

FIVE

Beast Eye And Something Else

1911 was to be a bad year for the isolated, hill-spiked terrain of southern West Virginia. Death and discovery of the unpleasant would visit more than one family in the coal-fields, and Trenchmouth, aged eight years, would be shaped by all of it.

A third talent had gotten in his bones, natural as the digging and climbing, which he still practiced daily. Frank Dallara's words had come to fruition, and Trenchmouth could knock a crow off a sugar maple branch from sixty feet using nothing but his eyes and that little wooden wrist rocket he'd picked up at the grocers.

Frank Dallara took the boy out on weekends for practice. 'Ancient man couldn't always carry a bow and arrow or a spear,' he said. 'They needed something lightweight.' Accuracy was studied through repetition. 'David protected his sheep with the same contraption you got in your hand, except Mr Goodyear give us cooked rubber to work with,' Frank Dallara liked to say. 'Old David slew a giant with it too.' You could find stones anywhere, in any size. Small, smooth ones

for line drive precision. Big, heavy ones for high-arc'd momentum. Dallara was a miner and a carpenter by trade, but he should have been a physicist the way he tutored Trenchmouth on velocity, gravity, and inertia.

He'd put his arm around the boy after a particularly good shot, as if Trenchmouth were his own. Like most, he called him 'T,' but it sounded better somehow. It didn't seem like much to Frank Dallara, but to the eight year old, it was everything.

The boy was taught on guns too. The Widow taught him safety first, everything else second. She schooled him on a hammerless 10 gauge that had been her husband's. Frank Dallara let him get used to a .22 rifle belonging to his boy Frederick. The three of them went squirrel hunting on Sundays, and afterwards, each and every time, Clarissa and Frederick, by then almost twelve, made eyes at one another. Talked by themselves on the porch for a while.

This made Trenchmouth a little mad. There were three reasons why. The first was a natural propensity for protecting his sister, younger or older did not factor. The second was a distaste for the bland nature of Frederick Dallara. He had no fire in him. Was good in school, but never hopped a moving train. When other boys caught and skinned black-snakes or threw bullfrogs at the Model T's in town from hidden launching spots, Fred Dallara always got quiet and went home to study. He was a bore, and Trenchmouth didn't like bores. He wanted to be in it anytime and everywhere, and he had the scars to prove it. The third reason Trenchmouth was bothered by his non-blood sister's flirtations with the other boy was simple: she was non-blood, and

this meant *he* could be there for her the way Fred Dallara wanted to be. Trenchmouth was a little bit in love with Clarissa, as much as an eight-year-old can be.

One Sunday evening in winter, standing by lantern light on the Widow's front lawn, Trenchmouth, Frank, and Fred cleaned the four fox squirrels they'd bagged that afternoon. They cut them around the middle and peeled back the skins. Inside, Ona heated up some bacon drippings on top of the black Acme cook stove. Clarissa watched from a window until the squirrels were halved and quartered and so on, then she came outside. It was the kind of cold out that creeps into you, takes you by surprise. 'Y'all need help?' she said.

'We've got her just about done,' Frank Dallara said.

The almost twelve-year-olds made eyes. Trenchmouth watched them.

When he and Frank Dallara took the little legs and abdomens inside to rinse and remove buckshot, Fred and Clarissa stayed put in front of the house. From inside the kitchen, the boy could see them. They kissed.

Trenchmouth was up and toward the door like he'd sat on a tack. He didn't slow once outside. He took the bigger boy down by driving his right shoulder into the hips. Once on the ground, while a confused Clarissa looked down at them with her hands to her mouth, Trenchmouth straddled Fred and commenced to fist pumping. He was like an out of control oil drill, swinging away, up and down, and when Fred Dallara finally grasped what was happening and threw the younger boy off, his nose and lips were split and leaking crimson fast. They both sat on their butts. Clarissa was about to lean down and check on the boy whose lips she'd just

kissed, and Fred was about to lurch at his attacker, when Trenchmouth, squatting now like he might come back for more, squinted his eyes to almost nothing, pulled back his forever-covering lips to reveal the mess of sores and bulges and sharp crooked calcium, and hissed. In the low light of the lantern, he made a sound reserved for mountain cats with their backs against a rock wall. Then he shot forward like one and sunk his diseased teeth into the left cheek of Fred Dallara. The boy wailed something awful.

Trenchmouth ran for the woods.

He didn't come back until they were gone. Until the Widow had made a wet snuff poultice wrap for Frederick's face. She and Frank Dallara didn't speak a word while they tended to him. Fred choked back a confused cry. And Clarissa went to her bed in the loft and stared up at the wood beams.

Frank Dallara did speak one thing before he left that night, and from his hiding spot behind the outhouse, Trenchmouth heard him. 'Your boy ought not to have done what he did,' Frank told Ona Dorsett. 'I like him, treat him like my own, but what he done here is something else.' The something else he spoke on was more than protecting a sister from puppy love.

The Widow said nothing. Trenchmouth could hear the disappointment in his mother's silence, in the voice of the man he regarded as his Daddy, and it got to him.

They all read the newspaper. The Widow had made sure her two little ones were plenty literate by six years. A man called Orb brought the *Williamson Daily News* to them every Thursday. He was seventy-four years old and he liked to

climb mountains and descend into hollows, but only if he had a destination, a nickel coming his way for delivering goods. On an early January Thursday, they'd heard most of what was coming to them already from folks walking by, looking to gossip about death. But, when old Orb rapped at their door that evening, none of them, not Ona, Clarissa, or Trenchmouth, expected those words on the page.

Trenchmouth's reading needed the most practice, so he read aloud to the other two while they strung half-runners. The first two stories weren't much more than the tragedy that had come their way in breezy gossip the day before. 'Eight killed,' Trenchmouth recited. 'Thacker. Eight miners are dead – two Americans and six Italians – as the result of the derailing of a mine car in the Lick Fork mine of the Red Jacket Coal Company.' The derailing had knocked mine props loose and unleashed a precipitation of heavy slate on the men. The article ended by giving the mine owner's name, and lamenting that the mine itself was 'badly wrecked.'

Clarissa stood up, holding her dress in her fingertips like a satchel, weighted down with the throwaway ends of beans. She walked gingerly like this to the pail used for hog slop, dumped them in. Trenchmouth read the next one. 'Cables Broke. Bluefield. Eight men were killed and two seriously injured on an incline in a mine near here. The men were . . .' he'd come upon a word he couldn't sound out, but he was a determined boy . . . 'ascending the incline in a coal car when the cable broke allowing cars loaded with coal to shoot down the plane and crash into the ten men. Eight of the victims were buried beneath tons of coal and instantly killed.'

‘Eight men in two separate accidents. That’s something,’ Clarissa said.

The Widow did not look up from her stringing. ‘Don’t make something out of nothing, Clarissa. There isn’t no plan in such filth.’

‘Moonshine charge,’ Trenchmouth read. His mother looked up at him. ‘Huntington. Mrs Caroline Carpenter, 50, of Burdette, Putnam County, said to be the only woman distiller in West Virginia, was arrested and lodged in jail to await the action of the next federal jury. It is alleged by federal officers that Mrs Carpenter operated on a place at her home that was the only oasis in the Putnam County district, and from her illicit sales of liquor netted a large sum during the past few months.’

The Widow stood and dumped her bean heads as her daughter had done. She wiped her hands together. ‘Some folks don’t keep their money close to their skin, I reckon,’ she said. ‘But children, we’ve got to be more careful than ever now. Got to let them keep on thinking there’s but one woman shinin in the state.’ She told them to look at her and they did. ‘It’s time to tombstone it again for a while.’ This meant whiskey headstones. It meant hiding moonshine in a hollowed marker of the dead at the Methodist Church cemetery where the bootlegger would pick it up.

Trenchmouth looked down at his paper and read silently. When his mother told him to look back up at her, he didn’t. She hadn’t spoken her full mind on the seriousness of the change coming down on her livelihood. ‘Boy,’ she said, ‘you’d be smart to listen.’

Still, he read the ink. ‘Disastrous fire at Matewan,’ he said.

'One man dead.' Tears were coming up now. It was hard to read, but he did. 'Soon after passenger train number 2 left Matewan about 6:30 a.m. Wednesday, fire was discovered in the Urias Hotel, inside the saloon building owned by Anse Pilcher, just across the street from where the recently burned Belmont Hotel stood, under reconstruction. Frank Dallara (Italian), forty, was burned to death after entering the Urias Hotel from across the street, where he was working as a builder. George Bowens, another worker burned considerably about the arms, said Dallara was attempting to save a child that was unaccounted for.' The boy did not read on aloud. Only to himself. None of it mattered from there anyway; the child wasn't in the building, folks' wounds were dressed at the Y.M.C.A. hospital, the entire town burned to the ground, and so forth. But Trenchmouth had read the words about the man who'd taken him in, looked at him real, and been disappointed by his savagery just four nights prior. And now he was dead.

The boy ran out the front door.

When the Widow found him, he was under a birch tree, shaking from the kind of cry that has no sound. She'd brought with her a small luggage bag filled with jars of moonshine. A woman sat in jail for this juice. It was time to clear the house stash. From the bag she pulled a small canning jar. It was half full of the strongest moonshine she had. For a moment, she just stood over him. He couldn't look up at her, knew it wasn't for boys to cry like this. She bent and brushed at the hair on his forehead, her fingertips working in such a way as only a mother's fingertips can. 'Tonight you'll sip a little extra for your pain,' she said, unscrewing the lid.

Through his shaky inhales and exhales, he managed to swallow a little, and it calmed him. The Widow kept at rubbing his face, his cheeks, his neck, until he nearly fell asleep on the spot. She took back the jar, nipped it herself, and pulled him up by the hand. 'Let's get to the cemetery before nine,' she said. 'You don't have to go to school tomorrow.'

Once there, they worked. There was no time for crying. You had to look out for the law, for folks visiting their dead. You had to find the four foot tombstone marked with the name Mary Blood, dig under it a little, and unearth the hollow metal casing awaiting its delivery. It was paranoid work, the best kind to put a mind off sorrow.

But sorrow always came back. That night, long past midnight, long past the pain-numbing effect of the shine, Trenchmouth stirred in his bed. It seemed to the boy that the world was burning, that men were being pulled to its center to die, and that he somehow was responsible. It also seemed that the air inside the house was unbreathable. So he descended the ladder and went outside. He wore nothing but his nightclothes and socks.

It didn't take long for another scent to embed itself in his nose. It was the same one he'd gotten hold of that day knocking bugs in the garden so many years before. On this night, with the miners dead and Mr Dallara burned alive, he almost recognized it. The smell of rot and regret. Of meeting the maker unnaturally.

He tracked it liked the Widow had taught him to night track deer. The aroma of shit and functioning glands. But this was something else. His nose led him to the outhouse,

then to the mound next to it, then to a third mound further down. Trenchmouth bent to one knee and inhaled hard. It wasn't bowel movements his nose had followed.

Out there, it was bone cold.

A boy his size could work a shovel just fine. He didn't possess much weight to bury its edge, but he jumped up and down on the thing, bruising the bare arches of his feet, enough to make headway in an hour's time. Somehow, despite the frozen crust of earth, Trenchmouth broke through. He always had been able to dig what others couldn't. He got below the petrified mess of eight-year-old human waste, deep below it after a couple more hours. It was then that he noticed something small and gray in the half light of his lantern. He bent to it, held it up to his eye. It was a man's thumb.

Trenchmouth didn't scream or throw the thing back. He bent again and unearthed the hand from which his shovel had severed the digit. It was the color of nothing, and the skin was full of holes, tunnels for unknown breeds of burrowing insects and filth bugs long since full. The clothes were intact if not brittle. And once Trenchmouth used his fingers to dig and brush away the remaining dirt, a face looked back at him, sunken and scared. Hollow and clay red. He stared at the face, and as he put his hand to his nose again, the hills around him seemed to shift at their foundations and the trees and the sky went red. Then all of it, everything, almost fell away to nothing.

The boy had an unexplainable urge to spit in the dead man's empty eyes.

He sat next to the buried man until sunrise. When Ona

Dorsett walked out to the barn clutching her bearskin wrap around her chest, she did not act surprised to see him there. She went back in for his twilled wool coat and boots, handed them to the boy in silence. His fingers, nearly numb, pulled the warmth on slow and awkward. He didn't look at her.

'You know who he is?' she said.

'No ma'am.'

'How he come to be buried here?'

'No ma'am.'

'I kilt him.'

In those times, in those parts, everybody, no matter what their upbringing or education, used the word 'kilt.' 'He got kilt cause some folks need killin,' was a phrase heard once or twice annually, and hearing the Widow speak something like it was less monstrous than a child might expect.

Trenchmouth stared at his boot laces.

'Ain't you going to ask if I had good reason?' She scanned the foothills circular, pivoting in her stance.

He waited, then spoke, 'I reckon you wouldn't have done it if you didn't.'

'That man there is your daddy,' she said.

The boy rolled those lips over his teeth in such a way that they might break through. He sneezed, a fit of them really, for no good reason.

'He come to take you when you wasn't but a baby, a little baby,' the Widow said. 'He come drunk and wild and unfit to father anything breathing. Your father was a bad man.' The condensation of her speech hung heavy in the air.

Trenchmouth stood. 'He would have taken me from you,'

he said. He looked at her like a son looks at his mother when he needs more than words.

‘He would have.’

‘He would have kilt you to do it.’

‘He would have.’ She pulled the dead man’s mouth harmonica from her shirt pocket, gave it to the boy. ‘His,’ she said. ‘You’re liable to make somethin good of it.’ The boy looked at the little silver and wood instrument and felt sick at the thought of putting it to his mouth. She pulled him to her so that he hugged her around the hips, his face in her belly. An eight-year-old can know a great many things, and at the same time very few. That morning, at an outhouse burying ground, Trenchmouth Taggart knew he had been raised up right by the only woman who could’ve done the raising. He knew he’d most likely be dead or starved were it not for her. And he knew, that since the time of his last linen diaper some six years earlier, for every day of his young life, he’d been pissing and shitting on his very own daddy. That sat just fine with him, he decided.

That evening, the Widow sat down with her children and told them things she never had before. The time was right. Due.

She told Clarissa, among other things: ‘Your mother was too young, and most likely had got herself where she was by way of a drunk man’s forceful hand.’ The Widow knew things about the young mother, things like her name, Cleona Brook. Her whereabouts, Huntington by way of Charleston. Her profession, actress. The Widow even knew that Cleona was starring in a current production of *Girl of the Golden West* at the Huntington Theatre, less than a hundred miles of track away.

It wasn't coincidence that she turned to Trenchmouth that evening and spoke of similar knowledge, similar geography. While Clarissa whimpered next to the washtub in the kitchen, confused by discovery, and while the sunlight through the windows died and the room went orange and soft, the boy's practicing mother told him of his birth mother. 'She is in a room alone at the Home for Incurables in Huntington,' she said. 'She pulls off her own fingernails. Thinks Satan is among us.' Her name was spoken aloud with less sympathy than the girl's mother. 'Mittie Ann Taggart.'

The Norfolk & Western ran a 1:50 p.m. daily out of Williamson. Columbus and Cincinnati, all points west and northwest. But the train stopped in Kenova and Huntington, and Ona Dorsett trusted it would be good for her children, aged eight and twelve, to strike out on their own for an overnigher. Children were babied too much, that was her thinking.

Moonshine sales bankrolled the excursion of course, and the finger sandwiches in the café car were unlike anything Trenchmouth had tasted before. While he chewed, he almost let his teeth show.

All of this, the fancy train car, the fancy finger food, would take the boy's mind off Frank Dallara.

Huntington was the big city. A train conductor had taken pity on the two, drawn them up maps on paper napkins. 'The Theatre and the Asylum?' he'd said. 'Not your most visited sites for out-of-towners, but easy to git to anyhow.'

The two split up at the corner of 3rd Avenue and 20th Street, Trenchmouth heading north to the nut bin on the

hill, Clarissa east to the theatre. It was cold out, and she'd held her little brother's hand since getting off the train, something he'd never let her do at home. Walking alone and looking back at one another, it seemed like they'd always clasped hands till now.

The Huntington Theatre was of good size, all intricately carved maple, painted gold and red and blue. The red velvet curtain was stained and the hem needed repair. Clarissa asked a woman with a cigarette where she might find Cleona Brook.

'How old are you?' the woman answered. She spoke through her nose, wore a chicken feather in her silvery hair, and spat specks of cigarette tobacco between her tongue and top teeth.

'Twelve,' Clarissa said.

'Too young to be told the truth, too old to lie to.' The woman pointed to a door beside the stage and walked away.

Clarissa walked down a hallway lit by a single gaslight on the wall. Behind one closed door she heard moans. A woman or a man's, she couldn't tell. The next door was open, and inside, a young lady with thin wrists smacked color into her cheeks in front of a mirror. Her hair was pulled back with an elaborate assortment of pins. 'Excuse me,' Clarissa said.

The woman turned in her chair and looked Clarissa up and down. She sat with her legs spread, wearing nothing but a brassiere, stockings, and a pair of men's shortpants. 'Do you have something for a cough?' she said to Clarissa. 'I've got a terrible cough.' She faked a hacking sound.

'No ma'am.' Clarissa thought about moving on down the hall. 'Are you Cleona Brook?'

'Cleopatra Brook. Who told you Cleona? You from the apothecary's?'

'I'm sorry, I'm Clarissa. My adoptive mother is Missus Ona Dorsett from Mingo County. She—'

'Ona Dorsett. I know that name. Was she the one that died from gonorrhoea up at Detroit? The Shakespearean?' She looked around herself wildly, presumably for a production poster on the brown walls littered in newsprint and cheap fliers and dried up flowers pierced by nails.

'No ma'am, Missus Dorsett raised me after you dropped me off to her. I was just a baby, you were young yourself.' Clarissa was finding it difficult to speak with her normal level of confidence.

'Puddin, I wasn't ever young,' the woman said. She turned back to the mirror and snorted. Spat what came up into a trash bin next to her foot. 'I was Cleona Brook, that's for certain, but I wasn't never young. I didn't have no babies in Mingo County. No, no, no babies in Mingo.' She smiled then, cocked her head so that she could see her daughter in the mirror's reflection. 'Got me some babies now though. One named Jack, one named Phillip, and another Bill. All of em babies even though they're grown men. Do what I tell em to, cry when I yell at em. You know, I smack those three and they call me mama, kiss my feet? It's a real dream.' She opened the drawer at her chest and put in a dip of snuff. 'Let me see your teeth, girl.'

Clarissa pulled back her lips. She tried to make it look like a smile.

'White as white can be I guess. Hold on to that,' Cleona said.

'You're my mother,' Clarissa said.

'Like hell I am.'

The show was in two hours. Clarissa watched her mother shut the door with her toes. She had to step back to keep it from hitting her in the face. A fat man swept the hall on his hands and knees. His broomstick had broken off to a height of eight inches, and he swept the dust side to side, breathing it in down low on the floor and coughing it right back out.

The Home for Incurables was a big stone building with over two hundred rooms. A hair-lipped nurse with calves the size of cantaloupes took to Trenchmouth, and though it was not customary to get his type of visitor, his type of story, she led him to Mittie Ann Taggart's room anyway. His obvious mouth problem reminded her of her own, and she decided to let the boy see his mother, provided she could supervise them. 'She's especially active today,' the nurse said. 'Woke up hollerin something even louder than usual. Even took a swing at Betty.' She explained to Trenchmouth that Mittie Ann would be in restraints on her bed, that it was for her own good, and that she might say some unpleasantries in his company.

'Yes ma'am,' he said.

They could hear her from the end of the corridor. Speaking in tongues, no doubt. When the nurse led the boy in, Mittie Ann went silent. She stared at the ceiling, which was covered in dried-up peanut butter balls. Trenchmouth looked at them, then at the nurse. 'Dessert,' she told him. 'Mittie Ann don't believe in dessert.' The window shade was drawn. His mother was sweaty and unwrinkled and green under the eyes and cheekbones.

‘I knowed you was comin, so I baked you a shit cake,’ she said, still staring up. Despite her arm and leg restraints, she was able to turn her hips to the side, revealing a brown stain in her white gown.

‘That’s no way to talk or act in front of a boy,’ the nurse said. She pulled a towel from the bedside table and hid the woman’s midsection with it. Trenchmouth covered his nose and tried not to cry.

‘He’s no boy,’ Mittie Ann said. ‘He’s Beelzebub’s offspring. Child of the one sent down to fire.’

‘That’s just the nonsense you woke up hollerin, Missus Taggart. It’s got nothin to do with him.’

‘It *is* him. I woke up hollerin on him cause I knowed he was comin. You figure pretty slow, don’t you lips?’

The nurse looked at her shoes.

Trenchmouth started to say something, but couldn’t.

‘I once knew a boy like you,’ his mother said. Then she turned and looked at the drawn window shade. Dust floated in the crack of sunlight. ‘I can see through things, like this window shade.’ It was quiet then on the third floor of the mental hospital. ‘I tried not to see through a little baby boy when he was plain as day an abomination, but he spat at me and spoke to me in the English tongue, but it wasn’t English, just sounded like it on the river’s air. Can you imagine, a baby talkin at two months?’ The nurse’s hands shook, and she stuck them in her armpits to stop it.

‘I got mouth disease on account of river water,’ Trenchmouth said. It wasn’t much louder than a whisper, dry throated and cracking.

‘I watched that boy die under the ice,’ his mother said.
‘That boy is dead.’

They had found out what the Widow had guessed they would find out. What part of her wanted them to find. There are mothers in this world, who, for reasons of experience or malfunction, cannot care for their children. And those children need to see it for themselves before they can truly live. Clarissa and Trenchmouth had seen it.

They held hands in the empty passenger car of the night train home. Folks traveling from Cincinnati and Columbus rocked unaware in their sleepers, but the brother and sister not bound by blood couldn’t sleep. The girl because she had a mind that raced, and the boy because he had no moonshine.

She did not mind his breath when he told her of the tied-down woman at the asylum. She’d grown used to its smell. And he breathed hers in as she told of the foul woman at the theatre. He’d have listened forever if she’d let him.

It was in this way that their bony shoulders banged with the train’s turns. Their knees touched, and their lot in life as children without roots caused them to move closer to one another. All this ended in a kiss between them that would be their only one until the next, thirty-four years later, when Clarissa was married to a man she did not love and Trenchmouth was wanted for murder.