



RICH SHAPERO

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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

TooFar Media
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A buzzard teeters on a branch, slapped by the breeze. It rustles and regains its balance, gathered with others in the tall trees. Denlon, shivering, feels the wind too. He's in pants but bare-chested, stepping through the darkening woodland. He halts, puts his hand to his chest and draws a deep breath, imagining his lung inflating. Then he glances back, seeing the steep decline of the knob at his rear. Forested valleys, dark ravines, descending to hills and valleys, endless and hidden from view. Forward, the slope reaches the knob's summit and the convex limestone cap that covers it.

He continues forward between two tapping hickories. Spider lines cling to his chest as a bright bowl of sun flares into view.

His feet leave the humus. Limestone is beneath him.

It's as he remembers, rocky plates mottled by lichen, like the shell of an enormous turtle, a female dreaming of laying her eggs in the spring. She's dug herself into the litter for

winter. All around her, the buzzards are perched in the trees. Against the glow in the west, the birds tip and lean, feathers rattling, bald heads ducking to follow him.

“He’s ours,” one mutters.

“Less they feed him to the hogs,” another hisses.

“Or dump him in the crick.”

With cautious steps, Denlon crosses the turtle’s back. He’s middle-aged; not young, not old either. But he’s been condemned, and his arrival here reminds him of that. He lives in the womb of a cheerless oblivion. He’s on the crest of the darkening knob, gazing beyond, yearning for the light. The declining sun hangs before him like a tulip tree bloom, bright amid black clouds, with a serrate orange halo and golden arrows fired at its center: a portal, a way of return, impossibly distant. As he watches, the petals clench, narrowing the egress, reducing it to an irregular ember.

There had been time, plenty of it. But the time had run out.

The sky’s cloudy ceiling grumbles in the south. The dimness is smeared by rain. A familiar odor reaches him: vapors from the mine on the far side of the knob, sulfur from the Sweethome. He was on the list. Ma had given them his name.

One of the buzzards bats its wings and lifts itself into the air. Others do likewise, leaving their perches, hovering amid the trees, then gliding together. A dozen, a score of them now— They’re circling the fallen tree, the prostrate black walnut at the edge of the turtle’s shell. Its long trunk divides the slope. The dead walnut is hard to mount, but there are places where you can scramble beneath.

Denlon remembers when it went down. He was watching, not far from where he is now. The bushy crown dropped, the trunk landed with a boom, and its compass of roots was like a spider springing out of the earth. In the years since, the peckers and bugs had joined with the rot to separate the giant stump from its trunk.

And that stump—

Is more than ugly. It's a monstrous thing: a reaching hand with innumerable fingers, stiff and crinkled. The tapers are gloved with crusted clay, and they creak in the wind and the cold. This spectral hour breathes life into them. The root hairs shiver. The dry clay cracks. The wooden fingers move.

Denlon turns, descending the slope, putting distance between himself and the stump and its gyre of buzzards. He could return the way he'd come, but the incline below is open to him, and he knows it well.

When he reaches the gaunt persimmon, he looks back.

The buzzards are flapping around the stump, gabbling to it, encouraging it. The wooden fingers, silhouetted against the sky, quiver and spread, feeling the air.

The mountains rumble. A boom and a flash. Rain smokes against a nearby slope. Another boom, this one so fierce it shakes the knob. And as he watches, the giant stump tips over onto its belly.

Its tapers dig into the rocky soil, squealing, scraping.

Is the monstrous thing coming alive?

Denlon can see— The root mass is shifting, scrabbling, moving between the trees, descending the slope, hurrying its

limbs like a wooden crab.

Does it know he's here?

The squealing is suddenly louder. The dark stump rears, lifting itself, root arms spread, scarves of spiderweb and gauzy mycelia waving. Its tapers are testing the air, seeking.

He's hidden by darkness, but the warm spring wind flows up the slope like blood, carrying his sign.

The monster can smell him or taste him. The root mass falls forward onto its limbs and scabbles down the slope, closing the distance quickly.

The stump's special terror shakes Denlon's frame like a high-voltage shock. A glum gasp, a desperate groan— He turns his back to the monster and hurries his stride.

The way is steep, the plates of rock slide. Another boom shakes the earth and sky, and now— There's a thumping behind him, thumping and clattering— The sounds stir a fear in him that no earthly comfort can allay.

Hurry, he tells himself. It's close, too close— It's right behind—

An awful creak and a root arm butts his shoulder, toppling him, rolling him over. The leaf litter's flying, gritty appendages plow around him, feeling and finding him, grappling him with hairy claws.

One pins his shoulder, another digs into his hip.

Denlon tears free, sledding atop the loose mold. He trips, stumbles, rolls over a bluff, gets his feet back beneath him and scrambles down. Around him the shrubs are shaking, the wet wind is smacking his face. He descends a narrow

ravine, shouldering past clutches of saplings— Behind him, the stump breaks through a windfall, descending a soil-slide, root arms waving.

Forward, a cloudy face appears in the sky, rising above the trees. The brow is lined. A dark hollow appears like the pit of an eye. The swell of a cheek. And its chin tapers like an inverted bell.

Ma, Denlon cries out.

A dart of wind sucks between the cloud's cheeks, and an elderly voice sounds in his head. *My dear boy.*

Ma's eyeholes blow through, a star appearing in each. Feeling stars. Stars of infinite care.

Denlon's moving as fast as he can, but it's not fast enough. The spiderous mass launches itself and lands behind him. A snaking taper circles his waist and draws him against the stump's twitching center.

He wails, and the high pitch of his voice startles him.

He struggles free of the snaking hold, tripping, pants catching on branches. His stride is short, his legs are shrinking—

Root arms behind him, reaching—

I'm getting smaller, he thinks.

His trousers foil his escape. The waist has fallen around his thighs. He's a boy again, and a six-foot drop seems an enormous height—

Denlon grabs a sapling and hangs, feet dangling. Then his pants slide free and he lets go, landing hard on his side, rain clattering over him.

Behind him the wooden monster is turning this way and

that, probing the thickets.

Denlon is naked, slick with mud. He wipes his cheek with a little hand and regains his feet as the stump swings toward him. A terrified sound from innocent lips and he's running again, descending the muddy slope, feeling his bitty genitals jiggling against a hairless groin.

Abruptly the trees vanish. He's reached the edge of the forest.

Denlon sees three yellow lights below. There's the shack, with a lamp in the bedroom window. And a pair of lanterns are on the porch. A twist of smoke rises from the crippled stovepipe. The collecting smoke had fed Ma's aged visage, but it's dissipating now, along with her caring eyes and worried look.

The shack is unchanged. Its roof is still sagging. The siding is patched with board scraps and tarpaper, and a shutter swings in the wind, hanging by a single hinge. The shack faces the funnel-shaped sinkhole. The rocky vortex seems to be pulling at the earth around it, drawing everything into it. The sinkhole is twice the size of the shack. Part of the dwelling's foundation is gone, and it looks about to plunge in.

Denlon turns. The monster is right behind him, groaning and creaking with malicious intent. *Ma*, he cries, stumbling toward home, giving way to a child's defeat.

He'd gambled his future. He'd bet everything on a mistaken conviction. He'd lost himself in a futile undertaking. And now he is going to get his due. Sobs well in his undersize chest.

What a pitiful creature he is. And the shack makes it painfully real.

No need of crying, a man's voice says.

Denlon looks up and sees his father. Pa is standing there facing the threatening stump, as if by his will alone he could stop the thing in its tracks.

Pa is as he'd been the last day of his life: left arm jiggling, right leg gimped, wearing a dome hat with an irregular brim, a headlamp protruding from its front. As if he can feel Denlon's desperation, Pa raises his hand and switches his headlamp on.

The beam shifts from side to side, lighting the frightening mass, its thready webs, its reaching tapers. And for a moment the monster is frozen in black and white, like a tumor on a CT scan.

Look at that, Pa murmurs, and he stoops to raise his son in his arms.

Pa has black rubber boots on his feet and black rubber gloves on his hands. The metal devices attached to his hip rattle and clang, and as he's lifted, Denlon hears the squeak of coal dust in Pa's clothes. His small head approaches his father's, and he sees Pa's sooty face, eyes peering over his sharp nose, lower lip wet and curled.

"You're saving me," Denlon sobs.

Oh Denny boy, Pa wheezes, *I hope I am*.

The wind lifts his coat. *We'll do whatever we can*, Pa rasps in his ear.

A small woman—a much younger Ma, in her mid-twenties—steps beside Pa.

It ain't right, Ma grieves.

No, it ain't, Pa agrees. Ma puts her head on Pa's shoulder.

Then he hands Denlon to her, and the three of them survey the stump together.

It's motionless now, root arms inert, as if fixed by the beam from Pa's headlamp.

We gotta stop that thing, Pa says. But there's uncertainty in his voice, and his headlamp is flickering.

Ma's chest is warm and her voice is soft.

I gave you life, she says. *I've come back to restore it.*

Pa puts his arm around her. She gazes at him with deep devotion.

Denlon feels his parents' care. They understand the danger he's in, and they're going to protect him.

"I'm not done," he assures them both. "I'm not going to leave."

And with that, the lights in the shack go dark and Pa's headlamp winks out. The ugly stump vanishes, and so does the miner and his slip of a wife.

There is only the echo of a child's resistance in the darkness.



"Denny, Denny—"

He's gasping, the tail of a plea in his throat. Denlon opens his eyes.

He's breathless. His chest is thumping, heart racing— A bedside lamp clicks on, and the pillow beside him is lit. He

turns, hearing a crack that sounds like a root arm snapping but is only the shifting of a bone in his shoulder.

“You’re tangled in the sheets,” Bett says.

He’s shivering, covered with sweat. When he tries to sit up, he fears he’ll vomit.

Then he feels Bett’s hand on his hip. She’s loosening the twists of linen binding his legs. “Sorry,” he mutters.

“A bad dream,” she guesses.

Denlon exhales. “A stormy night back in West Virginia.”

She raises her hand and touches the skin below his eyelid.

He realizes: there are tears on his cheeks. “What time is it?” he wonders, lifting himself, turning away, drying his face with his hand.

“Half past three.”

“I was in the forest behind our home,” he explains. “Pa was with me. And Ma. They were trying to help me.”

“Your mother was being helpful?”

“It was a dream,” Denlon laughs. “A stump was chasing me—the roots of an old walnut. It looked like the growth in my scan—like a hand with fingers reaching in every direction.”

Bett shakes her head. His words upset her. “The threat is preying on you.”

Denlon sighs and waves his hand, dismissing the fear. “We’ll have more information in a couple of days.”

The image in the scan, he thinks, was less alarming than the one in his dream. Simpler, more mundane. But the danger’s still palpable, impossible to dispel. And Bett is right: he’s tried to suppress his fear during his waking hours, but it’s

surfacing in his sleep.

Two days before, he'd sat in a chair beside the surgeon while she zeroed in on the tumor they'd found in his left lung. She'd magnified it for him, dialing into its depths then rising through it, seeing the reaching tapers in three dimensions. "Spiculations," she'd called them.

How old is the growth? Did the malignancy start in his lung? Where else in his body are the agents of death extending their claims? At the moment it's all a mystery. In a few days they'd have PET scan results and a report from the pathology lab. In the meantime he'd be a pilgrim waiting for the oracle to speak.

"We have to take this seriously," Bett says.

"We do," he agrees. "But there's Franny. And Pete. He had a simple operation, and he hasn't had a recurrence. People survive things like this.

"The thought of the end—" He looks at Bett. "It's always with us. And the knowledge too—that it might be sudden, unexpected. But to look too closely at that—" He shakes his head. "Life is enough of a struggle." His words are weighted by memories of delays and diversions, plans impeded, hopes deferred.

Bett, he knows, is right to be worried. But it's his nature to play the optimist. He's not going to dwell on mortality until circumstances force him. Meanwhile, his brewing subconscious will imagine the worst, dreaming of Ma and Pa, reaching into the past for their help, wishing they were like they were when he was a child—harmonious, united to protect him.

Denlon stands, opens a dresser drawer, grabs a t-shirt and pulls it on.

I'm not afraid, he thinks. The aspiration I've carried through life won't die with me. He steps to the window and draws the curtain.

As late as it is, Arlington is sprinkled with light. A commercial jet is blinking its wing tips, preparing to land. He's called this his home for thirty years. Most of his life.

The image reflected in the glass isn't a boy or a teen. But his strong jaw is still there. He has a full head of hair, and the graying is tasteful. And he's only an inch shorter than he was in his prime.

He has a mate—a beautiful woman, inside and out—who believes in him and does what she can to help him. And she knows how determined he is. He's devoted his life to being more than another mouse on the knob, and the reward for his struggles is right before him. That's what he wants to share with her and everyone else: his "Temple in Lime."

As he looks out at the sleeping city, he imagines he can see the Temple complete, lit up against the night sky, glowing above the mundane structures. Five irregular groves, towering to leafy roofs, where branches project in every direction. The bastions are woven like boles and vines in a dense forest, but the members are made of limestone, with undulating arches and keyholes between. And where the branches put forth, there are webs of mosaic glass colored gold and green. The roofing boughs are thatched with copper leaf.

Less a building than a mystical woodland. And a deeper

mystery is found within. Its enclosed spaces are defined by lime spans and rippling corrugations, like the curtains you'd see in a well-lit cavern. Its heights are hollowed by elliptical loges and drip with tear-shaped chandeliers. All who enter, however inured they might be to metro ennui, are transported to another realm.

Denlon's Temple in Lime. A place of inspiration in the guise of a community center. A powerful vision and a personal one. A vision he'd carried with him for so many years. He longed with all his being to bring it into the world.

There was no pretense. He was self-aware. The project was a glorification of origin, a transmutation of his lowly beginnings. In the Temple, the memory of his childhood was preserved, the good years before Pa died. It was this that imbued his work, his mission in life, what he wanted to share with the world. He wouldn't let go of it. No, never. Even with death threatening. He wouldn't let go.

"Come back to bed," Bett says.

He can see the concern in her eyes. The surrounding skin is creased and shadowed, and her straw-colored hair is mussed. Bett's vulnerability frightens him. The discovery of his malignancy had shaken her, and he knows the wait for the pathology report has been hard for her.

She holds out her hand to him.

Then his mobile rings.

"It's Romero," he guesses. "A new brainstorm about the surveys."

He grabs his phone and steps into the bathroom. But it

isn't Romero.

"Denlon?" The voice is male and hesitant.

"Speaking."

"We've never met. My name is Foster. I'm married to Tracy. I'm sorry to call under these circumstances—"

How long has it been, Denlon wonders. Maybe a year. Things were peaceful with his ex, but they didn't speak often.

"It's the middle of the night," Denlon says.

"I know. I wouldn't have called if things weren't dire."

"Dire?"

"Tracy's in trouble. She was diagnosed with cancer in January."

Trace, Denlon thinks. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"They found a mass in her stomach," Foster says. "It's metastasized. It's in her kidneys and her throat. And they think that—" He halts and draws a breath.

Denlon pictures her on the day they met, feeling a fondness from earlier times.

"She needs to see you," her husband says.

"Forest? It's late. I'm not recalling your name."

"Foster."

"We're not close," Denlon says. "We rarely talk."

"I know that. You need to understand— She's terminal. Hanging on. Her mental condition is— I wish I didn't have to bother you. But Tracy's doctor thinks it's important."

"You're calling from—"

"Pittsburgh. I have two grown children here. I'll be honest with you. I want to help her, but— Making this call

wasn't easy. Her doctor thinks you should be here. If you could spare a few days—”

Denlon moves the receiver a few inches from his ear, depriving the voice of its intimacy. “I'm really sorry, but—”

“Tracy's dying,” her husband says. “She's in another world, seeing things that aren't there. She speaks to you. She calls your name in her sleep.”

“I can't. I really can't.”

“The mass in her abdomen,” Foster says. “She thinks it's a fetus. She thinks she's carrying your child. Her doctor wants you to come.”

Tracy is dying. And she thinks she's pregnant.

“Her doctor wants you to come,” the man says again.

2

The sun is up. They're in the car, and Bett is driving. Denlon is on the phone to Romero, talking about the Temple.

"Let's get the amended survey data filed by Wednesday," Denlon says.

Romero commits to the deadline and ends the call by expressing his confidence. There aren't many obstacles left. The latest drawing revisions are in. The remaining public approvals are nearly in hand and the funding consortium's oversubscribed. It's not hard to imagine breaking ground before year-end. The younger man's optimism matches Denlon's. For the firm, the project means status: a public building in an enviable location. For him and Romero, it will be the realization of a waking dream.

As he disconnects, Bett turns onto the highway.

"This is crazy, Denny."

Bett is upset. Why, in the middle of this uncertainty about

his own health, is he getting on a plane to Pittsburgh?

“Her husband should be supporting her.” Bett shakes her head.

“The doctor says it’s important,” he tells her again. “I may get the news today.” He’s talking about his scans and the pathology report. “As soon as I hear back, I’ll let you know.” He puts his hand on his left pectoral as a demonstration of his care and commitment.

Then, with Bett focused on the roadway, he thinks about the reunion with Tracy. It’s hard for him to imagine her as Foster described. She was always the resolute one, the sure eye at the helm. They’d met in their last year of college and faced the struggle to survive together. Tracy was a working man’s daughter—calm, of a practical mind and determined. Attractive too, but that wasn’t what drew him. It was her clarity. She had confidence in him. She understood his sense of purpose and she valued his strength. Together they were headed for something better. Her love was an expression of her faith in them both.

She got a job as a clerk in a department store. He ran a printing press and took architecture classes at night. The print shop was purgatory—a damp basement where he fed black ink to mammoth presses that rattled and pounded like the coal crushers from which he’d fled. The future had been dubious, but he committed himself to his dream of building things the world had never seen. With Tracy’s confidence, he’d granted himself permission to hope. He sharpened his mind with study, and he sharpened his manner and speech.

Ultimately, they found their way to good incomes and a comfortable home. He made a living as an architect, though his high-flown goal remained out of reach. He was able to support Ma, and Tracy kept an ailing aunt going. But they wanted a family and they failed the test. That's how things unraveled.

A childless future— For Denlon there was disappointment, but it drew him closer to Tracy. It was different for her. When she learned they couldn't have kids of their own, she grew distant. To Denlon's surprise and dismay, the commitment and devotion no longer mattered. She just wandered away.

The hope for a child had been vital to Tracy. It gave meaning to her life, the way the Temple gave meaning to his. When the hope faded, it was replaced by the anguish of failure.

Now, somehow, with the threat of death upon her, Tracy's hope had returned. Her dream of a child has come back to life. That's the reason he's flying to Pittsburgh. He's still in her heart. And she is still in his.

The airport cutoff is just ahead. Bett makes the turn and slows as the terminal appears.

The car pulls to the curb and stops beside the sliding glass doors. Denlon leans close and kisses her. "I adore you," he says.

He grabs his traveling bag and steps out. Bett mimes a kiss and he waves as she pulls away. Then he's moving toward the airport entrance, passing through the terminal doors.

As often happens to him in public structures, Denlon has a reaction to the space around him. The design is impersonal,

authoritative and rigid, trying hard to be sleek. As many times as he'd passed beneath the bald ceilings, he still found them oppressive. The architect had imagined travelers would find the cold efficiency modern, but the airport had been a relic on the day it opened. It was a cautionary now, a showcase of bad ideas, a reminder that the human spirit draws inspiration from natural forms.

The strength of a tree's trunk, the sinuosity of its boughs, the hatchwork of limbs and forking branches— The shifting angularity of light beaming through the lush mosaic, the fluid smoothness of cavern lime sculpted by time— In his Temple, the spirit would be coaxed, not herded or bludgeoned. The soul would hear the whisper of something familiar, subtle and vague, blurred and deep, as it might be suggested to a dreaming child.

The airport is busy. The noisy foot traffic obscures a woman speaking over the paging system. According to the posted departures, his flight is on time. Denlon steps to the ticket counter and takes his place behind a teen in a green ski jacket.

He hears a voice: a whisper, high-pitched and creaky.

Is the skier talking to him? No, the boy has his phone to his ear. The attendant behind the counter motions, and the skier kicks his backpack toward the luggage scale.

It won't be easy, the creaky voice says. A familiar voice, aged, female.

Denlon turns. There's nobody near him.

No mercy in cancer, Son.

The voice is Ma's. "What the hell," he mutters.

He can hear her breath by his ear. It's as if Ma is right beside him.

Is it you? he wonders.

The old turtle, Ma replies.

"May I help you, sir?" The attendant behind the counter is staring at him. The skier is gone.

"Three twenty-one," he says, "to Pittsburgh." He shows her the boarding pass on his phone.

Denlon can hear Ma sighing in his ear.

You can't bargain with death, she says.

Her voice is laden with remembrance. Cancer had taken her, and the end had come quickly.

Denlon shuts his eyes and shakes his head. He can see Ma's high brow, her gray hair twisted at the rear and held by a twig. When she scowls, her lips lose their wrinkles.

"Are you alright?" the attendant asks.

You've returned to torment me, Denlon thinks.

I'm here to help. I care about my boy.

"Sir?"

Faces are turning in his direction.

"I'm fine, I'll be fine." He sees his phone on the floor and stoops to retrieve it. The glass is cracked.

The attendant is motioning him away. Denlon picks up his bag and wipes his brow with a trembling hand. Three hours' sleep. Tracy, the pending pathology report—

He's taking uncertain steps, listening, moving down the causeway toward the security queues. It's the dream, he thinks.

The shock— The image in the scan, the ugly mass with tapering arms reaching in every direction.

Denlon stumbles into a flight attendant. Her ankle gives and she falls to her knees.

“Look where you’re going,” she says.

“I’m sorry.” He tries to help her up but she ignores him, rising and swatting the dust off her skirt.

He starts forward again, but his attention isn’t on the terminal or the travelers around him. He’s listening for Ma.

No breath, no words. Just silence.

The voice wasn’t real, he thinks. His mind produced it. That’s happened to others. People hear voices. Pitiful souls locked away in institutions. Then he realizes there’s another explanation. The cancer has spread. It’s in his brain.

Denlon thinks of Tracy. Being face to face with her after all these years. Lost in a delusion caused by—

Stop, he thinks, trying to calm himself. He’d imagined Ma’s voice. He’s fine, he’s just fine.

“Flight three twenty-one to Pittsburgh is now boarding.”

Denlon passes through security and enters the terminal. His gate is crowded. He takes his place in line.

Nearby a mother is seated, nursing her child. As he notices them, the infant sobs and the nipple’s dislodged. When the mother tries to put the baby back to her breast, the coverlet falls from around her. She takes things in order, getting the infant resettled, bending forward to retrieve the coverlet, unwilling to be rushed for modesty’s sake.

Denlon can’t look away. The breast is larger than the baby’s

head, barely dimpled by the tiny hand. The nipple, engorged with milk and blood, is stiff as a finger, deforming the infant's mouth.

A child, Ma whispers, makes the world a joyful place.

Her venomous tone makes Denlon shudder. He raises his hand to his ear, as if he might touch the stinging voice. He's tempted to answer, but he stops himself.

"Have an enjoyable trip," the gate attendant says.

Denlon passes through the gate, enters the jetway and makes his way onto the plane. He locates his seat, squeezing past the legs of a large balding man who's talking with someone in the row forward.

When Denlon sits, the man faces him.

"Louie's my name," the stranger says. His large hand grasps Denlon's arm. "Back to the Pitt, hmm?" His string tie has a silver clasp with a crossed pick and shovel, and as Louie leans toward him, the clasp swings in the space between them.

Denlon doesn't reply.

Louie winks. "You've got mother on your mind."

"What are you talking about?"

"Friend," the big man grunts, "Sunday is Mother's Day. The old petunia is eighty-three. Can't wait to see her." He pats Denlon's leg. "Louie's gonna buy you a drink."



As the aircraft is landing, Denlon wakes. Louie bids him goodbye and the passengers file off the plane.

Denlon exits the airport warily, listening. The voice in his head is quiet.

At the curb, the taxi stand is empty. He waves at an approaching cab, and it screeches to a halt, narrowly avoiding a collision with a hotel bus. Denlon opens the rear door, stows his bag on the seat and slides in.

“Where to?” the cabby asks.

Denlon reads the address from his phone. The cabby punches it in and pulls the taxi into traffic.

“You from Pittsburgh?” The taxi guns between two shuttle vans. “I was born here. No place like home.”

As he speaks, the corner of the cabby’s mouth jerks. Catfish on a line, Denlon thinks, imagining the man at the bottom of a stream while someone above tugs on the hook.

“Don’t run the light,” Denlon says.

The cabby pounds the brakes, and the car screeches into the intersection.

“Is it far?”

“Too far to walk,” the cabby replies.

Denlon checks his messages and sees a new one from Romero that boosts his spirits. They’d found a fabricator for the Temple roof.

“Plans for Mother’s Day?” the cabby asks.

Denlon is silent, listening for Ma.

He opens the window, hearing only road noise.

“My mother is gone,” he says.

And he hopes it’s so.

From the day he left the knob, Ma had harried him. He

sent her funds without fail. He paid a neighbor to look in on her, to cook and do chores. No manner of attention satisfied her. She shared every discomfort with him, every problem, even the most trivial ones. What had changed him, she wondered. Didn't he care? He called her often, and her first words were always, "When are you coming home?"

He'd done his best to be patient with her, but as the years passed, his weariness turned to aggravation. He was taking care of her. Why couldn't she let him make a life for himself? Would she ever stop badgering him? She knew how hard it was for him to carry the guilt she heaped upon him.

"What's the number?" the cabby mutters, consulting his electronics.

Denlon looks at his phone. "Fifty-two oh nine."

"Almost there," the cabby nods, slowing at an intersection and making a turn. He cranes over the steering wheel. "Ambulance parked down the street."

Denlon comes forward, peering through the windshield at the houses ahead—trees, lawns, hedges— He can see an emergency light over the roofs of the parked cars.

"Hope that isn't your stop. Forty-nine twenty-seven, forty-nine thirty-nine. Fifty oh nine. Here come the neighbors."

Denlon sees figures crossing the blacktop ahead.

"Fifty-one fifteen, fifty-one twenty-nine. Probably some old guy with a bad heart. This patch is full of seniors. Driving a meat wagon: there's a job. I had a woman last year, delivered on the way to the hospital. Right where you're sitting. Wait a minute." The cabby rolls down his window. "Bad news, pal.

Fifty-two oh nine. That's your stop."

The scarlet van is parked at the curb. Between the trees, men in white uniforms appear. Denlon is lurched to the side as the cab turns into a driveway across the street.

"It's a woman," the cabby says, "and they've got her strapped down."

Denlon grabs the handle and wrenches the door open, stumbling across a lawn and into the street.

Two paramedics are carrying a metal litter with a struggling woman on it. She's sobbing and howling at them. Most of her body is beneath a blanket. A crowd of shocked elders are standing on either side.

"Trace?"

At the sound of Denlon's voice, the elders turn as one, eaving their brows with tremulous hands, squinting through glasses.

Tracy is suddenly quiet, head cocked to the side, staring at him.

Denlon steps toward her.

Her body is bent at an odd angle beneath the cloth. Has her spine been damaged? One of her legs is twisted, the other is folded beneath the blanket. Her head is couched against her shoulder as if there's something wrong with her neck.

The paramedics reach the rear of the van.

"It's you," Tracy says.

Her face is the same, but her eyes have changed. Desperation blazes in them, fear and animal pain.

"Let me down," she says. "He's my husband." Tracy

struggles to free herself, rocking the litter.

One of the medics looks at Denlon. “She needs to be taken to the hospital.”

Denlon nods.

Ignoring Tracy’s curses, they lift the litter and roll it into the van. The doors slam shut.

Denlon hears a muffled shriek, then the van is pulling away, speeding down the block, siren blaring.

He stands there, stunned. Moments pass and the street empties.

The taxi is gone. Denlon’s bag is on the drive. The oldsters have returned to their crossword puzzles. A man is standing in the doorway of fifty-two oh nine looking at him.

“I’m Foster,” he says, and he disappears into the house.

Denlon steps along the walkway and through the entry.

Tracy’s husband is in the living room. A coffee table is in pieces between two overturned chairs, and the remains of plants and broken pottery are scattered between them.

Denlon sees something glittering on the carpet. It has a familiar look, and when he stoops to retrieve it, he sees the pendant he gave Tracy the night they moved in together.

“A lot’s happened.” Foster’s voice rises from the bottom of a well. He’s big, rotund and unshaven. “Will you come to the hospital with me?”

3

After you and I spoke, I returned to the bedroom. She was still asleep.”

Foster swallows, looks in the rearview mirror and changes lanes.

“Around seven, she was delirious again. I couldn’t understand what she was saying. And her body—” He blinks and draws a breath. “It’s crazy, I know. But it *was* just like—”

He glances at Denlon, confused, unclear. On the phone the previous night, he had seemed unsettled by the doctor’s suggestion. But he’s frightened now, welcoming Denlon’s help.

“I’ve been through two pregnancies,” he says. “Tracy’s middle looks like my first wife’s. Swollen, bumpy.” His face tightens. “Last night, when she was asleep, the thing inside her was shifting.

“I tried to talk to her, but she didn’t hear me. Her eyes were open. Wide open. While the bumps were moving. I thought: Tracy’s dead and whatever’s inside her is trying to get out.”

Poor man, Denlon thinks. The malignancies had thrown Tracy's mind off its track. And because they were coupled cars, Foster was going with her.

"I helped her sit up," he says. "I don't think she saw me. She started making these *cooing* sounds."

"The light's turned green," Denlon says.

Foster nods and the car moves forward. "She bent over and turned her head, as if she was listening to it. Then her lips pushed out." Foster exhales. "They went tight against her teeth, like this, and they pushed out again. She was speaking to it."

Foster takes one hand from the wheel and touches his forehead.

"It was hurting her. I could see something below her ribs, like an elbow, pushing farther and farther out. I was afraid it might—" He takes a breath. "I put my hand on it and pressed. It moved to the side. She leaned back, and the thing seemed to huddle down. Tracy closed her eyes, and she was breathing normally again.

"I sat beside her until she woke. I told her I wanted to take her to the hospital. She said she wasn't ready.

"I explained what had happened while she was sleeping. She seemed surprised, frightened. Then she turned on me. Angry, really angry. She said—"

Foster swallows and shakes his head.

"What did she say?" Denlon asks.

"She said she knew what I was up to, and she wasn't going to . . . let me."

“Let you what?”

“It was strange,” Foster says. “After so many days of being disconnected, we were finally talking as we normally do. But what she was saying was completely crazy.

“I told her you were coming. She clung to my words. She spoke your name over and over. Then the moment of clarity passed, and she was unreachable again. Like I wasn’t there. Like she was on the phone, listening and talking to someone else.”

Foster sighs. “She was calm until the ambulance arrived, but when they tried to escort her out, she went wild. She seems to think that—” He exhales.

“What does she think?”

“That I’m jealous. That I’ve convinced the hospital to—
To abort your child.”



Doctor Janits is dish-faced with a crumpled nose. It’s as if long years of tending to others have quarried his features.

“We’re doing our best,” he explains to Foster. “She’s not happy about being here.”

The three of them are standing in a waiting area.

Janits turns to Denlon. “You’re her first husband?”

Denlon nods.

Janits points to a chair, motions to Foster, and the big man steps toward it.

“Come with me,” Janits says to Denlon.

He turns and leads Denlon down a well-lit corridor.

“It’s a difficult time,” the doctor says. “Tracy doesn’t have long. Three months ago, we were trying to save her. Now our job is to ease her departure. You understand?”

“I do,” Denlon says.

“The malignancy has metastasized quickly,” Janits says. “We can’t stop the spread, and to try would only make the end more difficult for her. The complication is that the cancer has found its way to her brain. She’s delusional. We can reduce her pain, but we’re not able to restore her cogency—to reconnect her with reality.

“Tracy has been expressing her desire to see you. Foster says there’s no disharmony on your side.”

Denlon shakes his head. “None,” he says. Losing Tracy had been hard. There was a part of him that had never gotten over it.

Janits stops in front of swinging doors and gestures Denlon through. Another corridor stretches before them.

“In situations like this, we take a patient’s requests seriously. We’d like to honor her last wishes. What more can we do?”

They approach an intersecting hallway and Janits gestures Denlon to the left. They pass a counter with shelves of instruments behind it. Three nurses emerge from an adjoining alcove, one carrying a rack of test tubes filled with blood. The hallway connects to another corridor extending to the right.

An involuted maze, Denlon thinks. A labyrinth with Tracy at its center.

“She’s frightened,” Janits is saying, “and aggressive. She’s spent a good deal of time here in the past few months, and she isn’t happy about being back. She’s quieted down, but she was violent when we admitted her. We’ve had to restrain her. I don’t want you to be concerned or surprised about that.”

“I saw her being loaded into the ambulance,” Denlon says. “Her body looked badly cramped.”

“Some of that’s caused by the malignancies,” Janits replies. “Some of it’s due to her pain. Some of it’s psychological.”

“There are times when it seems like she isn’t listening, or is unable to hear us or see us. I believe her withdrawal is partially willful. But the greater portion may be beyond her control.”

Janits leads him around a corner.

“How can I help?” Denlon asks.

“Reach out to her,” Janits says. “Be with her. Comfort her. Based on what she’s told us, it’s you she needs.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“You must have been happy together.”

Denlon sighs. “Very happy. For a long while. But we couldn’t have kids.”

“When reality is too much for us, we find comfort in delusion.”

The elevator doors open. Janits motions and they start down a narrow hallway. There are offices on either side, windows sealed by vertical blinds.

“Don’t initiate any discussion about her malignancies,” the doctor says.

“How long will I—”

Janits shakes his head. “Let’s see how it goes. The room has a window of one-way glass. We’ll be monitoring things should any problem arise.”

They pass a lab bench and desks. The doctor stops before a white metal door with a small window.

Janits gives him an encouraging look, takes hold of the chrome handle and turns it slowly.

The door swings open.

Denlon steps through and closes it behind him.

The room is twelve by twelve with cream-colored flooring and cream-colored walls. Tracy is lying faceup on a gurney, but her eyes are closed. She’s beneath an ivory blanket. Below her chin, Denlon can see the neckline of a green hospital smock. Thick red straps cross the blanket, securing her arms and legs.

He moves closer.

Tracy’s fists are clenched. Beneath the blanket, one leg is stretched, the other is bent at the knee. He wonders how much pain she’s feeling.

She’s the one, Ma whispers.

Denlon’s heart sinks.

The one you sheltered with when you left your poor mother.

He takes another step forward.

Shake yourself, Ma says, as if speaking to Tracy. *Look who’s here.*

Tracy’s face turns toward him.

It’s lifting her spirits to see you.

“Denny,” Tracy smiles. In her eyes, there is absolute recognition. “You knew. Didn’t you.”

What did he know?

“Our baby,” she says.

Denlon sees the emotion in her eyes. The young woman he’d married, the one he’d never forgotten—

“Our baby,” Ma mimics.

What do you want from me, Denlon thinks.

Nothing but the regard a devoted mother deserves.

“Here,” Tracy says. “Inside me.” She looks at her swollen middle. “Your son,” she draws the word out.

There is pride in her voice.

“I’m so glad,” Denlon says.

His words bring damp to her eyes. And Denlon sees love in their depths—the love that had touched him for so many years.

I’m going to cry.

Please, he begs. Please stop.

Tracy lifts her chin and parts her lips, urging him closer.

Give your wife a mountain boy’s welcome.

Denlon steps closer. He’s focused on Tracy, remembering all the vulnerability and fondness he’d felt in his youth.

He reaches the side of her gurney and raises his hand to touch her cheek.

“We were lucky,” he says.

Tracy smiles. Somehow, through the trials she’s suffered, her need for him has returned. Her warmth, her softness, her sensitivity—

“You did it,” she murmurs.

“What do you mean?”

“You knew my tubes had opened. You sent me your seed. When I was asleep.”

Denlon doesn't reply.

“I know,” Tracy says.

What does she know?

“Hills magic,” she grins.

It was an amusement they'd shared during their marriage: that Denlon had access to Appalachian wizardry that was beyond the grasp of his city-bred wife.

“Some secret way,” she says. “A spider bite. A thread of fog on the wind. Or a baby snake: when I was asleep, it crawled through the crack.”

Tracy seems to be taking the joke seriously. Denlon glances behind him at the one-way mirror in the door, imagining Janits peering through it. Is there a mic in the room? Can the doctor hear what's being said?

She's crazy, Son.

“You did it for us,” Tracy says, profoundly grateful. “You found a way.”

You abandoned your Ma for her.

That's enough, he insists, feeling the old dread. This isn't the Ma of his early years, before Pa died. This is the Ma he had feared, the one who'd had power over him, the one who'd done everything she could to load him with guilt. He imagined her piercing eyes—brown, bitter, withering.

Tracy's body bucks, wrenching at the straps. “Help me,” she gasps.

“Are you in pain?”

She seems all at once confused, as if her attention's been called to something fearful. "He's been growing so quickly. My womb had to stretch. My organs were in the way. They said my body didn't want him."

"The doctors?"

Tracy nods. "It isn't true. He just needs more room. His arm grew up the side of my chest. I could feel it there when I took a deep breath. One of his legs circled my back. It was rubbing against the knobs. It frightened me," she admits, sharing some of her doubt.

"There was a bitter taste. They thought something was wrong with my kidneys. I could feel his fingers trying to get a grip. Then—"

An odd expression appears on her face, startled but gloating, as if she'd experienced something unexpected and had found it pleasurable.

"His head reached my heart," she says. "His wispy hair is growing around it." Tracy sighs. "Denlon. I knew you'd come."

Her wish fulfillment is vivid to him: the young woman who desperately wanted a child, and the dying woman imagining she is pregnant.

They're a twosome. Mother and son. Ain't love grand?

"The contractions started this morning," Tracy says. "My breasts are ready. They're full of milk. Undo me, Denny."

Denlon stares at the straps.

"You want to see," Tracy laughs, "don't you?"

You heard what the sawbones said. They're gonna throw her

on the ash heap.

“Help me, Denny.” Tracy is thrashing her shoulder and twisting her trunk.

What about Baby Root? How’s she gonna nurse him and change his diapers? She can’t care for the boy strapped down like that.

“Undo me,” Tracy insists.

Don’t be heartless like your Pa. Let her loose.

Denlon is about to object when the door flies open behind him.

Tracy screams.

Denlon’s knocked to the side, doctors surround the gurney. A nurse grabs his arm. Two interns subdue Tracy while Janits raises a syringe and a vial. The plunger retracts, filling the syringe, then Janits steps closer and jabs the needle into her arm.

“You’re alright?” the nurse asks.

Janits eyes him with a frown. Denlon isn’t waiting.

He’s hurrying through the doorway and down the corridor, jostling a robed patient, past a lab tech wheeling a cart.

“How do I get out of here?”

A woman in uniform gives him directions and Denlon continues down the hall, through a swinging door and into another corridor. He’s running now. Janits and the others know. The doctor had heard what Tracy said to him.

It’s none of their business, Denlon thinks. Tracy’s madness belongs to the two of them. It’s their tragedy—their sorrowful past and hopeless future. Tracy is leaving the world.

And death, for her, isn't just the end of mind and body. It's the end of her most precious wish, her most fervent desire.

She can't accept that. She isn't ready.

At the end of the corridor, he starts down another, remembering his dream of the night before. He has a crying need for the comfort and care he'd felt long ago. From his mother, before Pa died; and from Pa himself.

I'm right here, Pa says softly.

Denlon's feet are still moving, but he's stunned. Surprised but relieved.

Glad to be back. Pa laughs.

There's a nursing station ahead.

Poor Tracy, Pa says.

Ma made it worse, Denlon thinks.

She wants to help, Pa says, *but she don't know how.*

She's mean to me, Pa. And she's mean to you.

Since the day I died, things haven't been right between us. It isn't her fault. Your Ma is afraid.

Of what? Denlon wonders.

She has two sides, Son. A caring side and a frightened side. The frightened side gets angry. She thinks we abandoned her.

You understand, Denlon thinks.

I understand, Pa says.

The station on Denlon's left looks familiar. He remembers the shelves of instruments, and he turns at the connecting aisle.

Where are you going? Pa says.

Back to D.C., Denlon thinks.

It's time to settle this, Son.

Settle how?

You have to go home. Back to West Virginia.

The corridor leading to the reception area appears before him. Pa is right, Denlon thinks. He can't live with Ma's abuse in his ears the rest of his days.

You can't die that way either, Pa says.

Foster sees Denlon approaching and rises from his chair.

"How did it go?" he asks.

"The doctor wants you," Denlon lies. "He's in the ward."

Foster can tell something's wrong.

"On your own." Denlon waves the big man toward the corridor.

A tone sounds nearby. Elevator doors are opening. Denlon hurries toward them, passing through the gap as the doors close. The elevator goes straight to ground level.

A cab is parked in the turnaround. Denlon hurries toward it, opens the back door and slides onto the seat.

The cabby swings around: the catfish, with a hook tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Thought you'd be here," he says. "Where to?"



Denlon's on an expressway now, headed south. At the Pittsburgh airport, he'd rented a car. He has nothing but what's in his pockets as his bag is still in Foster's front room. He retrieves his phone.

There's a message from Romero. An important meeting is planned. "When are you coming back?"

Denlon calls Bett.

"Where are you?" she asks.

"I just left West Penn Hospital."

"That doesn't sound good. How is she?"

"Not good. It's in her head. She's out of her senses."

"Oh no."

"She doesn't have long."

"What's your arrival time?" Bett asks.

"I'm not returning tonight. I've rented a car. I'm four hours from Charleston. I'll spend the evening there and drive to the knob in the morning."

"You're going home?"

"I am," he says.

"Denny— Have you heard from the hospital?"

"Not yet."

"You should be here." Bett's upset. "We should be facing this together."

"I promise I'll call," he says, "as soon as I get the pathology report."

Should he tell her about the voices he's hearing?

"I have to make my peace with the place," he says.

"You're talking as if—"

"It's important to me."

Silence on the line. Bett's trying to accept his decision.

"Is there anything we should do for Tracy?" she says.

"Knit her a baby sweater with five sleeves. I'll call you

tomorrow. Rest easy, sweetheart.”

“Goodbye then. I love you.”

Goodbye, Ma says as Denlon disconnects.

4

A line of motionless rail cars appears on the right, twenty yards from the highway. Coal hoppers waiting to be loaded, brown with white numbers painted across their sides. The giant wheels and couplings had spoken with fierce authority to the child's mind. The pale codes held a mystery that had frightened him as a boy. Denlon sees them now with a wiser eye, knowing the digits' chief importance is on the waybills of railroad clerks. But the sight still calls forth powerful images—adits and headlamps, sooty bodies belly-crawling through winding tunnels, shafts that might collapse at any moment.

A hill of black ore rises behind the hoppers, and beyond that is the steep side of a mountain ridge, climbing toward the sun as if to obscure it. During his youth the coal trains were never far. From the knob he could hear them coming and going, day and night.

The road straightens and a small farmhouse appears made

of concrete blocks, a water drum beneath its eaves. The ground is cleared for pasture to the top of a hill. One of the fence rails has a dead groundhog draped over it.

From Charleston, he'd taken the cutoff, passing through scattered farms. The farther he drove, the higher the hills, the more shabby the spreads and the cruder the dwellings. Where the slopes were steep and the forest untamed, farmers were barely hanging on, scratching at the earth for a living. And for those still higher, the land was beyond hope, untillable. The only livelihood was beneath the earth.

The night in the motel in Charleston had been a long one. Ma and Pa had been silent, but the events in Pittsburgh and his plan to return to the place of his birth had kept him awake until four or five. He'd been like a hurdler reviewing his set. At each hurdle, he scanned the recording backwards and forwards, judging his leap.

The course began in D.C., where he struggled with night school and the rent, running the presses seven days a week. Then came hard luck, an eviction and a robbery that left him with nothing but what he was wearing. In the middle of that, he'd met Tracy, and things got serious quickly. He was admitted to grad school and devoted himself to study in the daylight hours, working at night. Waiter, drug store clerk, midnight pizza delivery. He was a flea on the back of the city, feeling its energy but not yet a part of its future. Still, he took comfort in the knowledge that he wasn't beneath the hills. He was far from the mines, infinitely far. Finally, he got his degree. He applied for entry-level positions in D.C. architectural firms. It

took nearly a year, but luck turned his way.

Roadside buildings ahead. Auto repair, a feed and seed, a deserted shop with a torn awning. Shacks close to the road. A small dozer is digging stumps out of the earth. A snake-rail fence, another sharp turn, and no fences at all. The sights draw him into the past. He can almost believe he's seventeen, sitting in the passenger seat of a truck beside a stranger, a sackful of food and clothing between his legs. He was leaving, fleeing from the future Ma had planned. "The Sweethome won't take you," she said, "but the Black Orchard will."

The farms have vanished. The road turns sharply again and again, and on either side mountain walls rise steeply. In the strip of sky above, buzzards are soaring. Lazy and flapless, the shallow vees stamp the wooded labyrinth with the cipher of death. In a land this poor, were there really enough perishing creatures to feed them all?

Denlon makes the turn, and the road ahead climbs toward a break in the ridge. Clinker Knob isn't far.

On the left, sun lights a glade of blooming redbud. It's that time of year. Redbud, dogwood, serviceberry— White bell-flowers down by the creek. The associations are good ones. He resists them at first, then he lowers his window. He can smell the redbud fragrance, and it sends him back to his childhood, to the time before Pa's death. The three of them are ambling in the woods among tart cherry and lime-stemmed sassafras. Pa lifts him into the air and sets him on a high branch. Ma spreads out a blanket. Pa kneels and stretches across it. He's in a suit of white linen with blue suspenders. Denlon watches a

bird and when he looks again, his parents are on the blanket together, embracing. Ma has circled Pa's thumb with her fingers, expressing her amorous attachment, along with a youthful dependence on him.

The road curves around a hollow, black locusts on either side. A mobile home propped on cement sacks and a ruined barn on the right. And beside the barn is a gaping sinkhole. The hills are made of limestone, and the limestone is riddled with caves. When the erosion reaches the surface, a hole often appears, opening into the caverns below.

The asphalt ascends. Denlon holds his breath.

In the space between two ridges, a sharp peak appears.

Grayson's Peak.

The monolith rises in forested steeps until it reaches an abrupt border where it turns stony, angular and three-sided. On its eastern flank, hidden from view, is the mine where Pa lost his life. For the child Denny, the Peak had been a grave marker. The sun lights it now, as it often had, stirring fond memories. Pa chasing the Sheets boy with a hoe and carrying Denlon home on his shoulders. Skinning a possum, seeing Pa's crooked smile and his bloody cheeks beneath the pelt on his head. Pa at night in the woods with his jug, singing to the wind.

The summer he died was a hot one. The walls of the mine were sweating, Pa said. The rock was soft, the timbers were sinking into the floor, shrinking the tunnels day by day. "There are crickets in the attic," he joked. "*Greek-greek.*"

The jokes ended abruptly. The collapse occurred near the

end of the shift and it took nearly a week to clear it. What they found of Pa was put in a sealed coffin. He wasn't fit to look at, Ma said.

After he died, mother and son shared their grief. Then Ma's sadness turned to recrimination. Pa's death freed a hundred gripes—his laziness, his drinking, his foolery. It was hard to hear, but Denlon accepted her harsh judgment, at least to her face. In private, the Grayson monument remained for the Pa he remembered.

Without a provider, their situation became desperate. Denlon was too young to get a job, so he was sent out to beg. He found meals for himself and brought something home for Ma every night.

He owed his education to Mrs. Scarberry. Her husband lost his legs to a coal cutter and she knew what hardship was. She spent long hours tutoring him, leading him beyond the simple school texts. A mine entrance framed with cracked timbers, black throat gaping, haunted his youth; and Ma didn't want him to leave. "You're old enough now," she'd said, "and the pay at the Orchard is good." The prospect of being left alone in the hills frightened her. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Scarberry, he would have ended up like Pa, lying on a rail car, mining coal in a tunnel three feet tall. Mrs. Scarberry gave him the learning, and Pa's grim end gave him the resolve to leave.

An intersection comes into view. Denlon guides the car around the turn. He's on the road home now. And with the familiar route, the familiar feeling returns. The old claustrophobia. His future is cramped, hedged in by fear. He's a

prisoner, held captive by the shack, by the knob, by his unlucky place in life. And by Ma.

Through the roadside scrub he catches sight of the stream. Is there still bad water in it? A common lament in the valley: bad water in the school well, bad water in the homes around the Black Orchard. It was cloudy and smelled of sulfur. By the road, the stream was thick as biscuit gravy, and the catfish were blind. If you waited long enough, you'd see one raising its head above the surface, gasping for air.

Around the bend, the Stearns Barn appears: the local dance hall. Denlon remembers Jink, his closest friend. They were brothers in so many ways—their determination, the relish of discipline, the aversion they shared to a life in the mines. Jink loved music, and a natural agility infused his hands. He learned the fiddle from an uncle and played at the Barn dances. There was longing in the music, especially the tune Denlon called "Our Waltz." He remembers its mournfulness and the desperate hope they both felt when it rang in their hearts.

Like Denlon, Jink's chances were slim. His father survived years in the mines, but he could no longer work. His breath was short from dust in the lung, and he walked with a stoop, peering ahead as if he was lost in a tunnel and couldn't find his way out. Jink dreamt of a scholarship to a conservatory in Raleigh and a life playing the violin. But it didn't work out. He had younger sisters and brothers, and the curse Denlon avoided as an only child landed on his friend. When high school ended, Jink joined those who labored beneath the earth.

Denlon remembered that fateful night before Jink reported for work. With solemnity, his friend placed his violin in its case and gave up his dream. That was the moment their friendship died. After Denlon escaped to D.C., communication persisted for a while and then petered out.

Had government pressure affected the mines? Are the Orchard and the Sweethome still active? Do children see Jink at dusk, trudging the long way home, reeking of carbide, soaked and sooty? Are the trucks still powering past, laden with black fruit, like ants bearing sweets from a tree canker?

At the curve in the road, Clinker Knob comes into view, its forested flank rising above the surrounding hills. The tree skeletons look like mist on the slopes, and a pall of cloud is drifting closer. Bad weather is on the way—rain, a storm perhaps.

By his ear, Denlon hears the slow breathing.

Hard times for us, Ma says.

They were, he thinks. Very hard. Their troubles had forced him to grow up quickly. Her fears stood between him and the future he wanted for himself. Despite their conflicts, she'd never known how deep his resentment went. He'd done his best to hide that from her.

Denlon listens, waiting for Ma's response. But she's quiet now, considering perhaps. Or oblivious, as she had so often been.

The Sheets place appears on the right, their nearest neighbor. The house is still there, and it looks freshly painted. Denlon can see the barn and some goats in a wire enclosure;

then, on the left, the shale wash where a box turtle could often be found barging around in the leaf litter. She had brown eyes. When you approached, her head and limbs drew into her shell. When you held her in your hands it was like holding a rock.

Denlon would carry the turtle down to the stream. With his arms extended to either side, he crossed the water stepping from stone to stone, balancing her on his head. "Careful," he cautioned, feeling her plated belly tipping back and forth.

When he reached the opposite bank, he would set her on a slab at eye level.

"Don't be afraid," he'd coax her. "Stick your head out."

Between the shell and the chest flap, he could see it—the high brow and beaked nose, her corded neck and watchful eyes. He'd wait, hearing the running water, the rustle of leaves, the woodpeckers tapping the trunks; he'd wait and wait until the belly flap moved and the head ventured out.

Her fear was maddening, but he had to accept her for what she was. The same as Ma after Pa died. Untrusting, wary and self-protective.

Is she listening to these thoughts? He can hear her breathing. Is she going to speak? Is she about to scold him, take him to task, make him feel responsible for their poverty and isolation?

He'd never been able to declare himself to her. Talk with Ma was always strained. When you spoke, often she didn't respond. You had to guess what was going on in her head. Some people thought she was hard of hearing, and Denlon didn't correct them. She'd halt mid-sentence, troubled by

other thoughts; she'd turn her head, remembering something. Her loving side hadn't vanished completely. At times her eyes would soften and she would show you her heart. But after Pa's death, it was a side only Denlon saw, and not very often.

Can you hear me? he wonders. Are you there?

The uncertainty. This too is familiar.

Is Ma with him? Why does she come and go? Is she some self-induced comeuppance for the errors he'd made in his struggle through life?

The shack's rutted drive appears. A post beside it is splintered, loose in its hole, and the remains of the rusted mail basket lie in a ditch. Denlon eases around the curve and shifts to low, starting up the drive. The car climbs past a grove of ragged cedars.

If Ma was alive and in the shack, she'd hear the car. She'd open the door, step onto the porch and look down.

Through the lowered car window Denlon can see them now, perched in the trees. The buzzards ruffle their feathers and bat their wings, and a dozen heads shift to follow him. They'd been roosting here as long as anyone cared to remember. To the young boy, they were bigger than life. And they always had morbid things in mind, they always had ghoulish things to say.

Denlon exhales. His hands are trembling on the wheel.

"Ma," he sighs.

He tightens his grip and steps on the accelerator, and the car continues up.

The odor of sulfur is gone. Are they still working the

Sweethome? The mine was in a hollow on the far side of the knob, invisible from the heights. But you could hear the tippie and the breaker and rail cars, and you could see the smoke and smell the stench. At the bottom of the rugged slopes with no road, only a coal train linked the camp and those who lived there with the outside world.

He can see the edge of the clearing now. A sagging eave comes into view, then the roof and a broken window. The shack is smaller than he remembers. The front door is closed and the porch deserted. But there's an old station wagon parked under the dogwood beside the cellar.

Someone's here, Ma says, and she sounds surprised.

A visitor? Has someone made the shack their quarters?

Denlon pulls his car to the side and kills the engine, eyes on the porch. He was last here for Ma's funeral. In the years since, the disrepair has advanced. All of the windows are broken now, the roof has shed most of its shingles and the stovepipe has sprung from the gable.

He opens his car door slowly. He steps across the weedy margin and around the lip of the sinkhole. It's twice as large as it was in his youth. The shack faces the funnel-shaped hole, its foundation completely exposed where the rim has eroded beneath it. The derelict dwelling looks like it's about to plunge in. The funnel had always been banded, but the bands are more prominent now, as if the vortex is growing in strength.

When Denlon reaches the station wagon, he tries the passenger door. It's unlocked and swings open. He looks at the worn seats, then back to the porch. When he was a child, they

had been squatters. No one had cared.

He pushes the glovebox button and the lid drops. Among the contents, he spots a car registration, and when he unfolds it he sees Jink's name.

What's he doing here? Ma wonders.

Denlon shakes his head, puts the registration back in the glove box and closes the door.

He continues to the foot of the stair, where he stops and calls Jink's name. The call echoes back from the sinkhole.

Silence. All he can hear is the sound of Ma's breathing.

We're back home, he thinks.

After so many years.

She sounds as trepidatious as he is.

Denlon starts up the stair, putting his foot on a tread, hearing it groan as he straightens his leg. Another and another. He imagines Jink opening the door to greet him.

The shack's walls show recent signs of repair, bent nails securing planks, gaps patched with tarpaper. The porch comes into view. Denlon can smell the must of decay, and when he puts his shoe on the porch, the wood compresses like cork.

Then he's facing the entrance.

The wear mark around the doorknob shakes him. A vestige of personal history: the coming and going over the years. How many times had his hand—first small, then larger—grasped that knob and turned it.

Go on, Son.

Denlon raps on the door.

It titters on its hinges, swinging open. In the front room,

he can see Ma's old chair beside the woodstove and the threadbare settee where he used to sit. The roof has been leaking. In places the ceiling is patched.

He crosses the threshold. "Jink?"

A kerosene lamp hangs on a nail in the wall. The cook table is cluttered with pots, plates and utensils. There's a box of white candles beside a bowl of wooden matches, and a bucket on the floor is half full of water. Nearby is an open kitbag. Someone is living here.

"Jink?" Denlon says, louder, turning.

In back, Ma suggests.

He steps toward the two small rooms. He'd slept in the one without a door. It's empty now. His sleeping mat is gone, and so is the sack he'd stuffed with straw and used as a pillow. He imagines himself lying there, hearing the Sweethome rumble, the sound of the breakers grinding their freight.

Denlon faces the entrance to Ma's room. It's the same as it had been years ago. A scrap of canvas hangs in the doorframe. He imagines her standing as she often did, peering out of the small window.

You wanted the world, Ma says. *But there was a time when it was just the two of us*. She sounds wistful.

Denlon puts his hand on the canvas, feeling sick, faint.

He eases the cloth aside and pushes his head and shoulders through.

So many years. This room, this bed—

To the right, a man's soiled clothing hangs on nails. The old dresser is without its bottom drawer, and the mirror above

it is spidered with cracks, as if someone had done it intentional damage. The window at the rear is punched through, and below it a puddle of water has collected. But Denlon barely notices this.

The bed is covered with a blanket. There are swells and folds, and atop the small pillow he can see the back of a head with coarse gray hair.

Denlon tries to speak, but fear mutes him. It isn't Jink on the bed. It's someone small and slight.

What keeps her so still? How long has she been here like this? He steps forward, feeling grit under his shoe, as if something has brought earth into the room. A *crunch* and the gray head moves.

He reaches his hand for where her shoulder would be, but there is nothing. The swell of blanket flattens against the mattress, and the head creeps around, detached from the body.

The possum on the pillow eyes him with menace, pointed snout twitching. She opens her jaws, showing needle-sharp teeth. A baby, two inches long, is hugging her side, peering through the gray hair.

Denlon clears his throat to hear his own voice. Then he turns, lifts the canvas and steps back into the front room. Jink isn't here. And neither is Ma. He continues through the doorway onto the porch.

Am I going to see you? he wonders.

Is that what you want?

Of course, he says.

So much has passed between us.

So much, he agrees.

Denny, my son—

She sounds bereft.

I never thought you'd come home, Ma murmurs. I'm so glad you have.

She was reaching out to him.

You never lost it, did you. Your love for your Ma.

No, Denlon answers. It was always there.

We were happy once.

Happy, he thinks. And he takes a few steps, crossing the porch.

He puts his hands on the rail and looks down at the sinkhole. A dizzying sight, as it had been in his youth. Since his departure, it had swallowed the pines on the far lip and eaten the shale near the stunted cherry. The dark opening at its center is larger too. He recalls a humid evening he'd lain awake, praying that the funnel would swallow the shack and everything in it, including himself.

It was here, at this broken-down place, from these despairing beginnings— It was here that his dream was born: the dream of designing structures that would use the forms of nature to ennoble and empower. Structures that would transform and exalt, that would inspire hope and belief.

Are you regretting you left? Do you see what a cruel thing it was?

It's time for the truth.

No, Ma, he thinks. I'm not regretting. I had things I wanted to do. And I couldn't do them here.

I'm so sorry, she says.

Was she thinking of his Temple?

Life, Ma says, *is busy with powers we don't understand.*

What are you saying? he thinks.

In the woods there are webs, hanging between the trees. They catch all manner of flies and bugs. It's the one, Ma says, *having power over the other. And the power destroys. No one can change that.*

You're talking about my cancer, he thinks.

I am, Ma says.

His phone is in his pocket. He could call the hospital now and ask if the pathologists have delivered their verdict.

I wish I could do something, Son. I know what the cancer is. My beautiful breasts— The end was a torture. The lumps were like truffles—

He's listening, gazing at the far wall of the sinkhole, doubting that things would ever come right with her—when he catches sight of the rope.

Someone had tied a rope to the base of the cherry tree.

Jink—

Was it possible? Had he descended into the caves?

The funnel was the navel of Clinker Knob, an entrance to a labyrinth of tunnels and caverns. During their youth, the two boys descended often, shinnying down a rope and navigating the maze with dripping candles, daring each other on.

He wouldn't do that, Ma says.

Was Jink down there now?

What are you thinking?

Maybe Jink couldn't get out. Impossible, Denlon tells himself—that he'd arrived just in time to save his old friend. Then he remembers the box of candles and the bowl of matches on the cook table. And when he looks down at the porch planks beneath his feet, he notices a large bell jar half full of wafer ash seeds. During their forays into the caves, he and Jink had used them to mark the way.

5

Denlon pats his pockets, feeling his cellphone with matchbooks and candles in one and the wafer ash disks in the other. He steps onto the lip of the funnel, takes the rope in both hands and tugs on it. The cherry tree holds.

He pulls the rope up from the depths, coiling it around his shoulder, running the lengths through his hands, checking the knots where Jink spliced them together. They look secure, but there are rust-colored stains on the rope, and Denlon wonders what that means.

He adds a large knot to the far end, then hurls the loops back down the funnel. He whips the rope, snaking it toward the dark center until it passes over the edge and drops into the hole.

Is he really going down? Jink's hazard feels like a summons.

For the moment, the course of my life has changed, Denlon thinks. He's taken a bypass. He'll find his way back.

“Ready?” he mutters.

Ma doesn’t reply.

He takes the rope in both hands and throws his weight against the stunted cherry. Satisfied it will hold, he starts down, edging his shoes into the sandy surface, letting the rope slide through his fists.

The dark hole slues below him. He crouches, lowering his center of balance, feeling the dank air of the cave exhaling against him. The jags around its rim are like rotten teeth. He won’t be able to use his phone’s flashlight or strike a match until he comes to rest.

It’s been decades since he last did this. Is he agile enough?

Denlon shuffles over the ragged lip and lets his legs drop. Then he lowers himself slowly, moving one hand beneath the other, passing through the funnel’s neck.

The odors of the subterranean world engulf him.

He’s descending quickly now, hand over hand, rope sliding between his thighs. The rocky throat is above him. The darkness is thick around him. He can hear the echo of his breath, and he hears Ma breathing too.

You still have the strength in your legs, she says. It was different for me.

Her words are steeped in self-pity. Denlon knows what’s coming.

Without a word, Ma says, disbelieving. Gone for good. My only child. He wouldn’t do that to me. I ain’t perfection, Lord knows. But— Hush, you old fool. Stop your complaining.

I’m not listening, he says.

It'll be a cold winter, she persists. Quiet yourself and gather your weeds. You can boil 'em for greens.

You had someone to cook for you, Denlon objects. I tried to get you out of the shack, but you wouldn't move. The helper he'd hired had bought her clothes, but she'd send him photos of herself in her gray blanket, using a hickory branch as a cane.

No use crying, old woman, Ma consoles herself. No one can hear.

Stop it, Denlon demands. He has to be firm. She'll make him feel as guilty as he lets her. We're trying to find Jink, he says.

The view above looks like the face of a timepiece with a second hand tracking around the dial. He's swinging on the rope.

Down, down, hand over hand.

The final knot surprises him, sliding between his shins and his thighs. He's clinging to the lifeline now, legs dangling.

There was a ledge they had used to get back on the rope when they were ready to leave. Is the ledge still there? How much have the caverns changed?

Don't, Ma says.

His intentions are frightening her.

Don't let go.

He's flexing like a minnow on a hook, wondering if a bottomless chasm is yawning beneath him. A groan escapes from his chest. Then he loosens his grip and the rope slides through his clutches. Ma whimpers. He feels himself falling, then something unyielding strikes his back.

Denlon lifts his head. He puts his hand against the cloth of his pants, finding the pocket opening.

When he turns on his flashlight, the rocky floor appears along with a shelf covered with stalagmites. He moves the light, and the floor spreads out in all directions. Above, the knotted end of the rope is swinging like a bell clapper five feet over his head. And the ledge they'd used is right beside it.

"That wasn't so bad," he says.

Ma is still whimpering.

"We're fine," he assures her.

He sees the imprint of boot heels in the muck. And there's a string of wafer ash disks, pointing the way. Denlon pulls a candle from his coat pocket, lights the wick and secures it on a rippled shelf.

"The ramp," he mutters, remembering.

Denlon stumbles over loose rock, finds the ramp and ascends, pausing at the top to shift his flashlight. "Jink?"

I hated it, Ma says. When the two of you went down here.

There's a large deck riven with cracks, descending between two walls.

Denlon makes the turn, pointing his light toward the gap. With his free hand, he retrieves some wafer ash seeds from his pocket and sprinkles a line of them as he moves.

You worried me so.

Denlon reaches his arm out. The wall is cold and slimy, a drape of fused stalactites. The Curtain of Pipes, he thinks.

Frightful things.

They were wondrous to him, so alluring that he'd made

them part of his Temple.

He follows Jink's boot prints until he sees the place where stalactites have broken loose, parting the drapery. He extends his flashlight beam into the gap, getting a glimpse of surfaces sparkling beyond.

I don't like this, Denny.

"Jink," he shouts, hearing the echoes of his call, listening for a response.

Denlon turns sideways and squeezes through the gap in the curtain. It's a tighter fit than it was decades before. He plants another candle and looks back, fixing the opening in his mind for the return.

You're not listening to me.

You're right, he thinks. I'm not listening. I'm an adult now, not a child. He waves his light, seeing the floor declining toward a wide pit.

It's a long way down, Ma says.

The pit frightens her, and he can feel the depth of her fear.

Fear, Son. I lived every day with it. All those years Pa worked in the mines— And after he was gone, thinking about how he'd been buried alive.

He stoops to keep the light on the course before him. There's a softness beneath his shoe. He hears a sucking noise as his leg lifts. There's a line of wafer ash seeds at the pit's brink.

We're already lost.

"I know where we are," he assures her.

As he comes around the pit's far side, he sees a leaning wall, stippled like a plucked fowl. And beyond that a ragged

oval of black, the entrance to a tunnel.

Denlon kneels and crawls into the dark mouth, raising his light. The ceiling looks like melted wax, with nipples of drip-stone on either side. A dozen feet farther, a gap appears. He squeezes through and stands.

There's a shelf, he recalls.

Ma tries to laugh.

Keep your hand on the wall, he tells himself.

The ledge runs level and begins a descent. There's no room for error here.

Don't, Ma says.

She's fearful again, and her voice is sterner.

Denny—

This is dangerous, he says. I'm trying to concentrate.

You're as bad as your Pa.

Be quiet, he says. His back is to the wall, his soles on the narrow ledge, inching along.

You left your own mother to sicken and die.

"You're not helping me, Ma." He's reaching his limit.

Left me for the buzzards—

"You couldn't stand to see me make something of myself." He'd hidden his anger from her for so many years. Now it's coming out.

Something of yourself? Fairy tales? Bridges and castles? Those buildings of yours?

"I had the right to live my own life," he says.

He's reached the end of the ledge.

Keep quiet, he orders her.

He's stepping into a small chamber. "Jink?" he shouts, moving the flashlight beam.

Denlon crosses the puddled floor, hearing the *plink* of dripping water sounding around him like silver bells. Under that bulge, he remembers, and he steps toward a sagging outcrop. It's the belly of a monster with a thousand dugs, each with a long-drawn nipple and a droplet of cave milk clinging to its tip.

"Down here," he mutters, kneeling and shifting the light.

At first he sees nothing but shadows. Then he moves the light closer.

It's still there: the entrance to a tunnel three feet wide and two feet tall. The sight of it makes him shudder.

Ma is horrified. *It's too small.*

He can see the descent for a couple of yards, then it's lost in darkness.

We'll never come back.

Denlon sees the print of Jink's heel in the mud and that spurs his courage. I'll need both hands, he thinks.

He lights a candle, planting it in the muck. Then he turns the flashlight off and returns the phone to his pocket. He gropes before him, getting his fingers on the rock, squeezing his shoulders into the passage and pulling his hips forward. He feels for holds. He pushes with his knees and toes, squirming farther. The sides of the passage converge.

It's not wide enough.

I can do it, he thinks, shrinking his shoulders, sending his hands forward. The holds slip beneath his fingers, soft as clay.

No, Denny. No!

Don't be afraid, he thinks. Help me.

Hands and elbows, knees and hips— He's pushing at the cold putty, trying to squeeze through the narrow tunnel, reaching for the comfort only Ma could provide, the care and tenderness he remembered from so long ago.

Why are you doing this? she sobs.

Help me, Denlon gasps.

You're Pa's son. None of mine.

Pa was good to us, Denlon says. It wasn't his fault that he died.

You don't know—

I can't take any more, he says. I'm done with your carping. Your fear. Your guilt.

I brought you into the world.

You wanted blood, he says.

You are my blood. Every drop.

You were going to send me into the mines. Did you want me to die like Pa? Would that have shown you the proper devotion?

What a cruel thing to say.

I had dreams, Ma. Things I wanted to do.

Your fantasy? Your Temple? How did that work out?

Her words touch his heart.

I wanted a life of my own, he replies.

Some life it turned out to be.

You're the one who's being cruel, he says.

I'm sorry. A sob escapes her.

Denlon's shoulders relax. The tension goes out of his legs.

He moves forward effortlessly now, cold droplets prickling his neck.

I didn't come back to hurt you, Ma says.

The tunnel tends down. He's slipping through it, feeling a bigness in his head, making budging motions with his knees. His progress accelerates, then slows to a creep.

I wish that was true, he says.

He gropes for the wall. His arm swings to the side. He lifts his head, testing for the roof. It has vanished. He draws his legs beneath him and stands.

I'm sorry, Ma says again. I truly am.

Denlon is silent.

You're a fine man, she says softly.

I had things, he tells her, to prove to myself. I wanted you to be proud of me.

I am, she sobs. Believe me.

Denlon sighs. "We have to find Jink."

He removes his phone from his pocket, turns the flashlight on and holds it before him.

He's in the largest cavern, a place he and Jink called "the Auditorium." Its heights are hollowed by irregular loges, and the ceiling is fluked with viscera, hanging and seeping. An inside world—strange, mysterious—like the Grand Hall of his Temple in Lime. For the two boys, the Auditorium was often their goal.

Denlon steps toward a cluster of pillars, dripstones like ligaments stretched to breaking point. It was by these pillars that—

Denlon gasps and freezes.

You see him? Ma asks.

I do, he says.

At the foot of the pillars, a body lies on its side. As Denlon approaches, he sees Jink's fiddle case on the floor beside him. He'd strapped it to his back before he descended into the cave, just as he'd done when they were young.

Denlon kneels beside his old friend. The fiddle is still in Jink's arms, and when Denlon touches the strings, the sound shivers and ripples, resonating in the giant space. He moves the light, seeing Jink's face, creased and unshaven, lifeless but staring, as if he can see the future before him.

Something had happened to Jink's hands. The fingers on the fiddle's fretboard were deformed, and his bowing wrist was grotesquely bent. The palms of both hands were crusted with blood.

In the Stearns Barn, Jink had fiddled for dancers. But here, he was in a concert hall, an Auditorium in a distant metropolis. In their youth, it was in this cavern that Jink acted out his dream of being a great violinist.

Why? Ma wonders.

Maybe the end was in sight for Jink, Denlon thinks. Maybe he'd come down here to play the recital the world had been waiting for. Or maybe he was expressing the longing of "Our Waltz" for the last time.



A state trooper's sedan is parked above Denlon's rental car. Near the station wagon, there's a police van along with four passenger cars.

Denlon, matted with mud, is standing beside the drive, talking to the sheriff.

"Hard to get your bearings down there?" The sheriff cocks his head at him.

Denlon pulls a pinch of wafer ash seeds from his pocket. "He left a trail."

"If you hadn't gone looking, he would've been down there till judgment day." The sheriff glances up. The sun is gone. The ceiling of cloud is leaden and pleated like a rumpled blanket. "Rain's on the way. Hate to be climbing out of that hole in a storm." He yells to a deputy kneeling on the lip of the sinkhole.

"Coming up now," the deputy answers.

Voices sound and a small group struggles into view. A blond woman yells at someone behind her. Her hands and face are caked with mud. A man with a beard is hoisting the body onto a stretcher at the sinkhole's rim. While others untie the webbing that binds the corpse, the bearded man removes his hard hat, turns off his headlamp and begins coiling rope. There are clanging noises. Others are climbing out of the funnel.

Denlon sees the deputy covering the body with a blanket, securing it to the stretcher.

The sheriff turns back to him, dark dots on his hat. "Staying with someone in the valley?"

Denlon doesn't answer.

"They're going to want a statement from you. Some detectives from town in the morning. You'll have to stick around till tomorrow at least."

Denlon's watching the stretcher advancing toward them. One arm is visible, protruding from beneath the blanket.

"Believe I'll have a look," the sheriff says.

He moves toward them as the group approaches, speaks a few words to the man with the beard, then lifts the blanket to examine the corpse. Denlon can hear their mutterings over the breeze. The rain is tapping his shoulders.

The sheriff replaces the blanket, and with a wave he directs the body toward the police van. As the procession passes, the sheriff steps beside him.

"Like you said." The sheriff zips his jacket and turns up the collar. "Something wrong with his hands."

"What could have caused that?"

"Down there with his fiddle—" The sheriff shakes his head. "Out of his senses maybe." He shifts his jaw as the stretcher approaches the police van. "No telling. Lot of animals in them caves."

An older couple is walking up the drive. The man is in overalls. The woman is wearing a colorful dress.

The sheriff exhales. "Care for Joozie Fruit?"

Denlon holds up his hand, declining.

The sheriff unwraps a stick of gum, folds it and places it on his tongue. "Took some starch to go in after him."

"I played in the cave when I was a kid," Denlon says.

“That he did,” the man in overalls says.

The couple is standing before them, and Denlon recognizes them both: Jewel Stearns, the farmer’s daughter, and Upton Sheets, the neighbor’s son. “Jewel,” Denlon says. The woman puts her hand on her scarf and bows her head.

The procession has set the stretcher on the ground beside the van.

“What’s the commotion?” Sheets wonders.

“Man lowered himself into the caves,” the sheriff says.

“Jink,” Denlon says. “You remember—”

The couple nod as one.

“He moved into your place last year,” Sheets says, “when he left the mine.”

“Jink had cancer,” Jewel tells Denlon.

“Bone sarcomas,” Sheets adds. “In his hands.”

Denlon is speechless. Jink’s wonderful hands.

“We’re at the age,” Jewel sighs. “They just removed a spot on my back.”

Denlon looks from her to the body on the stretcher.

“You know,” Jewel says, “he never stopped playing.”

“No,” Denlon says. “I didn’t know.”

The bond with his childhood friend is, in a heartbeat, renewed. The fiddle was as important to Jink as the Temple in Lime was to him.

“He never gave up his dream of being a great violinist,” Jewel says.

“We could hear him,” Sheets says, “playing on the porch. It was a struggle for him, with his hands.”

A final date in the Auditorium, Denlon thinks. I should have left him there. That was Jink's intention. It felt now like a violation that the rescue squad had carried him out.

Jink's end now seems the same as Tracy's. There was a dream he couldn't let go of.

You don't want that for me, Denlon thinks. Do you?

He's speaking to Ma, but it's Pa who replies.

No, Son. Your Ma doesn't want that, and neither do I.

A moment of silence.

Then Pa suggests, *It's time to leave.*

And Denlon agrees. "I'll be back," he tells the sheriff. And he's stepping toward his rental car, ignoring the crowd, opening the door, sliding onto the seat.

He starts the engine and makes the swing in one move, taking the front wheel banging over the rocks, pointing the car down the drive.

I'm here to help you, Pa says.

Denlon takes the bend without braking, and he's out of the forest, racing past the Sheets house and onto the highway.

And so is Ma. She's doing her best, Pa says. *We love you, Son.*

"What happened to her?"

She grew up with fear. She didn't have shoes. She was always hungry. Her father beat her. She was seventeen when we met—a beautiful woman with a giant heart. But a scared little girl inside.

Denlon's phone chimes. He pulls it out of his pocket. There's a message from the medical team back in Arlington.

There it is, Pa says.

Denlon can hear the dread in his father's voice.

Go ahead.

Denlon takes a deep breath and returns the call.

The nurse practitioner answers. “We have the final scan results,” she says, “along with an assessment from pathology. Unfortunately, the news isn’t good. Your PET scan shows a number of hot spots—places in your body where there’s an abnormal amount of cellular activity.”

“Places?” Denlon’s heart is racing. “Where?”

Calm, Pa mutters.

“In your abdomen and your groin. In your throat and your head. The malignancies appear to be widespread. You’ll see the images when you’re here. We have an opening on Friday.” She pauses, and then: “Are you experiencing any unusual symptoms—localized pain, changes in your mental state?”

Denlon swallows. “Please— Be straight with me. What will you do?”

“Exploratory surgery to start. We’ll need your written consent for that. A scheduler will contact you for the Friday spot.”

“Do you have any idea—” Denlon is struggling to speak. “How long do I have?”

“We’ll know more after surgery,” she replies.

And the call ends.

Rain falls heavily on the windshield. The sky has darkened. Through Jink and through Tracy, Denlon thinks, cancer was speaking to him.

Death speaks to us all, Pa says softly. *I’m sorry, Son.*

In his mind’s eye, Denlon sees Pa put his hand on his chest and lower his head, as he did when a misfortune was so grave

that humor wouldn't dispel it.

We hurt for you, Denny. More than you know.

I can't leave, Denlon insists.

Disbelief chokes him. His mind is a storm of rage and refusal. He won't let his dream die with him. He'll live to see the Temple completed.

And then, just as quickly, despair overcomes him. His hopes had been false, his striving futile. He was just another mouse on the knob, born for the buzzards.

Rain pounds on the hood and splatters the glass. The storm is over him, joining Pa's labored breath. His parents' presence seems irrelevant now. Maybe they're ghosts, conjured by a troubled mind. Maybe they'd risen from a metastasis in his head. What did it matter?

Denlon steps hard on the accelerator. The wipers sweep, trying vainly to clear the rain. Through the pummel he can see boughs flailing, crowns waving. He had fled the knob once and he's fleeing again, but this time it's for good.

A depression appears ahead. He tugs at the wheel, swerving, skidding toward a rail fence. Denlon jockeys the rear, straightening the vehicle and stamping the pedal. Grape vines swing from an overhead wire, shooting rain like buckshot across the hood.

Ahead, the Stearns Barn appears through the glass, blurred and shuddering, soaked and unmoored by the frenzy within. It's not his tires shrieking. Jink is standing on an overturned crate, eyes closed, sawing his fiddle; and the condemned are dancing away their lives.

In a fantasy future, Jink's hands were his salvation. But the fantasy had ended, and the future was gone. Death had spoken to Jink, and it is speaking to him. However the growths had begun, they are rooted now; and they are going to consume him. They are companions in a nightmare from which he will never return.

He's helpless, hopeless, brimming with rage—

Denny. Pa's voice rises above the storm.

The road swivels, but he keeps his foot on the pedal. Where to? The airport, Arlington, Bett and the hospital?

The blades cross the glass, unable to clear it. A flooded hollow ahead, the car fishtails through it, then skids up a rise and swings left, hedging on two wheels. Denlon removes his foot from the pedal and the car settles back on all fours. He slows, checking his speed, passing a brick church and a thrashing pasture.

Beyond, the mountains are whipped with rain, flashing corridors cut into their flanks. Clinker Knob is behind him now and the night is ahead.

6

Denlon is hot, feverish. His head is pounding. For some time now, his guts have been knotted; he turns in his seat, but they won't stop twisting. Is it something he ate? He stopped at a roadside diner, didn't he? He can't remember.

It's not just forgetfulness. It's an occlusion of thought. His mind is a room with a dozen windows, and most of them have been shuttered. Through the ones that are still open, he's seeing things he's not sure he can trust. He's come a far distance, but the hills are still around him. Did he miss the turn? He's crossed the Boone county line. Maybe he's in a different state.

Or a different world, like Jink or Trace.

It's dark, and the wipers can't clear the rain.

If he's lost, he has to get his bearings.

Denlon slows and pulls his car onto the shoulder. The stormy blast is battering the cab, making it rock. He looks at his cellphone to check his location, but he's out of range. The

pounding in his head is suddenly fierce. He wipes his brow, then he opens the car door and puts his foot on the gravel.

Rain puddles around his shoe. If he steps out, he'll be instantly drenched. Through the downpour, he sees a house across the road. A log home. Its windows are lit and there's smoke wisping from the chimney.

Whoever lives there will shoot him or help him. That's the Kanawha way.

Denlon stands and hurries across the road, onto the path leading to the house. On either side, planted flowers are hunched, frailed by rain.

He's reached the front door, he's ringing the bell.

Silence. Then he hears conversation within.

A woman's voice and a man's.

A little grilled door at eye level opens. "Yes?" the woman's voice asks.

"I'm sorry," Denlon says. "I'm lost, and I can't get a signal on my phone. Can you help me? I want to know where I am."

"Where you are?" the woman says. "Well of course. We can help you."

A latch clicks, a bolt is drawn, the knob turns and the door swings open.

The woman is older. Her gray hair is braided and circles her head like a skullcap. She's wearing thick glasses and a dress with a sash—a navy dress with white dots, like eyes on a spud. An old man, white-haired and unshaven, peers over her shoulder. He's holding a shotgun. As Denlon crosses the threshold, the old man nods.

"I'm Lettie," the woman says. "Come in, come in. You're soaked, poor boy. Homer, get a blanket."

Homer is short and bald. He rests his shotgun against the wall, throws the front door bolt, closes the hasp, locks the doorknob and steps away.

There's some danger they're guarding against, Denlon thinks.

"Get by the fire and warm yourself," Lettie says.

Ignoring the wet, she loops her arm through Denlon's and leads him into the living room toward a cast-iron stove.

"Take off your coat. Give it here."

She hangs his coat on a peg and turns to take a blanket from Homer. As she drapes it over Denlon's shoulders, Homer hurries a stool toward them and sets it before the stove. "Look at his shoes," he says.

"Oh my." Lettie's eyes grow wide behind her thick glasses. "Take 'em off, take 'em off. Now you set here in front of the stove and warm yourself up."

Denlon sits. The warmth makes him shiver. The knot in his belly tightens. His head is still pounding.

"Ain't that so much better?" Lettie grins. Then her brow wrinkles and she's squinting at him through her thick glasses.

"Where am I?" Denlon asks.

Homer crooks his finger, smiles and taps his forehead.

"What's the name of the road?" Denlon asks. "How far is—"

"Pardon me," Lettie says. "Who are you?"

When he gives her his name, she gapes in amazement.

“Sure enough,” she cries. “Dear Lord! Homer, Homer—
It’s my sister’s boy!”

Denlon is stunned. Homer is wide-eyed. Lettie has raised both hands and is giving him a hallelujah.

“Letitia,” she says. “Aunt Lettie. Your Ma’s older sister. Don’t you remember?”

Denlon nods, doing his best to pretend.

There is no Aunt Lettie. Ma is an only child.

“Stay the night,” Lettie laughs. “He can stay the week if he likes. Can’t he Homer?”

“Oh sure,” Homer nods. “We got the spare room, where your cousin was before she passed.”

“The road,” Denlon says. “I just want to know—”

Homer grabs some paper and a cup full of crayons from a nearby table and sets them on the floor by Denlon’s foot. “You like to draw. Ain’t that right? Buildings,” he winks.

“Goodness, Homer. Denny’s outgrown that nonsense. Am I right?”

Denlon stares at her, feeling the dig.

“We all have foolish flights when we’re young,” Lettie gives him a meaning look. “But there’s a time to give them up.”

Homer scratches his head. “That’s so, that’s so.”

“As a boy,” Lettie says, “Homer imagined— Guess what?”

Denlon doesn’t react.

“He wanted to be a doctor,” Lettie laughs. “Remember?”

“I do,” Homer says, “I do.”

“He was going to discover a cure . . . for cancer!”

Lettie’s jaw drops, incredulous. The old man claps, shaking

with mirth.

There's a purpose to this, Denlon thinks. The derision was directed at him.

Lettie flutters her lids. "Denny's staying for dinner."

"Oh sure," her husband nods.

"Homer's helping," Lettie says. "You can too, if you have a mind."

And with that, they vanish into the kitchen.

Nothing is right.

Lettie isn't my aunt, Denlon thinks. But she knows as much as if she was.

The log home, the highway— Where is he? They haven't given him a clue.

Is he still in the car, driving blindly? Is the strange couple real? Outside, the storm seems to be mounting. Raindrops like stones are pelting the windows.

Beside him, a sharp hiss from the woodstove—

Denlon turns, and the room turns with him. Something upsets the stool. When he stands, it bangs to the floor. A small cloud billows out of the kitchen—mist from an opened case-ment or steam from a boiling pot.

What is this? Denlon laughs.

The wood stove gives an angry lurch. Something is scabbling at the pane behind him. He feels a draft of cold air and turns to see the window raised, a twitching root digit probing the gap between the curtains, curling around the selvage like a wooden finger, drawing the cloth aside.

Denlon blinks and the finger disappears.

Pa, he thinks. Ma— He's alone with his faulty senses in an unknown place, unable to separate truth from delusion.

The planks beneath his feet are trembling. The whole house shakes. The joints at the room corners shift, and pieces of mortar fall to the floor.

A sharp thump and the movement ceases. The room comes back into focus. Denlon touches his face. His cheek is quivering. The blanket falls from his shoulders.

Another thump, this one from the kitchen.

A crash of thunder shakes the small house, white flashing at all the windows. The thump sounds again, followed by a gasp of drawn breath.

Another thump, another gasp.

Denlon pulls his cellphone from his pocket. Still no signal.

"Are you there?" Lettie calls from the kitchen.

Another thump and a gasp.

"Nephew dear?"

Denlon steps toward the kitchen doorway.

"Come here," Lettie shouts. "You can help with the stew."

As he approaches, a refrigerator comes into view, part of a throw rug, a small table with a white cloth. Above are jars in a rack. Below, a counter with vegetables on it. One of the radishes twitches, budging toward the counter's edge.

Denlon shakes his head to dismiss the sight.

Then the entire kitchen is in view.

Lettie has her back to him, arm raised high, holding a large cleaver. Her husband stands beside a butcher block with one leg lifted onto it. His pant is rolled up and what's left of

his foot is in slices on the block.

“You see,” Aunt Lettie speaks without turning, “you see what Homer is good for now.”

This isn’t happening, Denlon thinks.

The cleaver descends with a thump, taking a section from Homer’s ankle, and as the thump sounds, he swings his head to smile at Denlon, jumping and wincing as a gasp escapes from his lips. “I’m tasty,” he says.

The slices and the stump are white and bloodless, pitch or pulp. A twisted radicle pushes out of the amputated ankle, as if to regenerate itself from the butchered rootstalk.

Homer grabs one of the slices and flings it into the air. It lands on the floor before Denlon.

“Our Homer’s as good as a rutabaga.” Lettie turns, eyes bulging behind her spectacles, lips parted, showing brown nodules for teeth.

Denlon takes a backward step. He’s left a harmless world and is in some crazy translation. Impossible sights, absurd fancies— In the realm he’s entered, his companions are Tracy and Jink.

“You’ll be tasty too,” Lettie nods.

Denlon laughs.

“Do your kinfolk amuse you?” Lettie tucks the cleaver in her sash, grabs a potato peeler and shuffles toward him, tongue lolling like a parsnip, its stringy point dangling over her chin.

“You’re not so special.” Lettie’s tone is caustic. “You’re a vegetable, just like us.”

A clutch of beets reaches the counter's edge, dragging its green tops behind. It leaps through the air, drubbing Denlon's middle. Half-cooked carrots clamber over the rim of a pot and fall to the floor.

Denlon is shaking his head, denying his senses. But he's backing out of the kitchen. Lettie is waving him toward her with the peeler.

Homer lifts himself off the butcher block, limping forward on his amputated stump. "Don't pretend you're better," he warns.

Lettie is nearly upon him, eyes bulging. She places the peeler against her biceps, presses it into the flesh and runs it down the length of her arm. The ribbon of peeled skin curls on itself, gathering at her wrist, revealing the yellow pulp beneath.

A kitchen window cracks, and a horn-shaped monstrosity appears, its soil-encrusted hide grating and squealing through the frame. Denlon wheels and hurries into the front room, reaching the door, turning the knob, cursing the hasp. Over his shoulder, mortar is crashing to the floor. Tapers poke out of logs at the room corners. The wood stove is shaking. Its door swings open and a flaming stump appears, pulling itself free by its root spikes. It falls on the hearth, snuffs out its stubs and starts toward him.

"You're not leaving us," Lettie bellows.

But I am— Denlon has the knob unlocked and the hasp unlatched. He can hear the thud of Homer's amputated leg crossing the floor. The horn-shaped monster is squealing closer. He throws back the bolt as Lettie's peeled arm reaches out.

“You belong here,” she cries.

Denlon swings his fist, striking her face, knocking her aside.

The stump’s charred stubs are gnawing his ankle. The beets leap again, striking his groin. Homer limps forward, arms extended.

Denlon draws the bolt, tugging at the door. It barely opens, revealing a mass of rootstalks in the gap. Lettie’s cleaver comes down, splitting the door panel an inch from his face.

The house walls are shifting, logs coming loose, a corner slumping.

“Auntie’s getting angry.” Lettie frees the cleaver with a shriek.

Denlon hurls himself against the door. The rootstalks snap and the door swings open.

As he races down the path, a wall of the house collapses. Lettie is behind him, cleaver held high, growths leaping on either side. Scuds of mist hover amid the rain, hiding his car, blurring the road. A forb pincer catches his cuff, clinging like a crayfish.

My mind, Denlon thinks. Malignancies are fouling my mind. I’m going to die, and I’m going to die mad. As if in response, a droning rises above the storm. A single headlight beams down the roadway, approaching rapidly.

Lettie screams, making for him, swinging the cleaver. The blade hisses past his neck as the two-wheeler roars off the asphalt and through the plantings, braking and spraying soil. A motorcycle, low-slung and chrome, with a dark figure

hunched in the saddle.

A sooty arm reaches out. Denlon grabs it and vaults up behind. The pinching forb is inside his pant leg. The mass of rootstalks leaps onto his back.

Lettie is six feet away, transformed by the rain. Her nose is a feeder root. Her neck tapers to a rhizome where it joins the misshapen body beneath her dress. Her eyes have burst, shattering the lenses, and in their place two twisted nodules glare at him, growing like tubers from the mismatched eye orbits.

“Pa?”

Hang on, Son.

The cycle’s engine rages as a bolt of lightning blanches the sky. Denlon sees Lettie’s arm swing, sending the cleaver in a low arc, blade over handle. With a *whunk*, it lodges itself in Pa’s leg as the machine tears through a sheet of rain. Denlon clings to the sooty man, expecting some reaction.

Miz’able things, Pa says.

He reaches a gloved hand down and pulls the cleaver from his shin.

“I’m so glad you’re here. I’m needing you, Pa.”

I’m doing what I can.

Pa flings the cleaver over his shoulder, puts his hand back on the throttle and gooses the two-wheeler.

“I’m losing my mind,” Denlon says.

They’re makin’ things hard.

He means the cancers.

“They’re growing inside me,” Denlon guesses.

Pa laughs.

“It’s no joke, Pa. They want to kill me.”

Pa turns toward him. The highway ahead is swallowed in darkness. The headlamp isn’t part of the cycle. It’s mounted on Pa’s helmet.

What can a fella do but laugh? Pa says.

Beneath the brim of the dented helmet, Denlon sees the gaunt face, covered with soot, sharp nose dripping. There’s understanding in Pa’s eyes and a powerful tenderness.

You might be better off, he says, *somewhere else.*

Where else might he be, Denlon wonders. He’s like a lost wren at the edge of the world. Somehow in his flight from the valley, he’d reached the borderline.

“I can’t leave,” Denlon says. “Not yet.”

It’s hard to let go of life.

“It’s not life that’s keeping me,” Denlon says. “It’s my Temple.”

The root mass is clawing his back. He tears it loose and hurls it aside. The pinching creature has worked its way past his knee. He can feel it scabbling his thigh.

“I have to finish it, Pa. I have to.”

We all need a purpose. Mine was takin’ care of you and your Ma. It was hard to let go of that.

Pa understands.

A forked object flies from the roadside, alighting on Denlon’s arm. He clamps it with his teeth, grinding until the root goes limp and falls away.

You’re the best, Pa says. *A man couldn’t ask for more in a boy.* A corner of his mouth sags, and it seems sorrow will best him.

I'm one happy stiff being with you again after all these years.

“Watch out,” Denlon shouts.

Muddy clumps fling themselves from a wayside thicket, and the cycle swerves. A mass catches on the rearview mirror, tendrils trailing back, reaching for Denlon. A second clump inches along the muffler, smoking by Denlon's foot. He kicks it and it's caught by the rear wheel where it's minced by the whirling spokes.

The asphalt is racing beneath them. Pa's headlamp strafes the forest. The trees are trembling, the bushes shake as if invisible herds are moving through them.

Don't look good, Pa rasps.

“What can we do?”

Not sure. I wish your Ma and I were working together.

Ahead, a fallen log drags itself toward the road, root arms climbing the shoulder as if it intends to bar the way.

“Faster,” Denlon urges his father.

Pa twists the throttle and the cycle roars. Denlon's feet bang the frame. The creature in his pants is crawling up his thigh. Its limbs have nibs and prickles, and its pincers probe his groin, getting a grip. He reaches inside his waistband, grabs the creature and pulls it out. The spiny forelimbs flex. It waves its antennae, chirping like a demented insect.

Hold on, Pa warns.

The log is nearly across the road. The cycle makes for the gap full throttle, and as they swing around its base, the large root arms reach for Denlon, catching the torn cloth of his pants, extending the rip to his waist. The cycle snorts and

shoots forward, fighting the slick surface. Denlon does his best to hang on.

They've unionized, Pa growls.

The woodland is bedlam now. A web of writhing roots and tapers are mustering to attack. A flying root-comet strikes the cycle and clings. Two gritty tendrils wrap around the kick starter. The comet holds an arm down, dragging it on the asphalt. Then it lifts the arm and jabs the sharpened point into Denlon's knee.

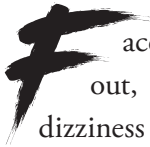
He cries out, reaching for the thing, and at the same moment the cycle hits a hump and bucks, throwing him free.

Damn, Denlon hears, and he feels himself floating.

Then the ground takes him with a wallop, and he's tumbling over and over.

The darkness is blurred, wet and streaming. He comes to rest, getting his breath, afraid to move. It seems that he's struck his head. The metallic drone of the cycle is fading into the storm.

7

acedown, breathing hard, Denlon sends his hand out, feeling the grass. He lifts his shoulders, fighting dizziness and a pain in his side, rising onto his knees. His palms are bloody. His shirt is half-open. Slowly he stands.

Across a rolling field, a few hundred feet away, is a service station and a small store. A sign says *Gas and Grocery* over the entrance.

Denlon limps forward, looking around. The bordering woodland is still. Has the uprising died? Was it all an illusion? Thistle heads scratch his shins. A knee appears through his torn pantleg. He starts down an incline, pushing the wet branches aside.

A slithering noise comes from the weeds behind him. He stoops and grabs a rock. Something is advancing stealthily. The blades and brush are parting around it. He hurries forward but the slithering follows. Denlon hurls the rock at the hidden disturbance. The grasses tremble and quash to the side.

I need something sharp, he thinks.

He hurries toward a bald mound and when he reaches it, he scans the surface, spotting a rock with a dagger's edge. As he stoops to grip it, a root mass comes into the open, wriggling furiously: a gang of snakes with their heads fused.

Denlon whirls, slashing, then breaks into a run, barging through wet foliage, his eye on the Gas and Grocery. There's a rending sound, a large shrub wakes as he passes, raising a gnarled root arm. Denlon lunges with his dagger, but the shrub dodges and swings its arm, clubbing his side.

"Asshole." Denlon hunches, clutching his middle with his free hand.

Ahead, a squat shape lifts from the ground. As the rain washes over it, Denlon sees an old stump hobbling forward on knobby legs. He's stumbling past when it launches itself through the air, landing on his shoulders and beating him with crinkled tapers. "Ma," Denlon gasps, stabbing the hulk blindly, masses of clods and root hairs falling free. "Are you there?"

I'm here, Ma says softly.

"Stop them."

I can't, she says.

His dagger strikes something soft, and the stump falls to the ground.

It's beyond my power.

Denlon hears the pain in her voice, and the anger. A slinking hydra is hissing between his legs.

Why did you come back? he asks.

I thought I could help.

“Help fight them off?”

Help you let go.

“I’m not giving up,” Denlon says.

The hydra is swinging an arm around his ankle. He stoops to catch it before it grabs hold, but it whips like a water hose, lashing angrily, striking him in the face.

You’re stronger than I was, Ma says. It’s your life—

Denlon tugs and the arm cracks loose.

Fight if you must. You have the right.

Denlon drops the cracked arm and reaches for another, but the hydra is backing away, crossing two limbs over its fresh stump, sending its longest arm into the air. The end of it makes a loop and the loop begins to twirl, moving in circles like a gnarled lariat. Denlon avoids the falling snare, then he’s sprinting toward the store.

Forbs spit out of the soil at him. His bare feet land on pits and stones, making him lurch and stumble. A root-wad strikes his middle, knocking the wind out of him. Then, as he passes a thicket, raspberry vines rise on their roots and flail his back, scourging his arms and sides with their thorns.

I have something to live for, he thinks.

Your building, Ma says. Your Temple.

Yes, Denlon replies. My Temple.

He’s using his dagger to slash at the vines.

I’ve given it my blood, he thinks. It’s in my heart and mind. Do you understand?

It’s your child, Ma says as he bolts for the store.

The service island has a single pump. Behind the door's glass, an unlit neon sign says *Open*. Denlon uses the butt of his dagger to shatter the pane. Then he's reaching inside, turning the knob and sliding through the gap.

You want it to be born, Ma says. *You want it to outlive you*.

From inside, over the racks of candy bars and chewing gum, Denlon can see through the windows: an army of roots advancing from every direction. His breath stutters, his bloody hands shake. He clamps his lids shut and snaps his head back and forth, as if that might erase the sight.

But the seething swarm is real. A maple stump appears—pale, washed clean, like the army's naked general, dragging his massive trunk behind. His root arms reach to both sides, motioning the troops forward, while the two largest are held aloft, carrying a bundle of rolled-up papers. As the general moves, he boosts and turns the bundle, displaying it to the hordes on either side.

Beside the general, a ragged lieutenant drags a cape of threads across the Gas and Grocery's service island. Atop the cape is a sheaf of papers. And the general is flanked by aides—uprooted bushes, tippy saplings—holding notebooks and binders and smaller bundles.

Denlon slaps his pant pocket. His cellphone's still there.

He slides the dagger into his waistband and draws out the phone with a shaking hand, praying as he jabs the keypad.

A *click* and then "Denny?"

The sound of Bett's voice gives him hope. "I'm here," he says, breathless with relief.

“Where is ‘here?’” she asks.

The twisted tip of a rootlet raises itself and taps at the window two feet from his face. Something is scrabbling over the gravel outside the door. Denlon turns, sees a glassed-in kiosk for the salesclerk, and backs into it.

“Are you at the airport?” Bett asks.

“I need your help.”

On either side of the shelves loaded with cigarettes, batteries and condoms, there are windows, and through the glass he can see: the ground around the grocery is swarming. A vanguard of twisted hawthorns is crabbing forward, with a flank of prostrate cedars behind. Bushy growths clamber over each other, filling the parking area in an unbroken mass. As far as Denlon can see now, the gnarled and twitching shapes are rising and falling in waves.

“I need your help,” he says again.

Oh Son, Ma sighs.

“What’s wrong?” Bett asks. “Where are you?”

“Near Charleston,” he guesses. “I’m not sure.”

The maple stump—the army’s general—has reached the store. Beyond the packaged cookies and cakes, its pale arms are unrolling the drawings against the window. Denlon can see: the blueprints for his Temple. And the flanking roots are doing the same with the documents they’re carrying. It’s all spread before him, on every side. Soil samples. Load analyses. Insurance quotes and stress tests. Proposals and bids, planning approvals and loan documents.

A rootstalk has reached the store entry. It’s curling through

the hole he punched and jerking excitedly, making the door shake on its hinges.

Denlon turns, scanning the walls around the cash register. By the breath mints and beef sticks, he sees a small frame with a business license in it.

“I’m at the Gas and Grocery in Alma Creek,” he says. “I need you—here.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I need you. Now.”

He can hear vegetation barging through the doorway, scrabbling against the coolers. A spidery shrub root is crawling toward him. Others outside are knocking on the windows, crowding the documentation, their gritty appendages squealing over the glass.

“Now,” Denlon says again. “Now!”

“Talk to me, please. What’s wrong?”

There’s a rapping by his ear. Bulbs are hurling themselves at his head. A legion of roots is making its way past the coffee counter a few feet away.

“You’ll think I’m mad,” he mutters.

Root creatures enter the kiosk, clawing over each other, crowding around him. Bristling feeders snake on either side, one of them coiling around his ankle. A muddy spider is climbing his arm. Another leaps onto his back.

“I’m not giving up,” he gasps.

“What’s happened?” Bett insists.

“They want to destroy me,” he says.

“Denny! I’m going to hang up and call the police.”

“No. Listen to me.”

He can feel the roots attaching in a dozen places. The droves have found him now, and the scrabbling is coming from every direction. Those outside are piling through the doorway. Those inside are crawling over each other, adding themselves to the writhing swarm.

Who can help my boy? Ma sobs, futile, bereft.

Denlon’s lost his grip on his phone. It’s borne up now by the rising pile. A root finger turns the flashlight on and odious details appear around him: black fungus rot, tubers crawling with threadworms, woody arms slobbered with glutinous slime and pocked by bugs. Bett’s voice emerges from the floating phone like an insect chitter.

Through the outside window, Denlon can see General Maple signaling to his army. As one, the root tapers rise on every side. Saluting? No, they’re reaching for the Temple documents held to the glass, and they’re shredding them. Denlon sees his paper dream torn to pieces. The originals, he thinks. And he knows: there are no other copies.

At a signal from the General, a hairy barrel of clay and roots moves into the light, commandeering the exterior forces like a field marshal. One of the large cedars comes forward, aiming its twitching base at the grocery wall like a battering ram.

“Denny?” Bett cries.

He can’t see beyond the kiosk now. It’s a crowded terrarium, brimming with roots. Many have pale fracture marks, scars of missing appendages, evidence of the furious haste

in which they'd torn themselves from the earth. His legs are buried. A spidery swarm is circling his waist. A giant taproot is squeezing his chest; he grapples it, unable to pry it loose. A tangle of whipping shafts leaps from the piling swarm to the ceiling fan and drops to his shoulder, coiling around his neck.

The last of Bett's voice reaches his ears. "Are you there? Answer me!"

Then the cedar bashes through the wall, shaking the grocery, sending wood and plaster in every direction.

A black hook is turning before his eyes. Its pale hairs quiver, and it enters his ear.

Denlon screams. Roots clamp his arms, the odors choke him. Masses of clodded threads are packing against him, moldy, putrescent— The taproot cinches his chest, collapsing his middle, stopping his breath.

Stop, Ma sobs, please stop. What's happening is breaking her down.

Denlon's left arm is punctured by a dozen syringes. His right arm is hitched behind. A taper pierces his navel as if trying to untie the knot. The cords by his face are stretching like long fingers, and mucid tendrils are looping through them. The warp bends around his head, while the weaving tendrils bind tighter, enclosing his senses in a dank basket. As dank and close as a doghole tunnel.

Panic. Suffocation. Mindless fear.

If I could take you back inside me, Ma sobs, I surely would.

The weft clenches, oozing mud and worms. Its slimy

surface presses against Denlon's face, crushing his nose, sealing his ears, clogging his mouth. The scene flickers in the failing light of his phone. There are tiny creatures scuttling over the top of his head. I can't breathe, he thinks. I can't breathe.

Then the furious speculations claim him.



Denlon wakes with a start, jerking onto his shoulder and looking around. He can see the profile of a ridge covered with skeletal trees on the far side of a paved highway. He's in an abandoned pasture dotted with small cedars. The Gas and Grocery is forty yards away.

Something digs at his ribs. He rolls to the side, seeing a bent twig right itself, relieved of his weight. He comes to his knees and rubs his eyes. The air is cold and clammy. Pain prods him in a dozen places. His shirt is open and his pants are torn, the damp clothing smeared with soil and blood. His palms are raw, his arms have cuts and there's a gash in his side.

You were gone, he thinks, in a delusional world, threatened by phantom evils. The malignancies had invaded his brain. How long had the horrors lasted? Four hours? Eight? During that time, the world others lived in didn't exist. He'd been up to his neck in morbid visions with no way to

free himself.

He rises slowly, seeing the lazy vees of buzzards wheeling in the sky above as if they know that he's dying or dead. Are they conferring?

"Bless his heart," he hears one mutter.

"A hillbilly hotdog," a second observes.

"Soup beans with hocks," another chimes in.

"It won't be long now."

Denlon turns and sees a green sedan pulling into the parking area in front of the Gas and Grocery. The door opens and a woman steps out.

"Bett," he murmurs.

For a moment, he thinks he's dreaming. Then he's running toward her, waving and calling her name. She hurries to meet him.

Lettie and Homer, he thinks. Pa and his motorcycle. How did he get here? In the mud by the road, he sees the fresh tire prints of a tractor-trailer.

As Bett draws closer, Denlon can see her concern. Then he's lost in her tight embrace, and he feels such a welling of gratitude that he wants to cry out.

Bett kisses his lips and strokes his face. "Who did this to you? Is anything broken? Thank heaven you're alive. How did you get here? What happened?"

A relieving calm passes through him. Her presence restores some of his confidence. "I'm alright," he says.

"Should we call the police?"

"No."

She reaches for his bloodied hand and holds it to her cheek. "Tell me."

He's not sure what to say.

"Talk to me, Denny." Bett is helping him toward the car.

He can see the Gas and Grocery now. The building is undisturbed. It's open for business, and there's a customer inside. The clerk's in the kiosk, taking payment for coffee or chips. "Let's get out of here," he says.

"Where—"

"The airport. I want to go home."



With Bett at the wheel, the sedan moves rapidly down the highway.

The scene is a quiet one—the blacktop, a line of telephone poles, a small farm, woodland on either side. All is still now. The vegetation is anchored wherever Denlon looks.

He draws a deep breath, allowing himself to imagine the nightmare is over. He loosens his clutch on the door handle and puts his hand in his lap.

Bett glances at him. Her concern is mounting. He has to explain.

"I drove out to the knob yesterday morning. Jink, my old friend— He'd left the mines. He was staying in our shack. The sinkhole, the caves— We used to go down for fun or a dare. He lowered himself, and he took his fiddle. I found him there. He'd been dead for a while. Jink had cancer."

Bett is confused. "Cancer? How do you know?"

"I know." Denlon looks at the cuts on his arm. "They did this to me."

Bett is squinting at him, trying to understand. "Who?"

She's outside his madness, untouched by it.

Denlon laughs. "That'll take some explaining."

"What was going on last night when you called? You sounded desperate."

Denlon nods.

"Please," she says. "What happened? Did you sleep in that field all night?"

He bows his head and puts his hand over his eyes.

Bett doesn't know about the pathology report. I should share that with her, he thinks. And he's about to speak when his phone chimes. It's still in his pant pocket.

He retrieves it and sees there's an incoming call from Romero. He touches the screen. "I'm here."

"I've been trying to reach you." There's excitement in Romero's voice. "The county accepted the boundary adjustments, and the first wave of loans are approved."

"I was in a cavern yesterday," Denlon laughs, feeling Romero's energy and enthusiasm. "I have some new ideas about our curtain walls."

"Eager to hear," Romero replies. "Don't forget: we have a face-to-face with the Planning Commission. Tomorrow morning. You have to be present."

"I'll be back this afternoon," Denlon says.

Then his hand, still holding the phone, sinks into his lap.

Romero's voice sounds from the speaker, but Denlon isn't listening to the man's words.

"What's wrong?" Bett asks.

He disconnects.

"Denny?"

He returns the mobile to his pocket and turns to face her.

"Promise you'll stay with me," Denlon says. "Don't leave me."

"How could you think of such a thing?"

A whistle screams up ahead. The girders of a trestle are visible through the windshield. The trestle spans the road and a river to the left, running beside it. Red lights are flashing where the tracks cross the highway, and a striped gate descends to bar the way. As Bett brakes, the locomotive comes rumbling into view. The engineer turns toward them and lifts his cap.

Denlon leans over and kisses Bett's cheek.

Is it 'goodbye'? Ma says.

He sighs and raises his fingertips to his ear.

Mist is lifting from the river, creeping through the large trees on an inlet below. A sudden charge of dizziness, and the trees seem to sway. The rumble of the train is punctuated by quakes, as if the earth objects to its passage.

Denlon shakes his head, turning, trying to get Bett's face in focus. Don't let it happen, he thinks. But he can't clear his vision. Something is tugging the earth beneath him. Things hidden are wrenching free, about to reveal themselves.

This is so sad, the aged voice says.

Another screaming whistle. Denlon's blurred vision is resolving. The tremors subside, leaving only the rattle and rumble of the passing train. Through the windshield, Denlon can see a chain of coal hoppers, their steel sides marked with inscrutable codes—the language of an unforgiving preordination.

The shrubs by the roadside are trembling. On the river's inlet, the skeletal boughs of the tree crowns quiver as if shaken from below. As he watches, bushy box elders lift themselves out of the earth and shake the soil from their roots. The longer tapers extend themselves stiffly, tapping their ends over the surface like the canes of blind men testing the terrain. Taller trees lean precariously. Denlon can see their root arms bracing and flexing, pushing to free their buried parts from the earth. On the slope leading down to the river, sapling stumps are swarming like stick bugs.

The train is still passing, bearing its freight of coal, barring the way. Bett smiles at him and switches the motor off.

“Can you see what they're doing?” Denlon points.

“The trees? Is that what you mean?”

“Yes, the trees. Start the car for godsakes—”

A squeal of grit comes from the rear window. A cluster of webbed tendrils are clawing the glass. Beyond it, Denlon can see the large trees moving over the inlet, crowns wobbling, their spidery fundamentals starting up the embankment toward the road.

He reaches over and raises Bett's window, locking her door and his own. What is the forest up to on the other side

of the tracks? If the train would only pass—

“We’ve got to get out of here,” he says. “Start the car.”

Bett seems unconcerned, but she does as he says. Things are happening quickly. A lumpy tuber is inching across the hood. A fibrous tendril reaches from below the chassis, loops itself into a crozier around the door handle and tugs, making the vehicle rock. The first of the large trees are topping the embankment, lurching through a veil of mist and onto the road.

Bett has her hands on the wheel. “It won’t budge.”

He reaches over and tries. Something is holding on to the axle. The car is surrounded by swarming plants. A group have climbed onto the cab and are banging on the roof. The fibrous tendril brooms itself and fits a splinter into the keyhole of the door. Denlon hears the latch click and grabs the armrest to bar its entry.

“I didn’t know they do that,” Bett says, peering through the windows.

“Put it in reverse.” Denlon’s fighting for control of the door. “Try and back up.” He’s using all his strength, but the door edges open, and a second tendril appears in the gap.

Bett rattles the shift and depresses the pedal. “It won’t go.”

“They’re wedged against the rear wheels,” he guesses.

“Look at that oak.”

An enormous tree is standing in the road directly before them.

“Sycamore,” Denlon corrects her, trying to shield his face from the blows coming through the gap in the door.

The window on Bett's side shatters. A muddy root claw reaches in and pulls the latch. Before Denlon can react, the door is wrenched open. Brown digits circle Bett's arm. She cries out and Denlon lunges for her, but he's too late. Roots are grappling her waist, dragging her from the car.

Denlon throws his weight against his door and stumbles out. The sight of him causes an immediate reaction. The scrubby growths crane toward him and hurl themselves. He dodges and ducks, kicking at those scrabbling around his legs, moving in Bett's direction. Don't panic, he thinks, as if she could hear him.

The roots have carried her beyond the front bumper. The sycamore is there with other large trees, forming a swaying grove around her.

Denlon fights his way toward the ominous gathering. They're not going to hurt you, he vows. A hickory with an asymmetric crown twists toward him, the furrows in its bark opening and closing with a threatening rasp. A dogwood leaps to his shoulder, reddish roots flailing his face and chest. Denlon tries to free himself, but the appendages bend in every direction. Lowering his shoulder, he leaps at the hickory, banging the dogwood against its bark. The impact tears the root mass from him, and he struggles forward toward the grove around Bett.

She's helpless, her back bent over the trunk of a prostrate birch, arms twisted above her head, secured by a quivering willow.

"Get away from her," Denlon demands.

The roots of a twisted sapling are crawling over Bett's middle, lifting her blouse, touching her skirt, pinching the hem and pulling it up.

A medusa of quivering rootstalks leaps at his face, appendages kinking around his neck. A clod of dirt is caught at the hub like a lumpy head, and as the appendages pull, it smothers his mouth with wormy soil. Denlon hooks his fingers around it, getting a grip and pulling. The clod comes loose, root arms flailing, winding around his hand like a writhing fist.

"Stay away from her," he shouts at the giants.

Something terrible is happening in the grove. A tall sassafras is moving forward, wagging an erect taper with a bulbous root knob, its massive pediment grunting against the asphalt, crown swaying drunkenly overhead.

A wave of nausea, then Denlon's roaring, swinging his woody fist like a mace, smashing his way through the swarming plants. He charges up to the sassafras, hearing Bett's groans, walloping the gray trunk between her legs, hammering again and again until the tree draws back.

The nearby giants are huffing, roots flexing with menace as they crowd around him. The sassafras raises its root knob and waves it like an ugly standard, a spicy odor wafting from its bruised bark.

The swarming vegetation near and far is centered on the grove as if Denlon's mate belonged to them. As he tears the twisted sapling off Bett, the train's caboose passes and the crossing gate begins to rise.

“Run,” he cries, “get back to the car.”

At first he thinks she’s been hurt—Bett’s motionless for a long moment. Then she’s on her feet, stepping through the root hordes unmolested.

The asphalt around the car is clear.

The medusa clinging to Denlon’s fist is convulsing with pain. It goes limp and falls from his hand. He turns and races toward Bett, who’s behind the wheel.

Denlon slides onto the passenger seat and slams the door. A cylindrical root swings from the back seat, striking his head like a section of pipe.

“Go,” he shouts.

As the car powers forward, he grasps the pipe and breaks it over his knee. There are cracking sounds beneath the car. The chassis is bobbing and bumping, then they’re crossing the tracks, accelerating down the roadway.

The forest on either side is still.

Denlon exhales. “You see what I’m up against.”

Bett is silent. Her hair is tousled and clotted with dirt. There is mud on her arms and the front of her blouse, mud on her thighs. A web of mycelium clings to her cheek.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” Bett says with a note of resentment. “You’re the one who’s upset.”

Denlon struggles with her response, trying to understand it. It seems they’ve experienced two different realities.

Her gaze shifts to her lap. Her fingers slide over the soiled cloth until they reach her knee where they lift a dollop of sap

from the smears of mud. She looks at Denlon and lifts her brow, a hint of the perverse in her smile. The odor of sassafras fills his nostrils like a repulsive cologne.

Bett— He imagines he's calling out to her. It's as if a great space has opened between them. Will she ever be able to hear him again?

The road leads into a tunnel ahead. Its mouth is a black oval at the base of a hill, and the tunnel goes through to the other side. A small circle of daylight is visible at its far end.

The car picks up speed. Something oblong and gray is hanging from the branch of a tree beside the tunnel entrance. As the car zooms past, the possum turns and its pointed head appears, following the vehicle, eyeing Denlon with surprise and regret.

The car is racing between the tunnel walls now, tiny lights blinking on either side. Bett is motionless, hands on the wheel. Denlon expects the tunnel's exit to flare. But instead of growing larger, it seems to dwindle in size. He swings around. The entrance is a small circle of daylight now, constricting quickly. The walls are a blur.

He faces Bett. She's come forward in her seat, clutching the wheel, staring straight ahead. They've reached the last of the tunnel lights and the egress is still contracting.

"Bett?"

She switches the headlights on. Suddenly the exit winks out.

The car is powering forward, headed into an unfathomable darkness.

Is this it? he wonders. So soon? Is this the end?

The tunnel walls have turned black, dusted with soot, streaked with seeps. No longer smooth, the vault is spalled and eroded. And something's happened to the road—it's pitted and loose. The car is lurching, bucking and banging forward.

Through the windshield, as the headlights shift, Denlon sees a pair of gleaming rails, a gravel bed and the tops of ties.

They're in a train tunnel.

And now he can hear a low grumble, like the thumping on a piano's bass strings.

Where the rails converge, the glaring eye of an approaching locomotive appears. The grumble is mounting. A whistle screams.

Denny, Ma whispers.

She's breathless. He can feel her dread.

Look who's driving.

He looks, and in Bett's place Denlon sees the old walnut stump. Its rotted top is against the seat back, and its tapers reach, gunning the pedals and wrenching the wheel, while a half-dozen feelers twitch over the dash, sensing the forward course like antennae.

The train is thundering toward them, shaking the tunnel. The rumble and screaming whistle consume his senses. The car takes a sharp turn, leaving the rails and ties, swerving to the left at full tilt. He's flung against the door, expecting to feel the car ram the tunnel wall and be crushed by the train.

But the impact doesn't come.

The vehicle is still bucking forward at breakneck speed,

following the course of some impossible bypass—a smaller tunnel, pitted and littered with broken rock. The engine is racing, the car careening from side to side, clanging forward in furious pulses as the wheels lose and regain traction.

“Where are we going?” Denlon demands.

It can't hear you, Ma says.

“Where is my wife?”

With the living, Ma says.

“I want to go back.”

Death doesn't take orders.

The engine screams, thrusting the vehicle up. It crashes back down again, churning loose rock and powering forward. The monster's limbs are bracing and flexing, its antennae trained on the darkness ahead. The tunnel walls are broken, gables of coal protruding from either side.

“Stop,” he begs.

A banging on the roof. Rills of coal rain down the windows. One of the stump's tapers turns the wipers on. Through the glass, Denlon sees the winding tunnel narrow. The ceiling, black and gleaming, descends with barely enough clearance for the car to pass.

I'm in the mines, he thinks. And the grip of panic takes hold.

Forgive the poor woman who wished you there.

Amid the crush of claustrophobia, he feels Ma's remorse.

I wouldn't do anything to harm you. I wanted to keep us together.

It's suicide, but Denlon doesn't care. He reaches for the

latch, yanks and swings the door open. A wing of coal catches it and slams it shut. Squealing and scratching along the car's flank— The black sidewall is only a foot away.

A cruel fate, Ma says, remembering. *Too cruel for a man like Pa.*

The groan of deforming steel. Denlon's head bangs against the window. He's looking at the end of the passage. The walls and ceiling converge just ahead.

I'm being buried alive, he thinks. "My dream," he whispers, knowing he'll never see his Temple finished.

The car thrusts and roars, slamming head-on into an unyielding bank of coal. As it strikes the end of the passage, the ceiling collapses. Denlon hears the heavy freight crashing onto the trunk. The lunatic stump is still en route, wrenching the wheel and stomping the pedal, engine whining and smoking, burning itself up.

My dream, Denlon thinks, and a final image of the glittering building lights up in his mind.

The rear window collapses. The engine is howling, streaming ore fills the back seat. At the same moment a passage clears above: an abandoned mineshaft, wide enough to permit the descent of one man. Down he comes headfirst, diving toward them, shattering the windshield and throwing his arms around Denlon.

Pa, Denny sobs, Pa, Pa—

We believe in your dream, the miner says. *Don't we, Ma.*

With all our hearts, Ma breaks down.

Pa's cheek is against his, sooty and close. Ma is beside him

now, kissing his brow. She reaches across his chest and takes hold of Pa's thumb.

When things are darkest, Pa says, a thought can save us. After the mine collapse, I pictured a better life for you. I died with that in my head.

When cancer was taking me down, Ma agrees, I imagined my boy was by my side.

The coal is pouring in, covering Denlon's middle. His left arm is buried, then his right. "I don't want to die," he says.

Son— Pa chokes on his tears.

Please, Ma begs. Please, oh please— As if there could be no greater pain than losing her child.

The creaking coal has reached Denlon's shoulders. Claustrophobia is consuming his mind as quickly as the ore is swallowing his body. He makes an enormous effort and two fingers of his right hand move.

Are his parents still speaking to him? Their voices sound from a distance. The ore is rattling around his ears.

Denlon groans and cranes his neck, lungs and middle constricted, trying to draw a thread of air. Jarring thuds: a fresh collapse from above and a load of coal rolls through the car's windshield, overwhelming him, burying his face. His senses seethe. And then a last bulb of awareness is crushed and he's swallowed by dark oblivion.

9

Daylight appears between Denlon's lids. He's alive.
And strangely calm.
Terror, it seems, has cleansed his mind.

He's still in the car. He can see the dashboard, the color and motion of vehicles beyond the windshield. There's an intersection with buildings ranked on either side.

The car passes a clothing store and a restaurant. Above a pharmacy on the corner, he can see the upper levels of a parking garage. He sits up, fighting dizziness, turning to face the driver. Bett is behind the wheel. She starts when he straightens himself. She peers at him, then her attention returns to the road.

"Bett?"

"Yes." Her voice is distant and apprehensive.

"Where are we?"

"Charleston."

On the right, a multistory building rises, faced in beige

tile. Its rows of windows are regularly spaced. A van painted orange and white is turning into a covered autoport on the ground floor. The signage above reads *Emergency*.

The car slows. Bett's turning into a parking area beside the ambulance bay. Her hands clasp the wheel, but they're shaking.

She guides the car to an empty space and it comes to a halt.

"What's happened?" Denlon says.

Bett's eyes are red. She's been crying. There's restraint in her expression—she's forcing composure on herself.

He makes a helpless face. "I want to know."

Her mouth purses as if she's trying to speak but cannot.

"Tell me," he says.

"We were on our way back. From that store by the highway. You were explaining what happened last night. We stopped at a railroad crossing, and— Something happened to you. You were talking. Your eyes were closed, but you were moving your arms and legs. You were like someone having a bad dream.

"I tried to wake you." Bett shakes her head.

"What?"

She's still shaking her head. "You were fighting something," she says. "You were angry. And sad, terribly sad. I called for help." She looks at the hospital entrance. "I drove as fast as I could."

The gulf between them seems impossibly wide.

Please, Denlon thinks, I need you— But he's speaking to

Bett from a distance, in a language she can't understand. In his head, he has the relics of Ma and Pa. But in the real world, he is utterly alone.

No, Son. You're not. Turn around.

Denlon draws a slow breath and turns.

Ma is there, in the flesh, sitting directly behind him.

Her brow is high, her face is gaunt and her eyes are sharp. She smiles and the wrinkles on her upper lip disappear. There's not a trace of acrimony or recrimination. Only tenderness and understanding. She looks like she's just walked off the knob. Her gray hair is twisted at the rear and held by a twig. Her gray blanket is stuck with leaves and spider silk.

"You don't remember," Bett says.

"No," he mutters.

My dear boy—

"There has to be something they can do," Bett says.

They, Denlon thinks. Ma is still sitting there, smiling at him.

Denlon sighs, grabs the handle, swings the door back and steps out.

Bett does the same.

He's standing there, looking through the glass at Ma, remembering his passion for independence, for aspiration and achievement— His schooling, his work, his far-fetched designs. Denlon laughs, opens the rear door and extends his arm.

"Shall we?" he says.

Ma puts her quavering hand on his wrist and struggles out.

Denlon escorts her around the car till the three of them are standing together, facing the hospital entrance. Bett tries to smile, but her eyes are weary and her cheeks are pale.

Bett reaches her hand for him.

This is my job, Ma says.

Ma turns to Bett and whispers something in her ear. Denlon sees a flash of understanding in Bett's eyes.

Then Ma starts forward, holding his arm, guiding him. And Bett falls in behind.

You're my responsibility now, Ma says. *She'll come with us.*

Strangely, Ma is acting as if she knows what to do. With every step, she's lessening her limp, straightening her stoop.

As they approach the Emergency entrance, Denlon sees movement around them. Drapes of ivy are descending the side of a building on his right. Crabgrass tufts rise from a planter, hopping onto the walkway. A pale rootstalk creeps over the hood of a parked car, dragging a landscape sapling behind.

It's starting, he thinks.

Ma tightens her grip. *Don't pay them no mind.*

Over her shoulder, Denlon sees a pyramidal mass of roots and soil lugging itself across the asphalt, greenery flopped to the side. Something's rocking an old Buick. A gnarled root taper angles around the fender, making toward them. A strip of curbside lawn is lifting itself, thrashing its root threads like a centipede, making its way toward the autoport, anticipating their arrival.

A screeching of brakes and a loud collision. One of the curbside trees uprooted itself, sending its trunk into the street.

A bakery truck has piled into it and the thruway is blocked to traffic. Down the open lanes march files of giants from a nearby park.

Denlon wants to hurry, but Ma can only go so fast.

Pretend they aren't there, she says. Just pretend.

Where's Pa? he wonders.

She shakes her head. *He'll be along, I expect.*

Cars are thickly parked near the entrance. They're winding among them now. Bett trails behind, head bowed as if paying no mind to the developing calamity. Maybe she can't even see it.

The giant trees pass the stopped traffic and enter the parking area. A group of tall shrubs from the hospital garden join them, followed by droves of potted plants from a nearby market, price tags and care information dangling from their tops. Drivers from stopped cars join the pedestrians gathered on the pavements, pointing and exchanging opinions about the advancing ranks.

We're moving too slowly, Denlon thinks. The marching giants are filling the space before the Emergency entrance. They're going to bar the way. And as if to confirm his fears, a deep thud sounds and is joined by others. The giants are pounding their tapers, shaking the asphalt in a show of strength.

Ma halts, faces the restive vegetation and raises her chin as if seeking a truce, asking for a modest concession.

A groaning of trunks, a rustling of branches. Reluctant acknowledgement.

Let us pass, Ma says.

Boughs wave, forbs titter, bushes thrash impatiently.

Ma holds her hand up. *Just give us this*, she says, scanning the foliage. *Nothing more*, she vows. And to Denlon, *A lifetime in the woods should be worth something*.

One giant rasps its taper across the asphalt, peeved at the general delay. But the others are nodding their crowns, moving slowly, lining either side of the entrance, forming an aisle.

Ma looks at Denlon. *The way is clear*.

Denlon continues forward holding Ma's arm. Plant odors reach him, rank and fungous. Impatient vines wind around boles. A landscape maple fidgets its twigs. One of the aisle giants drives its nether parts into the soil, trying to restrain itself.

Ignore them, Ma says. *I like what you've done with the stream*.

Denlon is puzzled. Stream? There isn't one.

Ma smiles at him. *The Temple, Son. Your Temple in Lime*.

When he looks forward again Denlon sees the small bridge he designed to span the stream that verges the entry. He lifts his gaze and the ramparts rise with it—the elliptical glassed-in overlooks, the interior courtyard, the weave of trunks and vines mingled with leafy mosaics—all the way to the projecting boughs, roofed with copper leaf.

“Ma,” he murmurs, disbelieving.

And when he turns back to her, she looks like she's lost twenty years. Her burden of care has lifted. She is, once again, the generous soul, safe and secure in the nest she and Pa feathered together. And she's full of regard for what her son has

accomplished since leaving the hills.

An inspiring achievement, she says. It's a wondrous thing you've done for the human family.

I'm imagining this, Denlon thinks. But he can see the love in Ma's eyes. And he can hear, as well, the wise creaks from aged trunks, the sighing of vines and the grudging clap of leaves. The details rise unbidden from the well of memory: the long construction, the feverish work; inspecting masonry and glasswork; walking on catwalks among the roof beams.

The Temple's boughs seem to touch the clouds. He'd designed them so the copper leafing would catch the light as the sun went down.

You see, Ma pats his arm. It's all worked out.

Ahead, above the entry arch, among the uplift of boles and vines, the giant mosaics glow, a myriad mismatched polygons admitting light as they might in a forest. A dozen uniformed greeters are gathered on the threshold. Will he need to identify himself? Denlon puts his hand in his pant pocket. His wallet is gone, but he feels a chain. And when his fingers emerge, he sees the necklace and pendant he'd given Tracy to seal their bond.

Denlon looks at Ma. Her gray blanket is gone. She's wearing an evening gown patterned with sequins, like dew on a meadow at dawn. Her hair is coifed, and there's rouge on her cheeks. As they enter the Temple, he places the pendant around her neck and fastens the clasp.

The greeters don't need his ID. They know who he is. They speak his name, and his mother's as well, bowing to honor

them both. The edifice is finished, and the esteemed designer has brought his mother to the opening celebration.

The pendant glitters on her pale sternum, and it seems it's transformed her. Ma's youth has returned. She's as he remembers her as a child: the teasing smile, her flashing eyes, her brow unlined, high and hopeful.

They step through the crowded foyer. Groups loosen, heads bow, speculations abound. Denlon's known, but who is the beauty on his arm? Around them, the limestone miracle unfolds. Slender hourglass pilasters, each a stalactite and stalagmite fused. Stone carved and polished, smooth as muscle, ovals that seem to open as you move, lustrous and stretching—

Denlon turns, overwhelmed by the sight. As static as the materials are, the space seems to define itself as something alive. The liquid elements, too, are perfectly cast: glass partitions like sheets of water, blown chandeliers like giant droplets about to fall.

He leads the way to one of the tubular elevators, and they ride to the Courtyard above. The weather is clement so the panels are raised, and through the giant openings, clouds and forests appear with the metropolis below. The hemisphere escalators carry them to the next larger structure, and an usher motions them into a room where the motif is bolder and grander. A mystical cavern, built from the parts of some heavenly giant: supports warped and twisted, crossing the heights unsquare and unplanned like dinosaur bones, while ligaments stretch and the rugose lime hangs from walls and ceiling.

Denny, Ma says.

He faces her.

I would never have imagined, she says, searching his features.

Though she couldn't fathom his inspiration, she understood his need for purpose and vindication. And that dissolved the last of the barrier that had stood between them for so many years.

An escort greets them and guides them under an archway and through a tunnel hung with stalactites, into the largest room of all: the Grand Hall. Here the lime loses all restraint, giving way to impulse and fantasy. Massive spans and a great woven pillar demark the space, while high above, through openings hung with cream-colored threads, the sky and the highest projecting boughs appear. On either side, there are giant hives, ellipsoid openings, roomy and interconnected. The irregular chambers are balcony loges lined with seats, and the loges are full, as are the scores of tables and chairs in the Grand Hall proper. The Temple is teeming with people, all festive and finely adorned.

A place of freedom and dignity. Of opulence and spectacle.

Against the far wall, on a dais, is a long table. Their escort is leading them there.

At the table's center is a seat for Denlon. On his left is a seat for Ma; and in the chair to his right, Pa is waiting. Denlon opens his arms as Pa stands, and the two share a warm embrace.

You did it, Pa laughs. *You rattled 'em all.*

Of the hundreds filling the Hall, all are in formal attire

except for Pa, who is still in mining clothes. His ragged coat is sooty and so is his face. There is candle grease on his cheeks, and his headlamp is on.

An emcee is calling the event to order. Denlon and his parents take their seats, as do the scores of guests at their assigned tables and the observers in the balcony loges.

The laudatory speeches begin. Denlon listens at first, and then his attention wanders, seeing in the crowd familiar faces. Bett is at the table of honor, directly below him, and so is Tracy, with Foster on one side and her young son on the other. Romero and the design team are there, of course, sharing a table with Aunt Lettie and Uncle Homer. Dr. Janits has come with his nurses and staff. And Mrs. Scarberry is seated beside her legless spouse.

The Sheets boy, Ma says, pointing.

Sheets nods and Jewel waves. They're at a table with their parents, Denlon sees. The old folks had risen from their graves to attend. And Jink is beside the dais with his recital group. He has interrupted the program of the music that has earned him such high regard in concert halls around the world, and with Denlon's arrival, he is playing "Our Waltz," the old fiddle tune he'd learned in the hills.

So many people, from so many times and places, are all there to recognize Denlon's achievement. Most are aware that the Temple in Lime is one of many. His crowning creation, some believe. But, to Denlon, it was another whistle stop in a long career.

Then the accolades are over, and it's time for Denlon to

give his speech.

He thanks them all for coming, relates a handful of interesting stories about the design and construction of the Temple, and gives credit and thanks to the many, both present and remote, who contributed to the project's success.

Then his thoughts turn foundational. He speaks of the matter of chief importance to himself and them all.

"I've been fortunate," Denlon says. "But it might have been otherwise. For so many of us, life gets in the way. From birth, an absence of gifts handicaps us. In our youth, our origins stall us. We want to learn, to study, to advance in knowledge. But there are always distractions. Problems with commitment, attention, persistence.

"We all need love. We can't survive without it. We need sustenance and shelter, the means to survive. In every life, there are so many obstacles; so much indirection; so many ways to lose our focus on what is truly essential: having a purpose."

Denlon pauses and sweeps the crowd.

They are all, in their way, glad for him. Do they all feel, in his statement, the importance of purpose for themselves? If he has a gift to give, it is this.

"I thank my stars. I thank my obstinate—sometimes quarrelsome—nature. I thank the tenacity of a caring school-teacher and the opportunities opened to me by a great urban center. I thank my first partner in love, the one who believed in me when there was no reason to. And the one who, in my later years, has shown me so much devotion and stood by me through so many ordeals. But most of all, I thank the couple

who brought me into the world and cared for me before I was able to care for myself.”

Denlon looks at Pa. Tears are striping his sooty cheeks.

He looks at Ma and her lips are trembling.

The mother who thought she knew him so well, who had questioned his grandiose aspirations, had come to realize that he was so much stronger and nobler than she had suspected. And the realization was a blessing to her, the balm she would need in the long hereafter.

The crowd is on its feet now, expressing its affiance with a standing ovation.

After the accolades have run their course, Denlon takes his seat.

Pa squeezes his arm. Ma kisses his cheek.

We did the best we could, she whispers.

Denlon hugs her. What more can a child ask?

10

Denlon is waking slowly, emerging from deep sleep and an eclipse of the senses.

Where is he? In a small room. The walls are gray. White, perhaps, in better light. He's lying face up on a bed. And he's not alone.

Bett is standing beside him, looking down. At the sight of him waking, she draws a breath and smiles. How long has she been here? She seems relieved. The concern—the tension he'd felt—is gone. The surgical team has completed their work. Somehow he's survived. The ordeal is over and Bett is taking him home.

Remember, he thinks, the promise I asked you to make on the way back from Alma Creek.

She doesn't respond, but he knows she remembers.

The door of the small room opens and four people file in. Bett moves aside, and the four surround him. It's not a bed he's on, Denlon realizes. It's a gurney with rails, made up like

a bed. The four are in surgical scrubs. One at the head of the gurney nods and pushes. They are wheeling him out of the room.

I'm not done, Denlon thinks. This is the scheduled procedure. Exploratory surgery. They don't yet know how far the cancer's progressed, but they're about to find out.

He raises his hand to Bett. I know you're with me, he thinks.

Bett's eyes close and sobs well up.

The gurney wheels squeal, the metal parts clank. The surgical team is wheeling him down a hall. A long hall. It turns and turns again, like the maze of corridors that led to the private cell with Tracy in it.

The cortege stops before an elevator. The doors open and they wheel him in. A larger man with a bald head is directing the group. There's a small man with spectacles and two assistants, a man and a woman.

The elevator has a bad bulb. The light is flashing on and off, on and off.

The elevator is moving now. No one speaks.

Denlon's arm slips, hanging down. The man with the spectacles grabs it and tucks it back under the blanket.

Then the doors open.

He's moving again, but he's not being wheeled. He's on a stretcher and they're carrying him. And the lighting is wrong. The flicker in the elevator is following them.

The air is cold, and the darkness around him is cut by flashes of light. Light and darkness, darkness and light—like

a thunderstorm on Clinker Knob. And if his ears aren't mistaken, Denlon can hear the hiss of rain falling not far away.

Somehow the four have shed their scrubs. They're in flannel and overalls now, clothed like hills folk. Above him, Denlon sees a dark sky with a scatter of stars and the silhouettes of trees.

His bearers set the stretcher down on an incline covered with dead leaves. In the distance, up a forested slope, he can see the curve of the turtle capstone. To his left, on the trees' twisted branches, vultures are perched.

"What d'you think, Doc?" the woman asks. Her hair is in braids, and her braids fall over a plaid flannel shirt.

The bald elder turns on his headlamp. He's standing before a rectangular hole, five feet deep.

"She's a mite shallow," Doc says, stepping around the plot.

Moonlight filtered through a cloud glimmers on his smooth crown. He's in patched jeans and a grimy vest. He wipes his lips and motions. "Specs. See how it looks down there."

Specs' jaw is stubbled. He's wearing overalls and mountain boots. He climbs into the hole, kneels and crawls around.

They've dug a grave for me, Denlon thinks. And with that thought, the sound of a solo fiddle reaches him. It's Jink on a nearby log, playing "Our Waltz," a dirge for his friend.

"Lotta roots down here," Specs says.

Doc nods. "I don't guess we're goin' much deeper."

"They won't bother him none," Specs says.

"Alright," Doc sighs. "Stay where you are and we'll lower him down."

Denlon feels Doc's hands on his shoulders. The young man and woman take his ankles, and as they lift him over the hole, Specs grabs his waist.

"Easy, Billy," Doc says. "Get 'im angled right."

Denlon sees the ragged walls rising around him. On either side, tapers are touching him. A hatchwork of roots scratches his back.

"Cross his arms over his chest," Doc says. "And close his eyes."

Denlon feels a finger on his lid, and his left eye goes dark. Then the right.

"All set," Specs says.

"Billy, grab that spade," Doc orders.

A moment of silence.

Then Denlon feels a shovelful of dirt land on his legs.

Is that Ma's breath in his ear?

It is, dear boy. I'm right here.

Another load of dirt, this one on his shoulder. A load on his thighs, one on his groin— There's nothing he can do.

I wanted a life of my own, he tells her. I had a dream—

Yes you did, Ma replies.

The Temple, he thinks. It saw the light, Ma. My dream came true.

With good fortune like that, she says softly, there's no cause for complaint, no reason for grieving.

She understands.

I gave my conception to the world, he says.

You had a purpose. And I had one, too. I carried you inside

me. I gave you the blood in my veins. It flowed from my heart to yours.

A load of dirt lands on Denlon's chest. He tries to ignore the weight.

You're not going to leave me, are you?

No, Ma says. I'm not going to leave.

A protest boils inside him. I'm not done. I need a little more—

Your achievements are behind you, Son. It's time to rest.

The earth shoveled over him is heavy now.

You're ready, aren't you?

Yes, Denlon sighs. I'm ready.



Rich Shapero's novels dare readers with giant metaphors, magnificent obsessions and potent ideas. His casts of idealistic lovers, laboring miners, and rebellious artists all rate ideas as paramount, more important than life itself. They traverse wild landscapes and visionary realms, imagining gods who in turn imagine them. Like the seekers themselves, readers grapple with revealing truths about human potential. *Dead but Not Ready* and his previous titles—*Xiphactinus*, *The Hornet's Spell*, *Hibiscus Mask*, *Beneath Caaqi's Wings*, *Dreams of Delphine*, *The Slide That Buried Rightful*, *Dissolve*, *Island Fruit Remedy*, *Balcony of Fog*, *Rin*, *Tongue and Dorner*, *Arms from the Sea*, *The Hope We Seek*, *Too Far*, and *Wild Animus*—are available in hardcover and as ebooks. They also combine music, visual art, animation and video in the TooFar Media app. Shapero spins provocative stories for the eyes, ears, and imagination.