them and move through them and rule over His house and His people and let that Pastor Thomas be put to his place in His will, whatsoever place it was He had for him.

After George got done praying, Miranda asked wouldn't the Father be with them and keep them and love them and let them love Him, love Him back with His very own Love that He loved them with, with that Love being His very own self. She prayed so pretty to please Father let them love Him with Him, His own self, Him loving His own self through His own self given down to them and it going back to Him. And what a mystery, Father. What a holy mystery, Father, Amen.

They opened their eyes. And wasn't everything so clear to look at? so full of love and color and light and holiness? The tan skin of his wife's hand, held so tight in his; the pink and blue flowers on the wallpaper; the picture of him and his father on the wall, stood by the pulpit they'd made with their own hands, the work of the Lord—the black and white and gray of that picture every bit as colorful as the flowers on the wall; the quiet burning light of the lamp beside him, the long shadow it made of that chair Pastor Thomas had knocked over and now had his wife sat in it. His wife. What a lovely, godly woman. He saw her so clear, so lit up with love and God in her eyes and shining hair. Rattle of wind against window, snow brushing against glass, fierce and gentle and crimson-washed white. House groaning in the cold. The snow-and-fire-crisp smell of winter come to River Oak.

Miranda squeezed his hand. He turned from. She smiled at him. Oh, that woman of God, the youth not gone out of her, not at all. Loving hind, pleasant roe. Sixty no different than twenty-five, the Holy Ghost moving through her and making her skin glow.

“I love you,” she said.

“The Lord is in this place,” he said.

She squeezed his hand again, then stood up and went to the kitchen to make dinner. That food would be full of flavor like the meat and bread of Heaven's own table.

He looked again at that picture of him and his father and their pulpit. That day, the day they had finally put in the sanctuary, his father had said to him just after they had finished that he could feel his soul unleashing itself, turning unlimited, so that his body wasn't keeper anymore of it but getting took over by it, getting flowed out of by it. And

the flow would never diminish, he told him; for it was the flow of Holy Ghost flowing in to him that was bringing forth his soul and adding it unto Himself, so that the Ghost was flowing into him and he into the Ghost. Such a union as there isn't any putting asunder of.

“My soul's unleashing, too,” George said. “Mine is, too.”

His father knelt down then, took hold of George's shoulders. “Don't be a fool, boy.” His breath was sweet with terrible joy. “It's mine you're feeling.”

After they ate, George decided, he'd lead his wife upstairs and lay her down and they'd get to it. Been a long time, but the blessing of the Father was upon them tonight in every way, bestowing upon them every gift. Let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love.

He made two phone calls. The first one was up to the manse. He told Pastor Thomas he was sorry things had got how they got, could they get together at the Oak Lodge and work through it? The wires had got crossed in their communication; shouldn't they hear each other out? They'd got a little too heated, as was understandable given the topic of conversation, and it seemed neither had said what they really meant to—not exactly, at least; not clearly.

Pastor Thomas was a little cold on the phone, which didn't much surprise George, but still, come on now—but he got him to agree, and how was Tuesday at noon?

Really, though, of course, George didn't regret not a thing he'd said; he couldn't regret words put in him by the Holy Ghost, words he'd prayed for with sincerity and a pure heart. But he had to get a hold on the situation, couldn't let things hang there

unstable like that. He couldn't have Pastor Thomas putting together his own idea of how things had went, bending it all to make himself a martyr, make George a bully. Couldn't have Pastor Thomas going and telling people about how he'd been done wrong by mean old George, couldn't have him bending it and telling it all slanted up like that to the point that he'd have himself convinced of it; for Pastor Thomas was a man who saw himself as doing the work of the Lord; someone come into opposition to him surely would seem a man against the Lord's work—amazing how you could get things twisted up so easy, amazing what you could make yourself believe so that you justified yourself and your actions. Oh, that the Lord would keep it all clear to him! keep him from deceiving himself like Pastor Thomas was surely doing this very moment. This very moment he was doing it, no doubt about it.

Then he picked up the phone from the hook for the second call. The click of it pulling from the hook, even that was full of the clarity and light of commune with the Holy Ghost.

He dialed up to his cousin's. Lester was also one of the other three elders of River Oak. He was a good and decent man of the Lord. And he trusted George more than them others—not that they weren't all men looking to do the Lord's will, but Grady and Hank and Matthew were more bound to question George than Lester was.

Their grandfather had sent their fathers to the Presbyterian seminary in Charlotte together so they could start a proper church when it come out the preacher of the Methodist church was going twice a week to Johnson City and using offering money on whores and drink. George's father had loved at it at the seminary and took to it much

better than Uncle Benny. They both ended up getting ordained, but it was George's father who become pastor of River Oak.

After George's father died, Lord gave Uncle Benny the calling to come forth and serve—and the wisdom to do it following his brother's ways. It was him who was pastor till he died. Then Grady Johnson stumbled on Pastor Thomas and got everyone enthusiastic about him. Everyone but George, leastaways. Had stirrings from the first, but got convinced by the other elders he was just uneasy about him cause he was from off the mountain.

George hadn't told any of what was in his heart about Pastor Thomas to Lester yet. He'd griped to him some here and there, but hadn't ever told him yet about the deeper stirrings he was having.

“Listen now, Lester. Me and Pastor Thomas is meeting Tuesday at the Lodge. Thought it might be good having you there.”

Lester spoke slow and careful. “What for?”

“You just meet me there Tuesday at eleven, and I'll give you the particulars. Pastor's coming at noon, so it gives us some time for talking.”

After a long time of Lester thinking—you knew he was thinking by the sound of him sucking in his cheeks to chew on—he said, “Alright.” Thing George best liked about Lester was how hard he thought about everything before doing it, even just agreeing to meet at the Lodge with a man he'd knew for sixty-five years. He was a man who knew his limitations of thought, allowed for it. All that slow thinking didn't every single time lead to the right decisions, but you couldn't blame too much a man for what he done if

he'd thought as hard about it as Lester always did. Last will be first, meant Lester would be right up front of line in Heaven.

He never got ill with George, trusted him like a father, which George was to him, in a way. Uncle Benny was a godly man, a chosen shepherd of the Lord's people, but he was a weaker man than his George's father. He fell away sometimes to drinking, and whenever he did he would beat hell out of Lester—when Lester could manage to lure him away from beating hell out of his mama.

After he got off the phone with Lester, he put on his flannel and went outside for some wood to get the stove going. It wasn't all too cold inside as far as keeping his own self comfortable, but Miranda tended to getting cold at night, and you could be sure as the Lord's good that it would be in the teens by midnight, and, okay, he'd be cold at that point, that much was true. Didn't matter who you were, you'd be cold in the teens. Nothing like the cold to keep a man humble. And thank you, Lord, for that. No worse thing than to get it mixed up who was in control, specially with the matter of Pastor Thomas. Weren't George's will what would come of it in the end, no sir, wasn't for him to assume nothing, and he'd sure-as-the-Father's-good best not forget there weren't a man alive beyond the Lord putting him back right if He willed it. Weren't for George to take it on himself to force Pastor Thomas out; Ananias didn't go to Saul and say to him, You! Saul! You're Goddamned! Went and made the scales come off his eyes. It was up to Saul to accept it or not, decide would he be Paul or stay Saul, would he take his seeing and submit to Jesus who'd took it from him in the first place and could take it right back away any time he wanted.

But there was also the matter of was Pastor Thomas blinded yet or still needs blinding? When Saul was blind, he knew himself so. How about Pastor Thomas? A wind got going good and terrible, and then another wind come from the other way, and they got pushing against each other and turning around furious, big wet snowflakes swept up in it whipping wild. Oh no you don't, Devil; it's no hellsent wind gone keep out Holy considerations from the mind of a godly man. Was a few different things it could be Pastor Thomas was: blind and don't know it; blind and knows and don't admit it; blind and wonders is he blind or does he see—and who could even tell now which wind was what, which way which flakes were spinning, how many ways the wind and snow was coming from and going to—or—oh, Jesus; oh, Lord Jesus—eyes open, breathing out threatenings and slaughter, and well aware. But even then! That much didn't even cover it, you thought it through: Saul's eyes were open that way, too, and him thinking himself doing the Lord's own work! Walking through that wind and hellsnow by-God raging all around you. Hard to say what was what. Self-deceived with open eyes? Put a foot in front of the one you just put in front of the one you're stepping with now. Go as straight as you can. Was there another way it could be Pastor Thomas was? Any he wasn't thinking of? Wind blows; snow whips; ice lies in wait. Right yourself when you begin to fall. Steady, now. Was the one last thing: eyes wide open, thoughts clear as day working willingly for Satan himself to defile the house and people and very Self of the Almighty Father, Who Was and Is and Is to Come. A soul Goddamned and knows?

Getting right up near to the shed, there was his father standing there next to a stack of logs, as if he'd never died at all but was just waiting on George to get out there

already and gather up some wood with him. Ax in his hands. Just the same as he'd saw him that day all those many years ago. *Mama's wrong and everyone's wrong and he didn't drowned in the river didn't wash up five miles downstream didn't any ax go missing from the hook there it is in his hands and wait till I tell him about I heard mama saying to Aunt Laura he done it to himself I just know it and wait till she sees him and oh her face*— “Why you got that ax, Father? Wood's already cut!” he near to yelled and took a step inside but right as soon his father was disappeared. George hadn't took his eyes off him, and he hadn't seen him do any disappearing neither; but he just was disappeared. Weren't any way to explain the difference to his own self much less no one else, so he never told about it, just knew it for his self his father never did any disappearing but just was disappeared.

And now it's fifty-four years since, and here he was again, and them words he'd yelled come back to him, but the wind loosed them up and they started turning in the snow *Ax, cut Father's wood already! You got that? Why you cut Father, ax? Already got that wood!* and then got sucked out into the wind and lost in the snow. His father raised up the ax, held it out to George; but when he stepped into the shed his father was disappeared.

He'd take that ax; he'd take that ax, Father, when it was time for him to receive it. He got some logs in his arms and went back through that snowstorm to set a fire burning in the house his father built.

She kept inviting him over. And it was pretty hard saying no over and over, with how she would tilt her head like that and stand close and oh those beautiful blond curls hanging down silky like the most beautiful smooth snakes sliding along through each other and not have even the slightest trace of hurt in her eyes when he kept saying he couldn't come over not this time. You will, everything about her said; soon enough, you will. Her smell radiated out from her, quivering; made him a little kid again, sitting in the honeysuckle patch in the backyard in the middle of summer wrapped in lazy hug of humidity, eating blueberries; sitting there all afternoon, waiting for the first lightning bug to put out its slow, sticky, delicious glow.

But tonight—his dad getting so angry about what George had said, making Peter tell him every last detail, and then, after all that, no apology or even discussion of whether or not it had hurt Peter that he hadn't asked or at least told him about what he was going to talk about in the sermon, just leaving the room all pissed off and then the sound of the car starting—Peter was feeling so stuck inside himself, so ready to jump out of his skin (his new Strat not taking it away, no matter how high he turned up the distortion on the amp, how hard he bent the strings; praying getting away from him every time he tried to start; Jesus' red-printed words too red to calm him) that when the phone rang and it was Taylor and he thought how she was probably sitting on her bed in just a tee shirt and panties as she said her mom had just left for Tennessee and wouldn't be back for a few days and he should come over (she could come pick him up) there wasn't any strength in him to say no.

It was quiet, but it was there. A calm, faraway voice saying don't. But he shut it out—just this once, Lord; just please, just leave me be, just let me—and focused on the soft burning in his stomach (star gently forming; a slow tornado of light).

Would of tried and met with Pastor Thomas and Lester this morning if only he didn't have to go into Buncombe County today. He put aside his Pastor Thomas worries as best he could as he drove that hour and a half to Swannanoa; he had to think about what was he going to say to this woman from Colorado with her big new tree lot everyone was talking about. He'd made an appointment with her to talk about selling her some trees, but that wasn't really why he wanted to meet with her. Weren't no way he was doing business with some woman using her rich husband's money to come in and undersell everybody else. Lord had blessed him enough that it wasn't his own business at risk, but there's plenty other people he knew was standing to lose everything because of this woman having her fun.

He got there few minutes to eight, when he was supposed to meet with Mrs. Dobson. Biggest lot he ever seen wasn't one tenth so big. Big as plenty people he knew's whole farms. *Plenty* bigger than Lester's. Who could by-God say how many Mexicans unloading trees from flatbeds to add to who-could-by-God-say how many already there. Even a daggum cabin overlooking the trees from a hill on the other side of the lot. Give the whole place a feel of a nice little family's running this place and oh they'd just be so thankful if you'd help them out and buy a tree. Never mind that that cabin—and you

could bet your life on it—cost a small fortune to build. Must be where she meant when she said meet her in the office, so he headed across the lot to it.

No matter how many times he seen it before, he didn't never get tired of—and never mind for a second today it was on this thief's den of a lot—the way of the fog hovering morning-still among the trees. Seeping slow from out between them. But you had to be daggum kidding what he was seeing the fog coming from out between when he got to the far end of the lot. It was one thing to—it was one thing to come here and—but Spruces? Blue Spruce in Fraser Fir country? Sharing the same lot? No ma'am, wouldn't do.

But he had to be delicate. Couldn't go in guns all ablaze and expect nothing. Maybe—her being the wife of a millionaire, do whatever she wants, all this just for fun probably anyway—could she somehow or other just not of thought about what effect she might be having?

The door was unlocked, so he went on in. A high school-age kid wearing a cheap suit too big for him was sitting at a wooden desk. He looked up from some papers and asked George could he help him. Accent was local.

“Looking for Mrs. Dobson.”

“She's not in right now,” the kid said.

“Not in?”

“She just left a couple minutes ago.”

“Down there on the lot somewhere?”

“No, sir. Said she was going into Asheville and run some errands. Like to leave a message for her?”

“Me and her have an appointment, son; I come all the way from Hinge County to meet here,” George said.

“I’m really sorry, sir. It’s just, well, she told me she wouldn’t be getting back till round eleven.”

“Eleven? She told me meet her here at eight.”

“She’s, uh—she’s not so good with appointments,” the kid said, looking nervous, like this wasn’t the first time, and wasn’t most people who tended to taking it too well. Being honest, George wasn’t taking it too well neither; but there weren’t no point in giving the kid any hard time. Wasn’t his fault.

He found a gas station close by with a restaurant attached onto it, sat in there at a booth by a window with a cup of coffee and his notebook and his Bible. Not so good with appointments. Wasn’t it any respect for people’s time? Asked the Lord let him keep his head about him when he finally met with her.

When he come back at eleven, the kid told him go right on in, she was waiting in the great room for him and just go on down to the end of that hall and it’s on your right. George told him thanks. “Great room,” he said under his breath as he walked down the hall.

Mrs. Dobson was sitting at desk in front of the window looking out on the lot. Not a day older than thirty-five, he figured, and wasn’t she playing the part so nice and looking so pretty in that Carhartt jacket?

She was writing loud and furious. She glanced up quick at him but then looked right back down and kept tearing into her notepad.

“Have a seat,” she said after a few seconds, but still not looking up, still scribbling.

“How are you today, Mrs. Dobson?” George said.

“Just fine, Mr. Kenner,” she said, keeping on with her writing.

“Wanted to talk to you about—”

“Give me a second, please,” she said.

She finally quit writing after a minute or so and looked up at George. He waited for her to say something, but she didn’t. When he finally was sure she was waiting for him he said, “I wanted to talk to you about your business you got here.”

“What about it?” she said almost before he’d finished saying it.

“Thing is, Mrs. Dobson—well, I run a run a farm out in Hinge County, in River Oak.”

“I don’t need any more suppliers, Mr. Kenner.”

“It’s not that, ma’am. It’s just I thought I should bring it to your attention how you’re affecting the business local farms. I just want to make sure that your aware of—”

“Let me go ahead and cut you off here, Mr. Kenner. I’m running a business, not a charity. There’s plenty of people like you coming in here and telling me the same thing over and over again. Part of business is competition; if you can’t handle competition, you might be better served by a different career.”

“It’s not my welfare I’m worried about, Mrs. Dobson. My farm can handle it. It’s other people I’m coming here on behalf of.”

“You can give them the message then.” Then her phone rang. She picked up from the hook and said hello, then put her hand over the microphone and said, “Have a good day, Mr. Kenner.”

They didn’t go to school. Peter had called home last night and left a message that he was staying at his friend Jeremy’s house. He’d left the number for Taylor’s house, but his dad didn’t ever call. He lay there next to Taylor, praying in his head for forgiveness for last night but everything else wild with wanting more.

He got to the Lodge at ten, an hour before he was going to meet with Lester, and two hours before Pastor Thomas would be there. Since Charlotte-Claire had took over the place, she’d fixed it up real good. Put to good use that money the church had raised for her (good bit of it from George), you had to give her that. All the wood of the walls and floors lacquered up to a high shine; that huge window she’d had put in on the upper level that looked out onto the river where it roared the loudest and foamed so white that you had to wonder was there something more to it there than just water and rocks and dirt. Now that would be a baptism. That water raging like that.

George thought sometimes about what if his father had fallen in the river at that spot, instead of downstream a ways. If he maybe wouldn’t of been raised up in glory stead of drowned. Everybody see him go up to heaven, stead of somebody finding him

drowned. Making George's mother think such a fool thought as he did it on purpose. If only she could of saw him raise up to heaven, she could of knowed it just as sure as George did that he was up there.

Charlotte-Claire was pouring coffee in the cups of some family from off the mountain, Mom and Dad in their brand new, by-God North Face fleeces they bought special just for this trip. And he knew the look on their faces so well, the conversation they were having with each other without talking: It sure is a nice place; Oh yeah, beautiful; A little farther from the slopes than I thought it would be, but nice; Yeah, we'll lose a little skiing time, but come on, it'll be fine; Maybe we'll find somewhere closer next time; Come on, come on; What?; Don't do that; Do what?; Don't start with that, this place is great; I know, it's just—; It's beautiful, don't ruin it by focusing on—; You're right, I'm sorry, it really is beautiful, I'm sorry; That's okay, let's just enjoy it, okay?; You're right, I'm sorry, let's enjoy it, it really is beautiful; Look at that river; It really is beautiful, it really is.

George knew he wasn't being fair. If it weren't for these families from Raleigh and Charlotte and Winston-Salem—they and Christmas tree farms, that is—Hinge County wouldn't make it. But still, those fleeces! Oh boy, those fleeces.

He went upstairs and took a seat at a table by that big window. The window was thick, to keep the heat in and muffle the sound of the river, but when you sat right by it you could hear it good, at just the right loudness where you could have a conversation without yelling but it still cut through enough to fill you up and rush around in your soul.

Charlotte-Claire come over to him then with the coffee pitcher and a mug.

“Hello, George,” she said. She had a sweet, gentle voice, no doubt about it; but it had a sadness under it, a lostness and a desperation that made George’s heart break just to hear it say “Hello, George.”

“Good morning, sweetheart.”

“Lester joining you today?”

“Yes indeed, he will be. Pastor Thomas, too, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh,” she said, and didn’t she go red in the cheeks. “I didn’t know.”

“And why would you have?”

And she gone even redder then. “No, right, of course. It’s just, I didn’t—I don’t ever remember you meeting with him here before.”

George didn’t know what was having a daughter of his own like, but the feeling that come to him seeing her so red-cheeked and tongue-tied about such a man seemed like it must be something like how a father might get to feeling time to time—like he just wanted to split into two of himself, one of him take up Charlotte-Claire in his arms and hold her tight, the other of him go find that Pastor Thomas and do who-knows-what to him. Nothing good. So happy, so nervous—it made him feel sick to see it. Smoothing the wrinkles in her skirt. That look on Pastor Thomas’s face on Sunday when he was looking back there at her instead of praising. The way he closed his eyes. That smile. Really, though, since there was no father of hers around to speak of, it was his place as elder of the church to be a sort of father to her—her and everyone else fatherless. Specially with Miranda’s barrenness. It was a heartbreak to him and her both, but as they’d prayed about it long and hard with sighs and groanings and tears, it come to be revealed to them it was

for that the Lord willed it that George be a father to the church's fatherless and Miranda a mother for the church's motherless.

"I guess that's true. I guess Pastor Thomas and me never have met here, come to think of it," George said. "About time we did, I guess."

But it wasn't for just no reason he'd said for them to meet here. Having Charlotte-Claire around seemed like it could be a way for getting of even more sureness from the Lord. Make some comment or other about her, watch is there any reaction come from him or not. But since there wasn't much sureness he lacked anyway, that wasn't the main reason of meeting at the Lodge. Mainly it was for making it so the Holy Ghost could use her to make Pastor Thomas feel even more the pressure of his sin. Her floating all around, table to table. A ghost herself.

"Let me know if you need anything," she said.

"I surely will."

He looked out onto the river. Mist rising gentle off its white wildness. Song of rushing. Always moving, never moving—and wasn't that just like the Father's Own Holy Ghost, and wouldn't He just go on and come to this place, fill George up, move and not move, give him the words and no other words, flow through but never away from him?

Of a sudden, there was a loud snap, and not a hundred yards away a huge by-God limb come falling down from an oak tree and splashing into the river. And before could even finish thinking how he was going to have to be the one to deal with it, daggum water just daggum carried the thing right away. As if it wasn't ever there at all. He might

of even wondered was that the case, had he somehow dreamed it, except for you could see the place where it had broke off from.

“We got a tree down?” Charlotte-Claire said, coming up the stairs.

“Limb,” George said. “But it’s gone.”

She eyed him suspicious as she come over to the table.

“Gone,” he said again, looking up at her staring out the window.

“I heard that thing snap. Can’t be gone.”

“River took it.”

“Easy sometimes to forget the power of a river, huh?” she said.

“Best not to,” he said. “Power of ice, too.”

“My granddaddy used to say ice was winter’s ax,” she said, patted him on the shoulder and walked away.

Winter’s ax. Father’s hands. And then there he was, George’s father, standing there on the river next to that tree. Then George floated through the window and down onto the river. He hovered above the Ghost-dwelling. His father floated slow upriver from the tree. Then he was there, his father before him, blue blazer, trimmed beard, hard, black eyes surrounded by pure, shining white. They hovered.

His father held out the ax. He took it, heavy in his hands.

“Goodbye, Father,” he said, Ghost rising up invisible from the river, father floating up to the sky. Then George began to rise, and it couldn’t of been nothing but the Holy Ghost taking the ax from his hands, chopping the blade into his chest—no pain, no blood; a great flood of light—and then pushing the blade and handle both into George’s

body; breathing upon him, that breath spreading warm and pure on his chest, closing up the wound; light coming back from everywhere it was touching all throughout the world and going back into his chest. He felt the ax shrinking down tiny, his blood carrying it right on up into his heart, as he floated back up and through the window and the Ghost set him back in his seat. And he felt that ax solid in his heart, and found that right as soon as he thought on it he could feel it in his hands too. Right on you go, Father, keeping on making it clear for me that keeps questioning, oh me of little faith. Giving it over to me to lay the ax to the roots, hew down a tree bringing not forth good fruit. No mistaking it, Father, not anymore, no way I could. No room for any will in me but yours now; they'll be no more doubting come from me.

George had got his own roots axed and not got hewn down. Sweet fruit growing on him all along, gone unnoticed by everyone including his own self till now when he could feel it ripening for the forth-bringing in the Father's Own Due Time, appointed since before even clocks or sundials or sharp-tuned men's senses for the measuring of it. Since even before You set Time to turning all about at all, Father. Even then You knew, know, will know the bringing-forth time of my ax-struck tree's fruit. Fruit of my own set-apart soul.

When Lester got there a few minutes later, George could hardly hold it inside what the Holy Ghost shown him; how the ax put in his father's hands by the Lord His Own self all those years ago had got handed off to him now, set in his hands and his heart both; how it was Fear and Wonder filled him up as he watched his own father raising up in the Holy Ghost's arm.

Lester took it in in his careful, quiet way. Got to chewing on his cheeks. Had to give him a little while. No problem: the Father's will so strong in George's soul now couldn't be anything but ordained that he'd told Lester all he'd just did tell him. Even with it coming out him so wild and not even thinking just all of it flowing on out, it wasn't even a worry, George's will getting put so right in line with the Lord's own as he had never known a still-on-this-earth soul could get. Didn't even matter no more, it didn't seem, what it was Pastor Thomas was. Evil and knowing himself so, seeing but self-deceived, blind and feels the scales, blind but thinking the backs of his eyelids to be the world—didn't matter none no more which one. All George had to do now was go forth and do what his insides so full of the Father's will set him doing. Just say what come to him as true, for so it'd be now. Just gone and hew down the fruitless tree, that's all was there for him to do.

“And you seen this just now?” said Lester.

“It was more than seeing, Lester; it happened.”

“You saying you floated down out of this building, and nobody else in this room—”

“Just cause it wasn't physical don't mean—something happens in the spiritual realm's every bit as much happened as something happens physically.”

Lester sucked in his cheeks and said, “Suppose.”

“I didn't see myself floating down. I went and floated on down my own self. And it wasn't a dream, neither. I was full awake, Lester.”

“And that happened just now?”

“Just now, just before you come in.”

“So that’s not it what we’re talking about with Tom, then.”

George had tried from the beginning to get Lester to see the good in Pastor Thomas over Tom, but Lester didn’t like it, said he had called George’s father Pastor was because he was a kid then. “I don’t call nobody Mister, don’t let nobody call me it, and I ain’t going to call nobody Pastor, neither,” Lester had said. “To you, it may be keeping him in his place calling him Pastor; for me, it’s putting myself more than him in a place. And I got no interest in doing that.” George couldn’t exactly agree, but he could own there was some sense in that. And there was no good in arguing with Lester in ideas he had fixed firm like that, where you could bet he close to put holes in his cheeks working it out.

“No,” said George, “but it’s sure-as-we’re-sitting-here related. That’s how come I was so quick telling you about it: it’s confirmation. Don’t you own that? It’s not a thing happens every day that the Holy Ghost His Own self floats you down in his arm to stand on a river, and Father handing me that ax. You own that.”

“I own that. Sure, I do.”

“And you believe me, don’t you?”

“What of?” said Lester.

“I asked you don’t you believe—”

“You said it’s confirmation. I’m asking what of.”

“Couldn’t be nothing but pre-ordained to say it. “Pastor Thomas ain’t for us.”

Lester looked cockeyed at him. Not sucking or biting on his cheeks; not doing a by-God thing but just staring right into him and not blinking neither. He could feel the Devil trying to use that look on his face—and it wasn't nothing but thinking careful Lester was doing, just how God's wisdom would have him to do—trying to use those cockeyes of Lester's put to doubt in him. But wasn't it Jesus His Own self sweating blood with worry and doubt on the night before doing what it was He come to do.

“What is it he done?”

George took his notebook from his pocket and put it down on the table. “It's so many things, Lester. It's so many things as you wouldn't believe.”

He opened up to the first page, from back in the spring.

“Well—and this is just the least of it, Lester—there's the lawn. You know he hadn't once cut that lawn up at the mance? Only time's it got cut, it was me who done it.”

“That what you been doing with that notebook all this time? Keeping notes on the man?”

“Well—I mean, I didn't get started doing it till I saw things seemed like they needed remembering.”

“Lawn's what got your attention?”

“Doesn't strike you as a thing to be bothered by that he didn't even get to mowing that lawn once? Don't seem to you to show a certain lack of respect?”

“Suppose.”

“You suppose? What else but a lack of respect? Outright show of aggression maybe even!”

“Maybe it hadn’t ever occurred to him.”

“Well, now! Sure, okay; he ain’t thought of it.” He leaned in closer and whispered, “That any better, Lester? Any better, him just assuming it’s someone else’s job? Any better, him thinking we’re his Mexicans?”

Lester stared down at the table. After a bit, he said, “I can own it don’t seem quite right, but I figure you ought to tell me some more of what you got wrote down in there.”

George put his hand on his notebook to flip the page, but then he said, “I got plenty, Lester, a whole bookful. But let me ask you, Lester; let me ask you first if you don’t have any misgivings at all about the man yourself. Can you tell me that truthfully?”

George couldn’t expect Lester to go and answer that kind of a question right off, so he was plenty ready to be every bit as patient as he needed to be, give Lester all the time in the world to chew on his cheek and think about it. But it wasn’t half as long as George was ready to sit quiet and wait when Lester said, “I’m searching, George, but it’s nothing coming to mind.”

Maybe George could have taken that for a sign. Maybe, if he hadn’t prayed just as unceasing as Jesus Himself commanded; if he hadn’t asked the Lord over and over to please let him be wrong about Pastor Thomas, to show him if he’s deceiving himself and seeking the blood of the innocent; if he hadn’t ever seen the way Pastor Thomas looked at Charlotte-Claire during worship, how he closed his eyes right then and smiled and might as well have just gone ahead and licked his lips; if Pastor Thomas hadn’t spent so many of his sermons talking about God Still Loves Us When We Doubt; if he hadn’t looked right straight down at George when he said *submit*; if not for the Holy Ghost taking

George down to that river and Father handing him over that ax. Maybe then. Maybe then he could have took for a sign that such a godly man as Lester, such a virtuous woman as Miranda, couldn't see what's right there in front of them. But it wasn't any room for doubt now. Sureness direct from the Father. Two wills one.

"I'll gladly show you the rest of what I got wrote in this notebook, Lester. But let me ask you something first—and you think good and hard before you answer me this one." He leaned far forward cross the table as he could, said, "You can tell me—in all honesty, in your heart of hearts—you haven't ever even once seen the way Pastor Thomas has of looking at Charlotte-Claire?"

And he kept leaned forward, till Lester got staring at the floor beside him, got chewing on his cheek. Lester thought plenty long this time. Then he put his elbow on the table, rubbed his hand on his forehead and his cheek.

"I'll own he seems to like her."

Then he looked up from the floor, and you could see plain as anything his eyes coming unblind to it.

"Seems to me it's a good plenty more than liking," George said, and then "Hi, Lester," come a voice from behind him. "Didn't know you were joining us," Pastor Thomas said as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Hey there, Tom," Lester said.

Doing his best to talk like it wasn't a thing at all happened two nights ago, as if he hadn't ever stood up so violent and knocked down that chair at all. Letting bygones be bygones. But he hadn't let nothing go; you could nearly smell it coming off him how

angry he was still. He looked calm, George would own that. But too calm, like he was wearing armor and calling it skin.

“Good morning, George.”

George turned in his chair to face him more, leaned on the backrest and put his arm on it. “I’d say it was, Pastor,” he said, full up with peace so he could hardly hold it in, “except I think it’s afternoon now.”

Pastor Thomas looked at his watch. “So it is,” he said, smiling over to Lester instead of George. “I was talking to Charlotte-Claire when I came in. She said she has a club sandwich on the menu now. She said everyone who’s had it has been saying how good it was.”

George wished he’d noticed when Pastor Thomas first came in; wished he’d got a glimpse of him and Charlotte-Claire talking to each other. Figured he could pretty well guess: him standing just up-close enough to be looking down when he’s talking to her; going over to the carseat she had her baby in, googooing and gahgahing some; saying to her he’s a beautiful child; looking at her in a way to tell her he’s going to have him some from her, only a matter of time. Or either to say he’s liked what all he’s had and wants him some more.

Wasn’t coming to him just yet exactly what to say to Pastor Thomas. But no words coming didn’t it wasn’t anything for him to say; only meant be silent and still and know that I am the Father and will give the words to you when they’re ripe for saying. You just give out the words of lunch with a friend till I give you others. They will come,

and you will say them; you will give him a chance of Heaven where right now he's running full-speed from knows it or not.

"We'll take three of those club sandwiches," Pastor Thomas called down to Charlotte-Claire.

George said, "Pastor knows best, I guess."

"I know a club sandwich man when I see one," Pastor Thomas said, saying it to Lester instead of George again. The two of them got started up talking about how were Lester's trees looking. George would of started telling about that daggum Mrs. Dobson except for that would take over all the rest of lunch, and that wasn't what he come here for. But those words for him to say hadn't come ripe yet, so he just made like he was listening and waited for them.

The griddle got sizzling loud downstairs. He turned and looked down at Charlotte-Claire there behind the counter frying up bacon for their sandwiches. She looked so much the lamb to make your heart break. And that little one of hers in his playpen, he laughed loud enough to hear over the spitting bacon grease. Mama smiling over with love. If only he was older and could see the way that Pastor Thomas looked at his mama.

But wait a minute, why wasn't he listening to Lester and Pastor talking; wasn't his place to decide to not listen just cause he's bored with it. Lord's will for him to watch Pastor Thomas with the Ghost so tuned up in him it's shown what's behind everything Pastor Thomas said or did. A tilt of the head, a glance—all was revelation.

So he listened to them going on about it all for a minute. Lester taking his time with answers to simple questions even though he knew the answers to them, Pastor Thomas asking question after question about keeping away adelgids and how many trees can you load on a flatbed.

Then it was given unto George and he said, “Sorry to give you the impression of I was attacking you the other night.”

Pastor Thomas stiffened up, stayed turned toward Lester seemed a long time. Then he turned to George, forcing a smile over top of his quivering. “I don’t think I know what you mean, George,” he said.

“Talking about how it seemed like maybe you were feeling attacked, considering how you knocked over that chair in my living room.”

Pastor Thomas laughed and said, “You’re making it sound like I knocked it over on purpose. Don’t want Lester here thinking I’m some kind of a madman on the loose.”

“Never meant to make it sound that way, Pastor. I just meant how you raised your voice at me and—”

“Hold on, now, George.” Still laughing, but no so lighthearted-sounding as might of wanted. Froz remove or speak or even breath for a few seconds. Wasn’t that he said it loud, wasn’t but just barely louder than whispering; but so sudden and hard, same as the sound of not looking first at a chair in a dark room but just sitting right down on your father asleep in it. “If there’s something you’re concerned about, that’s fine, we can talk about it; but is now the time? I mean, why make a thing of it?”

Make a thing of it! If there's a thing to call it *it*, it's a thing already, seemed to George. Throwing out words so empty of anything, not a thing in them, so then God not in them, so then Godforsaken. So then Goddamned. Emptiness Goddamned, for God is a God of fullness and words of fullness. The Word Was With and Was. In the Beginning the Word.

"I invited Lester here so we could all three talk," George said.

"Talk about what exactly, George?" Empty Goddamned eyes.

"It's just I didn't like how things got the other night. Seemed like there's a gap in communication. Thought it might be good having a third person. Make sure we're understanding each other."

"What did he tell you?" Pastor Thomas said to Lester.

"Nothing except come here and meet him here."

"He tell you I was going to be here?"

"He mentioned it."

Could tell Lester wanted to look at George to get an idea what are you wanting me to say to him, but he knew better. "Didn't say. Just said come to the Lodge at eleven."

Pastor Thomas turned terrifying slow to George, eyes going the grey of road slush. And Charlotte-Claire must just then of opened a window downstairs how loud the river was roaring of a sudden. Pastor Thomas was saying— But the river was singing too beautiful to not listen. He turned and looked at it. "George." Sing, ye Ghost, of the ice in the trees. "George." In my heart and in my hands.

Pastor Thomas said his name again, so George quit looking out the window and turned back to him. “You hear that river?” he said.

“I’m trying to talk to you, George.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just I love the sound of that river.”

“You told me meet you here at noon.”

“That’s right.”

“Then why would you tell Lester to come an hour earlier?” He looked at Lester, then back at George. “Do the two of you have some church business to discuss? Because frankly, George, I don’t see any point in bringing in Lester to talk about a personal misunderstanding between just you and me. And I don’t want to put words in his mouth, but I doubt Lester’s terribly interested either.” Lester didn’t seem to have nothing to add to that.

“Just talking,” George said. Wasn’t time yet. Time yet, Lord? Won’t you give me the words? “Just wanting to be talking more with you, Pastor. More we talk, I figure, less chances for miscommunication. But seems like you’re—maybe I’m misunderstanding, though; you tell me if I am—but is it something in particular we should be talking about?”

Pastor Thomas breathed deep once, shook his head a little, look down at the table then past George and out the window. Lester looked at George like asking a question, but George’s mind was going empty again of anything except that rushing water outside, loud as if he was swimming in it. It swimming in him. That Holy Ghost rushing around inside him to wash away everything but the words he knew were coming. Ax to the roots;

fruit brung forth or tree hewn down. Light shining forth; blinding or unblinding, either or both. Lord, if you need an Ananias. Father's will George's own. Jesus Christ our Savior, flipping the merchants' tables. Den of thieves. Ax and heart and hands. Floating above the furious water, raising on up to Heaven in the Holy Ghost's hands. Threatenings and slaughter. Grace and glory.

Pastor Thomas kept on looking out the window. He gripped the table it with one hand then the other. Held it good and tight. And those temples of his, weren't they tensing and twitching so?

Go on and give me them words, Father; give them to your Ghost. He's a river and He's rushing through me.

Footsteps on the stairs, and Pastor Thomas turned toward the sound. He smiled hungry. Charlotte-Claire put down the sandwiches on the table, then touched her fingertips to the table and said, "Anything else for you, gentlemen?"

"Think we're just fine," Pastor Thomas said, took his own fingers and put them over top hers for just a second then took him back quick.

George looked at him—never mind he wasn't looking back—and said, "What is it you think you're doing, Pastor?"

And it wasn't but plain evil how calm Pastor Thomas stayed; how he looked at George then like George was saying the beginning of a joke, that's all, then at Lester and Charlotte-Claire and back again at George; said, "I have to say, George, I haven't understood a single thing you've said to me today"; tilted his head, smiling gentle and amused; said "Are you feeling alright?"

George said, "You and Charlotte-Claire."

Lester said, "George."

"You may be hiding it from everyone else, but not—"

Charlotte-Claire said, "George."

"Nothing's hid from me."

Pastor Thomas said, "George."

Charlotte-Claire, "I think we're caught, Tom."

She'd been took in by him. She was no liar. She'd have forgiveness. But why was she smiling?

Pastor Thomas said, "I suppose you're right."

She laughed.

"We tried hiding it," she said, keeping laughing.

They were looking at each other. Lester looked at them. No one looked at George.

Pastor Thomas smiled; Charlotte-Claire laughed.

"Guess we ought to go ahead and tell them," Pastor Thomas said. He laughed.

Lester got a smile on his face.

"We were going to wait till Sunday," Pastor Thomas turned to George now, skin crinkling ravenous out from his eyes. "But we might as well."

Charlotte-Claire said, "I suppose we have to now."

"You want to tell them?"

"No, you do it."

Pastor Thomas stood up, put his arm around Charlotte-Claire's shoulder.

“Gentlemen,” he said, smiling down at George then turning to Lester and staying turned to him. Her delicate little white hand touching down low on his back.

“Charlotte-Claire and I are getting married.”

“Congratulations,” the North-Face mama said. The father raised his coffee cup and gave Pastor Thomas one them fool little *attaboy* nods.

Lester even was getting took in; got laughing—by-God Lester laughing!—stood up and stuck out his hand out for Pastor Thomas, thinking hard probably for something to say, chewing probably almost fullway through his cheeks.

George said, “She pregnant?”

They all three stopped their laughing and looked at him. North-Face mama drew in a breath just loud enough to hear. No sound now but the water rushing furious and wild and powerful and holy. As if he’s the one—as if he’s the one.

Charlotte-Claire said, “What did you say?”

“I asked are you pregnant.” He could feel it in his hands, hands and heart both. But she’s one of us. She just got took in, is all. “You don’t have to marry him, honey. We all love you, and we’ll take care of you. And there will be no shortage of forgiveness for you. You just got took in, is all.”

The North-Face mama was gathering up the little boy and girl. The father was seeing did he have enough cash so he could just leave it on the table.

Tears come in her eyes.

Pastor Thomas said, “George!”

She looked down with hate, can't speak, wants to lash out but deep down knowing he's right she's got took in and weighed down with guilt and sorrow and fear and wanting forgiveness; thankfulness coming upon her for him saying there's mercy can't stand it that thankfulness, hating that wanting of what he's telling her's hers, and can't do a thing but just stand there and fight what's true she knows it wants to or not.

"Nothing's hid, Charlotte-Claire. Lord knows and I know you were just took in by him. There's mercy unending for you."

She stepped up to him then. She looked down in his face. Cried without any sound. Nobody said a word, George neither. He only prayed deep inside his own soul that Lord wouldn't you show her how our hearts are breaking for her. Wouldn't you let us hold her and comfort her, Lord? Wouldn't you let us rescue her, wouldn't you let her find rest in your house, Father?

"There's mercy, Charlotte-Claire."

She slapped his face.

"If you'll only take it. It's there for you, honey; if you'll only—"

"You shut up," she said.

"Don't you know how much we all love you, Charlotte-Claire? Don't you know you don't have to—"

"You need to leave, George." Pastor Thomas said. He come over and put his hands on her shoulders to try and say why don't you back away now. But she wouldn't move. She wouldn't be moved by him. "She told you to leave, and you need to leave."

"You don't have to let him control you," George said.

“You don’t say another word,” she said. “You get out of here right now.”

“That baby boy of hers barely sitting up by himself, and you just move right on in. How long you been carrying on with her, huh? Must of moved in on her awful quick after she had that boy.”

Them Goddamned fearful eyes.

“Got nothing to say to that, do you? You may have everybody else fooled, Pastor—you may have every last person in the whole church fooled, for all I know—but not me. I know you; I know what you are. I know what a real pastor is; I seen two true men of God leading our church, and I can tell well enough that—”

“Hold on, George,” Lester said, a pitiful, lost look on his face. “I’m not so sure you’re seeing things so clear.”

“Don’t you see you’re getting took in too, Lester? Breaks my heart to see it how you’re getting took in.”

“This isn’t about anything but yourself, George,” Pastor Thomas said.

“I’m nothing but a vessel, Pastor.”

“I don’t doubt that you think that.”

“You take me for a fool?”

“No.” And the way Pastor Thomas said *no* like that, looking down on him with such of-a-sudden soft, patient, gentle, loving, pitying, caring light in his eyes—it weren’t no more real than Judas’ kiss, trying to seem the bigger man, full up with understanding and sympathy. Christlike. Lies and flatteries, sweetening up the breath of threatenings and slaughter. It just by-God pushed too daggum far for George to accept; Pastor Thomas

knowing or not not that falseness of his own soft eyes and tone didn't matter neither way, not at all.

“You're trying to make me look like the one who's blind, is what you're doing,” George said.

“All that's happenening here is you're making nasty, unfounded accusations.”

“Come down to it, Pastor, I seen the way you look at her. Don't matter is she pregnant or not, what you and her done or not done. I seen the way you look at her.”

“You get out of here, George,” Charlotte-Claire said. “I told you get out; you get up from that chair and you walk out of here and you don't come back.”

“You're supposed to be a shepherd, Pastor.”

“Get out,” Charlotte-Claire said.

“I don't know what's in your head, George,” Pastor Thomas said.

George stood up. “Nothing but the will of the Father for His people,” he said, and walked downstairs and out the door. He sat there in his truck, in the cold and lovely stillness. The field on the other side of the road was the only flat land in River Oak, and it was his. There wasn't anything on it. No house, no barn, no trees, no cows. Nothing. And there never would be, not so long as he was alive on this earth. He always got offers for it, prices you wouldn't believe. But there was no way was he ever selling that field. Only one thing that field was for: Snow. He sang. Quiet, to no one but himself and the Lord. “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine; Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!”

And he started the car, still singing, still quiet, full of knowing it was the right thing he done, the only thing he could have done, the will that would have been done

with or without him—but no, Father! cause your will includes them that does it; and praised be for that!—and he just drove right on out of the parking lot, ice on the road no issue to be considered, for who can be against us; past the church, its red door singing of the Blood; around the bend, then—Lord’s will, must be, for that it was happening, George’s will so much His that it didn’t feel like any will at all but only being led, in joy, in praise, riding a chariot of fire up the road through the banks all blanketed in snow, the whitest and pure as you ever could have saw in your life. Blood-bought. Crimson-washed in Heaven and come down pure and swirling and blinding and blessing.

Where he got led to was to the manse. He got led up that steep icy driveway without even the four-wheel drive only the Holy Ghost taking George up safe. He got led out of the truck and up to the back door and made not to knock on it but to open it and walk through its frame; to walk through the living room, through the kitchen, down the stairs to the basement; to stand before the boy’s bedroom door and listen to him playing his guitar so sweet and Ghost-flowing and doesn’t know the lostness of his father.

He hadn’t never heard the boy on his electric guitar before; hadn’t never till now heard the deepest cries his God-breathed fingers contained. Oh the sorrow, Father; oh the pure and holy yearning coming from that boy’s fingers and heart, and him not even knowing that’s what it is coming from him and blessed are those who mourn and that sorrow coming out blissful the way it did through the godliest of men only the godliest only the purest for whom suffering was the purest of the joys of the Lord, oh suffering thank you suffering for the good of the Father’s house and people and it was so clear not how Peter wasn’t for no Pastor Thomas to be the father of but a man whose will was so

much the Father's for all things including eldering and fathering of children to grow up in his ways and sing the songs of God in sorrow and bliss and joy and assurance and the blues come holy like no old Negro never did make them so holy only singing of bad bad whiskey and babies oh their babies gone and come home no more and hellhounds on their trail not the Hound of Heaven who overtakes them that are meant ever and ever for to be His and no altering of His will and Peter so clear on the path of the Hound of Heaven and oh thank you for his wonderful and beautiful purity and set-apart fingers for wailing and rejoicing and both one and the same.

And the Ghost didn't have George to knock this time either but only made for his hand to turn the knob and open the door and go on in see Peter sitting on his bed bent over his electric guitar which looked and yes Father was an ax put in his hands by the Ghost for to bring forth the fruit of crying joy.

"Hello, son," the Ghost gave for him to say, which was same as him just saying it on his own, for there was no forethought to it with his will lined up so flush and perfect to His Own. *Thyself with Me to Blend*, went a song his father sang.

Peter quit playing.

"Don't you quit that sweet music, son; I come here to talk to you, but you just let that music flow on; ain't for me to hold back how the Holy Ghost comes crying and screaming and laughing and whispering through them notes you're bending so sweet."

Peter looked up at him with his head tilted way back and his mouth froze open, as if George was come to do him terrible harm. And how could I blame him, Father, with

that father of his the model for him of what a man of God is? How could he not fear a vessel of the Lord as being just the opposite?

“Don’t be afraid, son.”

Peter’s eyes gone wide then, the devil filling him up with great terror and confusion; trying, fool the devil was, to put George off from the Lord’s own path set out for him since before even there was any devil at all. Don’t it just make you laugh, Lord? That fool devil trying and trying? Maybe this time I’ll get that bully God! Maybe I got the right plan this time! I think I do, I think this time I do!

“What are you doing here, Mr. Kenner?” Peter said, putting his guitar down on the bed.

“Don’t you see it ain’t me who’s gone harm you?” George said.

Peter was stood up now, poor soul backing up all the way till he’s up against the wall.

“Lord will make it clear, son. Don’t you fear no evil, son. Don’t you fear. Don’t you do not one thing at all, not one thing at all but just come on and come with me.”

“Is my dad here?” Peter said.

“You don’t worry; you just come with me, son.”

“Go where? Something happen to my dad?”

And what George said then, come straight from the Father, was “Yes,” and it wasn’t no lie neither. “Don’t you worry; you just got to come on now.”

“What happened?” he said. “Where is my dad?”

“You just come on, now.”

“Where’s my dad?”

Boy knew it deep down; didn’t know what it was he knew, but he wasn’t wrong not at all something’s terrible wrong with his father. Showed he knew it wailing them blues.

“Peter?” come Pastor Thomas’s voice from upstairs.

Wasn’t any words come to George then. Nothing at all come to him but just crackling fuzz from that amplifier the guitar was plugged into; he hadn’t heard it all till right now.

Peter looked through the doorframe, and then he took a step toward it and suffer me first to go and bury my father but the Ghost of the Father come then in such force, such love and justice and truth and follow me let the dead bury their dead and George didn’t even know what it was the Father was having him do till he heard the door slam and felt the vibration of it coming through his arm and heard the squeak of the stairs Peter was running up.

He’d told the Lord go and send me I’m Your vessel. He wasn’t gone turn back now; he just needed to please know what to do now, Lord.

Then there was more squeaking come from the stairs, but down them this time.

Ghost raised up George’s hand, and made him to lock the door. Made his eyes to see the guitar laying there on the bed. Told him ignore the pounding on the door, don’t respond to Pastor Thomas yelling to open it. Ghost flowed into him through the crackling, waving hum of the amplifier. He went over to the bed and sat down, picked up that beautiful black guitar, felt the holy weight of it in his hands and in his heart. Kept not

listening to Pastor Thomas' terrible pounding, his yelling with the breath of threatenings and slaughter. He turned up the volume knob high as it would go. Ghost in the crackling speaker sending out warm waves of hum. Flow music into Me, and out of Me too will it flow.

He waited for the song the Father would send. He'd play it and hear it and fill up with joy. Pastor Thomas would hear it and fall to his knees.