

Though sunlight tinges the mountains, black leather-winged bodies swing low. First fireflies blink languidly. Beyond this meadow, cicadas rev and slow like sewing machines. All else ready for night except night itself. I watch last light lift off level land. Ground shadows seep and thicken. Circling trees form banks. The meadow itself becomes a pond filling, on its surface dozens of black-eyed susans.

I sit on ground cooling, soon dew-damp. Near me a moldboard plow long left. Honeysuckle vines twine green cords, white flowers attached like Christmas lights. I touch a handle slick from wrist shifts and sweaty grips. Memory of my grandfather's hands, calluses round and smooth as worn coins. One morning I'd watched him cross the field, the steel oar rippling soil. In its wake, a caught wave of *sil-lion shine*. But this plow has wearied into sleep. How long lying here? Perhaps a decade, since saplings and saw briar rise amid broom sedge. Above all else, those bold yellow

blossoms in full-petaled bloom. What has brought me here.

A deer emerges from the woods, nose up, stilt step then steadying pause, another hoof lifted. Dark rises around me. The black-eyed susans float like water lilies. All else disappears but they hold their yellow glow. Moon mirrors, sun ghosts. Dream abeyant. When the night-pond floods its banks, I walk the trail to the state park truck. Maybe another time, Les had answered when I invited him, claiming sheriff business to attend to. The trail steepens. When I look back at the meadow, only darkness.

Lascaux. What wonder to have made such a descent. Tar-pitched torch wood swabbing stone with light. Swerves and drops and slant downs. Dark rushing up behind each step. Then to find them there in the cave's hollow core—bison and ibex, but others lost elsewhere to the world: saber cats and woolly mammoths, irish elk. All live-motioned in the wavering light, girthed by curves of stone. Amid it all the runic human handprint. Where less art's veil between us and the world? How strange that Hopkins' quill scratches let me see more. *Invisioning* before seeing. But the first message there inside the cave walls. What wonder yet echoes from the world's understorey.

One

Where does any story really begin? One thing can't happen unless other things happened earlier. I could say this story began with an art class I took in ninth grade, or broken promises, one by Becky Shytle and one by me, or that it began when a shirtsleeve got caught by a hay baler's tines. Instead, I'll say it began on the Monday I first saw the blue cell phone, the same phone I held, briefly, in my hand the following Friday.

This all happened three weeks before I retired as county sheriff. There would be a meth bust on Tuesday, but otherwise I figured it to be an easy week—tie up some more loose ends, do a few more final favors, get my retirement paperwork done. I'd already quit coming in before midmorning, letting Jarvis Crowe, my replacement, get

used to running things on his own. An easy week, but when I got to the office on Monday, Ruby, our day-shift dispatcher, let me know it would be otherwise.

“C.J. Gant called a few minutes ago, Sheriff. He’s coming to see you. It’s important, he said. Of course we know it’s *always* important if it involves him or that resort.”

“We do,” I agreed. “Where are Jarvis and Barry?”

“Jarvis is checking out a break-in and Barry’s serving a bench warrant.”

“Anything else?”

“Not any crime,” Ruby said. “Bobbi Moffitt was being her usual nosy self over at the café this morning. Said to me it didn’t seem right for a man to retire at fifty-one. I told her thirty years for a lawman was like aging forty years for regular folks. And it is.”

“I suppose so,” I said. “I’m closing my door so I can try to figure out how to download these damn retirement forms.”

“My grandson can come over and help you.”

“I’ll figure it out. I’d like to retire without some sixteen-year-old making me feel like an idiot.”

“What about C.J. Gant?”

“Send him on in when he gets here.”

The red light flickered on my office phone. The message was from Pat Newton, who owned the paper mill outside town. He’d offered me a part-time night watchman

job, two twelve-hour shifts, one on Saturday and one on Sunday, starting next month. "I need an answer by next week, Les," Pat's voice said.

Clearing out my office. That was something else I needed to do, though that would be mainly filling trash cans, shredding old files. All I'd take with me would be some books off the shelf, a few things stashed in my desk. And the three paintings on the wall, two framed watercolors I'd done, each with a ribbon proclaiming BEST IN COUNTY, and the print of Edward Hopper's *Freight Car at Truro*.

Even Hopper's boxcars are alone.

That was the first thing Becky had said when she'd entered my office two years ago. Not how most people would start a conversation, but as soon as Becky said it I saw it too—the freight car hitched to no other. Not a single shadow other than its own. The sky empty.

Yes, *it seems so*, I'd answered that morning, our first exchange like passwords in a Masonic ritual.

I checked my e-mails from Becky, the first from last night.

I wish you could have seen the black-eyed susans Friday night. They were transcendent, Les. Maybe another time you can go. There's something else, but it's not good. Darby took Gerald's lawn mower two weeks ago and still hasn't returned it. Can you help get it back?

I'll go see Darby this afternoon, I typed, but it's Gerald's fault letting Darby take it in the first place.

Becky wouldn't see it that way, though. In her eyes Gerald could do no wrong, even though I'd cautioned her that Gerald wasn't quite the lovable old man that she thought.

Becky's second e-mail was from 9:06 today.

There was a school shooting in Atlanta this morning.

Anywhere a school shooting happens, not just around here, I want to take extra precautions at the park. Becky had told me that during her first office visit. By then I'd heard the scuttlebutt around town that Locust Creek Park's new superintendent was a *bit quair*, as the older folks put it—that she didn't own her own vehicle, just a bike, and no TV or phone. Not easy to talk to either, people said, some claiming Becky was autistic. *I'm not autistic*, she'd told me later, *I just spent a lot of my life trying to be.* New on the job, so overzealous, I'd thought at first. Then Becky had brought up an elementary school shooting in Emory, Virginia, in 1984. Two students and a teacher had been killed. She'd given enough details that I'd asked if someone she knew had been there. *I was there*, Becky had answered. I'd been curious enough afterward to Google *Becky Shytle*, but

instead of something about the shooting, I'd found a newspaper photo of her and Richard Pelfrey, a terrorist who, had his timer worked right, would have killed more people than Ted Kaczynski and Eric Rudolph combined.

Two years and I still didn't know what word to use for our relationship. A few "dates," a few kisses. But more than anything, a wary out-of-step dance. Except for the first time I'd been in Becky's cabin. On that evening it had almost become more. I'd brought a bottle of wine and as Becky got us glasses, I'd sat on the couch and surveyed the cabin's front room, curious to see what it might reveal about her. There was a shelf of books, most connected to nature, but also some poetry and art books, including one I'd borrowed about the cave art in Lascaux. On the fireboard was a crumbling hornet's nest, a gold pocket watch, and a single photograph. In one corner a butter churn, in another corner a chair, a table, and a lamp. Except for the couch, that was it—no TV or CD player, no clock or radio or computer, no rug. Nothing on the walls, not even a calendar. The photograph of two old people, sun streaked and in an oval frame, seemed, like the rest of the room's contents, remnants left in a house long abandoned.

That night, for the first time, our kisses were the kind that led to a bed. But our talk was even more intimate, as if the room's feeling of time turned back allowed us to speak more freely of our pasts. Becky talked about her months

with Richard Pelfrey, and I'd told her about my ex-wife Sarah, sharing things I'd never told anyone. Becky had also talked about her childhood, the shooting at her elementary school and what had happened in the months afterward. We spoke of promises.

But with the late hour and empty wine bottle came the feeling that we'd revealed too much, violated something within ourselves, the very thing that had attracted us to each other in the first place. So we had left it there for six months. More than once I'd imagined a listing on an Internet dating site:

Man who encouraged clinically depressed wife to kill herself seeks woman, traumatized by school shooting, who later lived with ecoterrorist bomber.

Sorry to hear about the school shooting, I typed, then remembered I needed to collect my monthly "stipend" from Jink Hampton. *I may be out and about later today. Will try to come by the park. Les*

Ruby once asked what sort of relationship Becky and I had. I'd answered that I didn't know the word for it, but a word came to me now.

Accomplices. Maybe that was what we were.

Two

Somewhere in Arizona a jaguar roams. On this day of another school shooting, such news is so needed. Scat and paw prints confirm the sighting. Gone forever from the United States since the 1940s, many had believed. What more wonder might yet be: ivorybill, bachman's warbler, even the parakeet once here in these mountains. When I see them in dreams, they are not extinct, just asleep, and I believe if I rouse them from their slumber, we will all awake in the world together.

A fisherman is in the meadow, each backcast and cast a bowstring pulled and released. I walk upstream to check his license. As always, my chest tightens, so hard just to speak, especially the day of a shooting.

"The streams are about as low as I've seen them in a

while,” the fisherman says when I hand the license back. “I was thinking that I might play golf this morning, and I probably should have. I’ve only had one strike.”

He cradles the fly rod in the crook of his arm. I’m about to head back but he points upstream beyond the meadow and the road that leads past Locust Creek Resort to Gerald’s farmhouse.

“I bet I’d get plenty of strikes over there,” the fisherman says. “I heard they’ve stocked so many trout those fish line up like they’re getting served at a cafeteria. You can throw in a bare hook and the trout will hit it. Anyway . . .” The man pauses and I raise my eyes. He’s frowning now. “Pardon me for holding you up, Ranger. I was just trying to be sociable.”

“I . . . I’m sorry,” I stammer. “You aren’t holding me up.”

He nods and wades on upstream. It’s almost noon so I return to the park office. I eat lunch at my desk, then pedal out to the Parkway. Bright-colored car tags pass like flashcards. Land levels and I ride slow, a clock-winding pedal and pause. A pickup from Virginia sweeps past, leads me back thirty years to my grandparents’ farm. There, old license plates were a scarecrow’s loud jewelry. Wind set the tin clinking and clanking. But the straw-stuffed flour-sack face stayed silent. Those first months after my parents gave up and sent me to the farm, I’d sometimes stand beside the scarecrow, hoe handle balanced behind my neck, arms

draped over. Both of us watchful and silent as the passing days raised a green curtain around us. Soon all we could see was the sky, that and tall barn planks the color of rain.

I had not spoken since the morning of the shooting. Then one day in July my grandparents' neighbor nodded at the ridge gap and said *watershed*. I'd followed the creek upstream, thinking wood and tin over a spring, found instead a granite rock face shedding water. I'd touched the wet slow slide, touched the word itself, like the girl named Helen that Ms. Abernathy told us about, whose first word gushed from a well pump. I'd closed my eyes and felt the stone tears. That evening, my grandfather had filled my glass with milk and handed it to me. *Thank you*, I said. A shared smile between them, from my grandmother's eyes a few tears. After that, more words each day, then whole sentences, enough to reenter school in September, though I'd stayed on the farm until Christmas.

The Parkway ascends, soon peers over landfall. No one is at the pull-off so I stop. Mountains accordion into Tennessee. Beyond the second ripple, a meadow where I'd camped in June. Just a sleeping bag, no tent. Above me that night tiny lights brightened and dimmed, brightened and dimmed. *Photinus carolinus*. Fireflies synchronized to make a single meadow-wide flash, then all dark between. Like being inside the earth's pulsing heart. I'd slowed my blood-beat to that rhythm. So much *in* the world that night. The

next morning as I'd hiked out, I started to step over a log but my foot jerked back. When I looked on the other side, a copperhead lay coiled. Part of me not sight knew it was there. The atavistic like flint rock sparked. Amazon tribes see Venus in daylight. My grandfather needed no watch to tell time. What more might we recover if open to it? Perhaps even God.

I leave my bike at the pull-off. As I enter the woods, the wide, clean smell of balsam firs. Deeper, the odor of shadow-steeped mold. In canopy gaps, the sky through straws of sunlight sips damp leaf meal dry. For a minute, no sound. I gather in the silence, place it inside me for the afternoon. I coast back down the Parkway, the upward buffeting what a kite must feel. I pass a wheat field, its tall gold-gleaming a *hurrahing in harvest*. Soon Gerald and I will sit on his porch, a tin pan tapping as snapped beans fall. *You got no more family than me*, Gerald said when he learned my parents were dead and that I had no siblings. He'd told me about his son and his wife and his sister, all younger than him but now gone. I'm tired of being left behind, he'd said one day, eyes misting.

But will be left never by me. Never by me. Never.

Three

C.J. Gant's daddy had been a decent farmer but bad to drink. He'd show up in town with fifty dollars in his pocket and wake the next day without a nickel. During elementary school, C.J. and his sister wore clothes that would shame a hobo, then had to hand the cashier a ticket to get the welfare lunch. In fourth grade, though, C.J. quit eating the cafeteria's meal, instead bringing lunches that were nothing more than a slab of fatback in a biscuit. He'd set the brown paper sack in front of him, trying to hide what he ate. Taunts about his father, shoves and trips, books knocked out of his hands, he'd had a full portion of misery. I'd never joined in the bullying, but I'd never done much to stop it either. C.J. never swung a fist or said a word back. Things got better in his teen years.

He and I both made extra money helping on his great-uncle's farm. The day C.J. turned sixteen, he began working afternoons and weekends at Harold Tucker's resort. He could buy himself clothes that didn't need patches, school lunches he didn't need a ticket for. He made good grades and received some scholarship money for college. He took out student loans, then worked two, sometimes three, part-time jobs to cover the rest.

You needed to remember all that when you dealt with C.J., because he rubbed a lot of people wrong, even those who knew his story. He took no small satisfaction in having a nice house in town and driving a pricey SUV. At public meetings he could come off as pompous, especially since he'd shed his mountain accent, but C.J. had done a lot of good since coming back five years ago—key fund-raiser for the downtown park and new high school, cosponsor of the county Meals on Wheels program. People could forget those things though.

C.J. had on his working duds, dark blue suit and white dress shirt with a silk tie. A golden name tag with TUCKER RESORTS PUBLIC RELATIONS was pinned on his coat pocket. When he sat down, C.J. laid his right hand on his knee, the way he always did, the East Carolina University class ring where you couldn't help noticing it.

"Come to bring me a retirement present?" I asked.

C.J. didn't smile.

“Gerald Blackwelder’s poaching fish on resort property. You need to go see him, right now.”

“Well, there’s no need to get on your high horse about it, C.J. I’ll warn him there’s been a formal complaint.”

“Warn him?” C.J. barked. “You by God drive out there and charge him. Our signs say we *prosecute* and they’ve been up six months. And if Gerald claims he wasn’t up there, we’ve got the proof on camera.”

“I think you know this county’s got more serious problems than an old man poaching a few trout.”

“He scared a guest enough that she left two days early. You think we can afford to lose customers, in this economy?”

“What’d he do?”

“He didn’t have to *do* anything. Damn it, Les, he looks like he just walked off the set of *Deliverance*. Besides that, he’s up there catching trout, and keeping them. How do you think our guests like that? They *pay* to fish and have to release their catch.”

“I’m sure he just gets a few speckleds, not your pet rainbows and browns downstream.”

“We’ve got guests who fish above the waterfall,” C.J. said. “They appreciate how rare native brook trout are, and rarer still every time Gerald makes some his dinner.”

“Brook” trout instead of “speckled,” which was what C.J. had called them growing up. Something shed, same as his accent. I leaned back in my chair. C.J. and I had gotten

crosswise before when he or Harold Tucker tried to tell me how to do my job.

“Why don’t you just put it in your fancy brochures that Gerald’s there to add to the rustic experience, an authentic mountain man fishing the old-timey way.”

C.J. had always been good at keeping his feelings to himself, but now I could almost hear his molars grinding. But it wasn’t just anger. He looked desperate.

“This isn’t a joke, Les. I told Gerald in June not to go near that waterfall again. I put my ass on the line, instead of doing what Mr. Tucker wanted, which was to come to you. Gerald swore to my face he wouldn’t go fishing up there anymore.” C.J. grimaced and tapped the chair’s arm with a closed hand. “If I’d thought it out, I’d have turned right to come see you instead of left to Gerald’s house,” he said, as much to himself as to me. Then C.J. leaned forward, his voice soft, “Les, if this isn’t done right, I could lose my job.”

He glanced down at his tie, then smoothed it with his hand, like the tie needed calming, not him.

“Come on, C.J.,” I said, seriously, not joshing. “Don’t you think you’re overreacting a bit?”

“Have you seen our parking lot? If things don’t pick up soon, Tucker will have to lay some people off.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll go this afternoon but I’m not charging Gerald without a warning.”

“Damn it, aren’t you listening?” C.J. said, raising his voice again. “He’s *been* warned. By the signs, by me.”

“But not by me,” I said. “You can wait until after the end of the month and have Jarvis Crowe deal with this, but for now I’m still sheriff.”

C.J.’s cell phone buzzed. As he took it from his pocket, I saw the puckered scar on the back of his hand, the result of a hay baler’s metal tines on a long-ago Saturday morning. C.J.’s great-uncle had made a tourniquet from a handkerchief and we’d rushed C.J. to the hospital. *If your arm had gone in there it would have been ripped off and you’d have bled to death, son*, the doctor had told C.J., scolding him for his carelessness. But it hadn’t been C.J. who’d been careless.

“You don’t have to tell him anything,” C.J. said to the caller. “I’m taking care of it right now. Just let me deal with it. I’ll let Mr. Tucker know what’s going on.”

He pocketed the phone.

“I can’t lose my job over this, Les,” C.J. said. “My boys aren’t going to grow up like me.”

I’d thought to go to Jink Hampton’s place first, but I raised my hands in surrender.

“Okay. I’ll go on out there now and make it damn clear to Gerald that he will be arrested next time.”

C.J. stood, but he didn’t leave.

“You know this wouldn’t have happened if Gerald

had sold that place two years ago. Even his nephew had the sense to know there'd never be a better offer. And now, with this recession, he'll be lucky to get half that."

"I'm sure you and Tucker had only Gerald's interests in mind."

"Think what you want," C.J. said, "but I knew that a man Gerald's age, especially one with a bad heart, would be better off with a hospital near."

"As far as I'm concerned, Darby inheriting less is all to the good. The only smart thing Gerald did was not to give that little prick of a nephew power of attorney. As for Gerald living longer, look what selling his farm did to your great-uncle. How long did he last in town, a month? You know what leaving a home place does to men like them. No hospital can cure that."

C.J. didn't have a response, because he knew it was true.

"Get over there, Les," he said, and left.

You're smart, though you try to hide it. You can get away from this place too, be an art teacher in Charlotte or anywhere clear to Alaska.

That's what C.J. had told me at the start of our senior year. Since he'd come back to live here, he'd never directly said anything about me staying put, though the first time he'd been in my office he'd nodded at the Hopper painting. "With the rusty wheels and those weeds, someone might

see that painting as rather symbolic, Les. Is that why you bought it?" "I didn't buy it," I'd answered. "Mr. Neil gave it to me when he retired, frame and all. He just remembered that in class I'd liked Hopper's paintings."

I'd settled for too little in my life, C.J. believed. And maybe I had.

Four

The school bus pulls into the lot and children stream from it into the world. They gather around the cedar announcement board, on it the brass plaque I placed there my first day.

HOW NEAR AT HAND IT WAS

IF THEY HAD EYES TO SEE IT.

—G. M. Hopkins

I go through my usual protocol. No cameras or cell phones, not even for the teacher. Then we cross the bridge, go upstream where I show them cardinal flowers and bee balm, a mantis greenblended on a blackberry bush.

“It can change shades of color,” I tell them and set the mantis on a dogwood limb. “If it stays, you will see.”

I lead them to where joe-pye stems anchor low clouds of lavender.

“Did you know flowers grew so high?” I ask.

Solemn head shakes.

“I bet there is something else you don’t know, that jaguars and parakeets once lived in these mountains. Most people think the parakeets have been gone for over a hundred years, but I know a man who says he saw some in 1944. I want to believe a few might still be around, don’t you?”

The children nod.

I show them an empty hummingbird’s nest, let them touch a box turtle’s shell, other things. Last, we walk up above the bridge and sit on the stream bank. I point to a trout holding its place in the current.

“Let’s try something,” I say. “If you had a friend who’d never seen a fish swimming in a stream, what would you tell that friend the fish looks like? Think about that for a few minutes, without talking.”

I watch and I too see something new, how the trout appears to weave the very water it is in. As if the world’s first fish lay in dust, but with each fin and flesh thrum brought forth more water, soon whole rivers, then oceans. Taliesin in the coracle, the salmon of knowledge: all the world’s wisdom waterborne, water born. Welsh notions Hopkins would have known.

“So what would you say to your friend?” I ask.

Several say a flag and the other children chime in.

“On a windy day.”

“Not too windy.”

“With lots and lots of rain.”

“A brown flag with red spots.”

“What if your friend asked how the fish was different from a flag?” I ask.

“No pole.”

“It can’t get dirty.”

“Or be folded.”

“Flags don’t have eyes.”

“Or mouths.”

“Flags don’t eat bugs.”

The teacher nods at her watch, says it’s time to leave. As the orange bus drives away, a child peers through the back window. Behind the glass she mouths words as she waves at me. Memory scalds. Not the orange-bright of buses we ran toward that morning but minutes before, in the classroom as Ms. Abernathy lined us up. *You must be as quiet as you can, children*, she had told us. *Promise me that you won’t say a single word.* More memories come of the days and months after that morning: the room with big chairs and magazine-filled tables, a smaller room full of soft questions, a pair of black-framed glasses behind which huge eyes urged spoken answers, not head shakes. One night, my father thinking me asleep: *The other children are*

getting over it fine, why can't she? We've tried everything and it's cost us a fortune. What your parents offered, well, let them have her. At least we'll have a break from all this.

I close my eyes. Wash away, I whisper. Wash away, wash away. I walk down the loop trail, pass foxglove past bloom. Midsummer their flowers dangled like soft yellow bells. I'd wished them a breeze so they might silently ring. The same yellow as Van Gogh's sunflowers. Vincent's thick paint, like Hopkins' thick sounds. Such grace-giving from supposed failed priests. I think of reading Hopkins in those days after Richard was killed. *A failed priest saved my soul.*

What would he see if here? I ask. I pick up a Fraser fir cone. A hollowed lightness like a thimble, spring's green weight gone. The edges are strong-keeled as viper scales, wing seeds wedged in the slits. High in a white oak, a flicker searches for grubs. The bird's too blended to see at first but then the red nape reveals and tree bark softens into feathers. The flicker's tap-bursts and pauses: a thoughtful message typed. Where the trail skirts the creek, a stand of silver birch, then a gap where sun and water pool. On a granite outcrop, a five-lined skink. *Plestiodon fasciatus*. Its throat fills and sags but no other movement, a chameleon of stillness. Indigo body coppered with stripes that chevron on the head. The back feet frog cocked, the tail a bright blue fuse. I too feel the heatsoak of sun and stone, the human in me unshackling.