

A COUNTRY OF BONE



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THE FIRST MORNING of gun season, Orvince tracked a gut-shot doe to the old graveyard on his property and discovered it had been defiled. Tombstones bearded with moss lay felled like windblown trees and the maws of two open graves yawned at him darkly. A trace of bootprints went along the muddy rows and there were cigarette butts and empty Gatorade bottles strewn about, and a blue plastic Wal-Mart bag fluttered on a black oak limb. The coffin of an infant had been splintered and the yellow cup of the child's skull held rainwater.

Orvince walked among the plots whispering curses of disbelief. An hour before, the Winchester had bucked in his hands and he watched from a treestand as the deer fled through the forest tangle of branches and warbriers, leaving behind a spoor of dark blood as it sucked back into the trees like a retracted breath.

He was a short paunchy man of forty who drank too much coffee, wouldn't wear glasses, and he didn't like

walking. But he followed the blood sign, squinting at the divot of hooves in the black soil, grunting his way to the graveyard until it appeared out of the murk. Now he stood in the cemetery, at a loss.

His breath clouded. The morning was dim and only a frayed light fingered down through the cage of blighted elm trees surrounding the tombstones.

Dogs, he thought at first. It has to be dogs. Then he saw the boot tracks and the chewed Marlboro filters and knew that it was not dogs.

He tromped about the grounds touching headstones. His face had the aghast stare of someone who'd come upon a scene of roadside violence.

The cemetery had grown weedy from disuse. Some of his ancestors were buried here, but the bodies this soil kept had gone to dust and erratic bone a generation before, and now the access road was an impassable gulley barred by maples thirty years thick. There was no trail that could lead a vehicle here, only a footpath through the ferny undergrowth. Beyond this was the fact that this wasn't a burial ground for the rich. No one went into this earth with ringy fingers and jeweled brooches, so there seemed no purpose to such vandalism other than dumb chaos.

Orvince's nose ran and he sneezed. The sound sent something running off through the underbrush. The doe. He watched its white tail flash and then there was nothing but grim daylight and absence.

"Go on then," Orvince sneered, waving a pink chapped

hand. "To hell with you."

He wasn't the kind of man to waste good meat, and he knew the deer would run only a short distance farther before it lay down in a bower of bare honeysuckle to die, but the sight of newly robbed graves had shaken him. He shouldered his rifle and walked back through the cemetery, heading home, leaving the deer for the buzzards and coyotes. Or whatever else lurked in these woods.

ORVINCE'S WIFE, CORINE, a thin papery woman, stood at the sink washing breakfast dishes when he came in. She didn't stop when the storm screen latched behind him. Orvince stood watching her, the reflection of her face caught in the still dark window glass, her lips squared and clamped. A black thread of hair stuck to her damp forehead. Her white throat curved down like a drinking swan.

"No luck?" she asked. Her breath blossomed on the cold pane.

Orvince unshouldered the rifle and sat at the table, laying the gun across his lap, the polished walnut stock smooth under his fingers.

"I believe we'd better call the sheriff," he said.

Corine turned to him, wiping her hands over her blouse. "The sheriff? What for?"

Orvince clicked a thumbnail against the rifle barrel. "Somebody's been messing with the graves up there at the old cemetery."

She sat at the table with him. Her eyes were a bright clean blue. They seemed at odds with her thick tar-colored hair and were cause for a certain amount of gossip. Even to Orvince, who'd been her husband for a half decade, she seemed a woman of indefinite origin, as though she were the result of a spell so crafty and complex that any attempt to understand her would end only in speculation.

"Messing with the graves," she said. "What does that mean?"

"It means what I said." Orvince leaned his elbows on the table and sighed. "Somebody has gone up there with a shovel and dug out two of the plots."

"Dug them out?"

"That's right. There's bones and old pieces of casket thrown everywhere. Almost like a pack of dogs come in and just rummaged through the place."

Corine folded her hands neatly on the table. Her fingers were pruned, the red polish on the nails beginning to chip away. "Maybe it was," she said, nodding slow. "Dogs."

"Shit no, it weren't dogs. There's enough footprints and cigarette butts lying around to tell me that." Orvince craned his head and looked behind him at the beige telephone hanging on the wall. Then he put his eyes on her again. "You better call the sheriff," he said.

Corine brushed the hair behind her ears. She scowled, making her face hard and lined like a piece of weatherboard. Though she was three years his junior, Orvince often saw her as older, her face grained and stiff in certain lighting,

and he knew she forced the high girlish lilt she spoke with. Her real voice was stout and broad. He'd tried to turn her toward womanly interests, but the bathroom was cluttered with his gifts of perfumes and lotions that she wouldn't use. She hardly wore makeup and went barefoot a good portion of the year. Nights when he came home from pulling third shift at the Premium Allied Tool factory, Orvince often found her watching television, her feet propped on the coffee table, strings of grass clinging to her scuffed heels, mud squashed between her toes. Even in winter, she went to the mailbox unshod, her wet socks smacking the kitchen linoleum when she came back inside with an armload of envelopes and catalogues. She did things like that and Orvince was reminded of the slouching house out in the mudsticks where she lived before their marriage, its windows paned with white Hefty bags, a beech sapling growing up through a hole in the porch boards.

"Are you gonna call him?" Orvince asked, looking at her.

Her frown deepened. "I don't see why we have to bring the law into this."

Orvince ran a finger under the collar of his hunting jacket. "Why the hell wouldn't we bring the law into this?"

A long silence unwound from Corine. She stared across the table at him, the light from the ceiling lamp washing into the pale flume of her cleavage. Her eyes glinted fragile and hot as newly blown glass.

"I just can't think of who'd do something like that,"

Orvince said, shaking his head.

Corine smirked. “You don’t know anything about the kind of trouble that’s alive in the world, do you?”

Orvince thumped the rifle barrel in his lap. The metal made a dull hollow ping.

“One thing I know,” he said, “is that your mouth is getting smarter all the time.”

He rose quickly from the table, propped the gun against his chair, and picked up the phone. All through the dialing and the talking, he felt Corine watching him, but when he finished the call and turned to face her, she was busy with the dishes again, scrubbing them dry with a sleeve torn from one of his old work shirts—she wouldn’t use the embroidered dish towels he’d bought—and stacking the plates in delicate columns on the cabinet top, her chipped nails ringing against the cold porcelain. Her calves were rough and stubbled where they descended from the hem of her skirt. He wondered about the world’s trouble and thought maybe he didn’t know anything about it at all, the way she said he didn’t. And he saw Corine’s calves, firm and unshaved, and he wondered what kind of trouble she knew about, and whether or not she’d started any of it, or only had it come to her.

THE COUNTY SHERIFF was a bony gaunt man named Elvis. Walking along the cemetery rows with Orvince, he talked and pointed at things in the dirt, his crisp khaki uniform

rattling like grocer's paper.

"Orvince," he said. They'd stopped beside one of the open graves and were both staring down into the ruptured soil. "Are you the one married Gene Ratlier's daughter, Corine?"

Orvince looked at the man. His eyes squinted, as if some indecipherable problem gnawed at him. For him, the years of marriage had been a struggle to keep Corine from her father, to draw a stiff line in the gritty earth the crazed old bastard wouldn't cross. Old Gene, that ragged specter, his toothless mouth gaping black and blowing hot oniony breath, his red face like something wadded up and thrown down—Orvince couldn't abide his cornpone attitudes, the way he hitched rides into town wearing dirty slacks and smelling of nine-day beans, and he tried to convince Corine she should think the same. He'd had some success. Corine rarely drove out to old Gene's place anymore. Aside from the Christmas card Gene sent a month late every January, Orvince only thought of him when he was reminded of the way they were bound together.

"Yeah." Orvince spat and wiped his mouth. "That's me. I married Corine."

Elvis nodded quickly. He pinched a cigarette from his breast pocket and lit it. "Gene is a pistol," he said, smoke flaring from his mouth. "Used to keep two or three goats in the kitchen. Had a feeding trough for them under the sink. No surprise those boys he raised are wild as deer."

This was true, though Orvince had tried long and hard

to forget it. Corine's family, that brood of squatters and dope fiends, were country famous for their shiftless ways, and whenever something vaguely criminal occurred—be it a stolen tiller or a knife-slashed set of tires—their names came up.

“Do you ever get out there?” Elvis asked. He spoke with the cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth.

“Out where?”

“To Gene's.”

“Why in the hell would I do that?”

Elvis plucked the cigarette from his lips. “He is your father-in-law,” he said.

Orvince remained silent. He stared at Elvis until he dropped his cigarette in the mud and shrugged.

“Anyway, it's none of my business,” Elvis said, “but you might ought to drive out to Gene's sometime. I'd say it's changed a good bit since you saw it.”

Orvince looked off through the woods where they blurred, the trees merging into a blank haze of shadow. He didn't want to think about Gene's place, but the memory of the old man came slinking out of the gray forest deeps and he saw again the slouching house beneath a cluster of topped maples, Corine's brothers, wormy men scattered in the yard, lazing on upended propane tanks or paint buckets while they spumed their talk, their forms as bent and tangled as the aftermath of bad weather.

“Gene claims he's taken religion.” Elvis sighed and lit another cigarette. “Got crosses nailed to every inch of the

house and even on some of the trees. You drive out there and you'll see. Looks like a revival has just set up shop and aims to stay."

Orvince toed the mud and moss. "Religion," he grunted. "Sounds like whatever Gene's got it ain't keeping you from having to answer calls out there. Since you're so familiar with how the place looks."

The sheriff thumped the ash from his cigarette and sighed again. "That's the truth," he said. "I guess those boys ain't quite heard the gospel call just yet." He chuckled and paced out among the headstones, smoke wafting thin and gauzy around his brown hands hitched in his gun belt. "Anyway," he said, "I got to get on back to the courthouse."

"The courthouse? Ain't you going to do nothing about any of this?" Orvince nodded at the ruined graves.

"Oh, yeah. I'll write a report." The sheriff peeled a thread of cockleburs from his pants cuff and pinched the seeds between his fingers. "Wouldn't worry about it too much if I was you. It's probably just a bunch of drunk teenagers that done it."

"Drunk teenagers? Goddammit, just look at what all's been done out here." Orvince's face shook. "Somebody has been stealing bodies."

The sheriff ran his tongue over his bottom lip. His eyes were still and vacant. "Somebody stealing bodies," he said. "In that case, I guess I'll have to get a forensics team out here with their tweezers. See if we can yank some pubes out of the mud and get a DNA sample. We'll just have to

launch a complex and all-out investigation, won't we?" He chuckled again.

"It ain't funny," Orvince said.

The sheriff wiped his mouth. He looked at the graves that had been spilled.

"No," he said. "I guess it really ain't." He looked back at Orvince. "But I can guarantee you that there's a whole shit heap worse than this going on that you don't even want to know about."

Orvince sulked, staring at the ground. His eyes wandered over the clabbered mud and over the graves, the headstones standing mossed and sentinel-like, and the bracket of trees that held it all in. He could imagine no worse trouble. No backroom murder or highway rape could be this terrible. At the back of every common violence stood brute reason. But the dead wrestled from their soil, the ghosts disturbed—what logic was there to explain such?

"Maybe you should run out to Gene's, ask him about all of this," he said, suddenly.

Elvis stared at him. "Why would I need to ask Gene anything about this?"

"The man is strange." Orvince flung his hands out and they flashed white like flushed birds. "I don't think he's above doing something like this. When me and Corine were dating, he'd come snooping around my house at all hours, peeking in the windows, tapping on the door."

Elvis wiped his face slowly, his palm scraping at the dark scabbed razor cut on his chin. "You know him better than

I do,” he said. “Best thing I think is for none of us to lose any sleep over any of it. Old places like this, there’s really no telling what gets in here and roams around. Coons. Dogs and coyotes. What’s more, there’s really nobody left to care what happens to these old bones. These people buried out here are past even being memories.” The sheriff swung his hand through the air and sighed. “I’ll write my report and ask around, but there’s really not much I can do at this point.”

Orvince’s eyes flared. “At what point would you be able to do something?” he asked.

The sheriff scratched at the razor burn under his chin. “Hard to say really.” He looked at his fingers and then back at Orvince. “You’d pretty much have to catch them in the act.”

“In the act?”

The sheriff nodded. “Unless you see somebody out here with a shovel it’s not something I can help.” He lit another cigarette and raked the lichen from the top of a gravestone. “But like I said, it ain’t nothing to lose any sleep over.”

Orvince shook his head. “Oh, no,” he said. “I plan on sleeping like the dead.”

CORINE WATCHED TELEVISION while he built himself a sandwich to take to work. He hated pulling third shift, hated eating cold ham at three AM, hated the way his mind reared static and blank from the strange hours his

job forced him to keep. Slowly, he was losing his suntan. An anemic pallor had begun to draw over his face and hands, like a cloth patching over him in increments soft and blanched. His reflection often startled him. The drawn cheeks empty of color, the grayed flesh around his eyes—it all seemed frightening somehow, as if he'd morphed into a leering wraith, and he found himself struggling to recall the last honest sleep he'd gotten. And there was a part of him that wondered if the trespassed graveyard was only something he'd conjured out of a want for dreamless rest.

“You don't need to worry so much about those tombstones,” Corine said when he came into the living room. He sat down beside her on the sofa and stowed the wax-papered sandwich on his knee.

“Don't tell me what to worry about,” he said.

Corine bit her thumbnail. The lights were out. Only the television sprang warped dusky shadows over the room.

“I'm not telling you anything,” she said. “I'm just saying you'd feel better if you let it go. Nobody's getting bothered but you.”

“I'll bet those dead people that got their graves messed with would say different.”

“Those dead people.” Corine shook her head. “People gone that long don't have no worries. It's me and you and others like us that have the world to deal with who ought to worry.”

Orvince thumped the sandwich. “I thought you just told me not to worry,” he said.

Corine looked at the television, her thumbnail clicking against her teeth as she chewed it down to the quick. Even in the room's crude light, the blacked soles of her feet propped on the table shone like aged saddle leather.

"Hell," said Orvince, raking a hand over his face. "It's hard not to be bothered by something like that. When it's your own people's bones getting stolen."

"Your own people?" Corine grunted. "You never once went up to that graveyard with an armload of flowers. I bet you don't even know their names."

This was so. He had never believed in ghosts. The dead retained no authority. But something about the cratered dirt, the delved soil and cracked tombstones, had set a sturdy ache in him, and he wondered if the footprint of an interloper didn't yet linger on his own soul, his very heart.

"You don't think it might bother me to have my ancestors tampered with?" he asked suddenly.

Corine grinned at him. Her hand fluttered to his thigh. "That's how we all come to be," she said. "Somebody tampers with our ancestors and then eventually we get born."

She crawled to him, grinning. He didn't want to take her, didn't want the heaving blind light of it, but she slipped the sandwich from his lap and then her hands were on him, and her breath slid over his face coolly, with a faint nutty smell like rotting wood.

"You worry all your time away," she said, ladling herself into his lap. Her breath again, a wormy fog. "Don't you?"

Her fingernails scratched his belt buckle. "I guess," he said.

He slid her down beneath him. He put his face into her hair and it smelled thick and musky, like a place something had nested in all winter, and when he rose up, she grinned at him again, and her teeth flashed in the dingy light from the television. He tried to dismount, but her thighs gripped him. Then her hands crept over his face, her palms icy and sharp, and when she pulled him down finally he fell completely in a surging urgent rush.

THE FACTORY REARED out of the night like a lunar space station, a bleak complex of lights and piping and galvanized rigging. Cold wind swirled and grit dust tumbling pale and thick coated the trucks and cars in the parking lot with a veneer of rock meal. Beyond the lot, chain fencing rose, and farther stood mounds of scrap ore glazed in bronze light. The place felt breezy and open like a beach, the sound of the drilling machines recurrent and tidal as surf.

In these moments before he clocked in, Orvince imagined his life as an act of slow erosion. Old men, lifers at the factory, seemed to look like figures cut from a cliff face by hard weather, and he wondered if that was also his fate. A gradual wearing down until only a nub of bone remained.

But in the buzz of work he lost those thoughts. Bent over a whirring lathe, he pared steel into true dimensions,

sweat and the hot scream of metal blurring his worries into a vague glimmer until he forgot them.

He'd even managed to forget the graveyard until Saltine reminded him.

They were sitting in the breakroom, Orvince sipping a lukewarm cup of JFG, when Saltine broached the subject.

"Hear you got some grave robbers round your place," he said. His voice whined like steam cutting through a valve.

Orvince looked across the table at him. Saltine seemed giddy, as if he'd just told some kind of lewd joke. His thin colorless lips stretched into a grin beneath the blonde goatee he wore, and the pale translucence of his fingers thumped nervously against the plastic tabletop.

"Who told you that?" Saltine was Corine's second cousin by marriage, and Orvince wondered suddenly what phone calls she'd made, if even now she was sowing a crop of rumor and half-truths.

"Hey, it ain't hard to get the news around here." Saltine's smile grew. "Deputy told me. Said you called Elvis out there."

Orvince drank more coffee, the Styrofoam whispering in his grip. He drained the last of the coffee and swallowed. "It's true." He nodded. "But it's nothing to worry about. Probably just dogs." Orvince paused. "Or coyotes."

Saltine leaned back in his chair, his tongue plunging in and out of his cheek. "Dogs or coyotes," he said.

Orvince nodded again. "Yeah. That'd be my guess anyway."

Saltine's eyes narrowed to slits. "It'd been me that found a bunch of dug up dead folks on my property, I sure wouldn't want to be guessing at who or what did it." He scooted his hands absently over the tabletop. "I'd want to by-God know."

The coffee cup slipped from Orvince's fingers and rolled from the table, leaking a few black drops onto the gray linoleum. "Maybe that's just the difference between me and you then," Orvince said.

Saltine sighed. "Maybe so. But what I heard is that you don't really think it was dogs or coyotes that messed those graves up. I heard you think it might be Gene and his boys did it." Saltine took a Ziploc bag of crackers from his coat pocket and began arranging them in stacks on the table like a game of solitaire. "That true? Do you think it was Gene?" He took a cracker up and began eating.

Orvince leaned over the table. "Whatever you heard," he said, "it ain't none of your business."

Quick laughter sprang from Saltine. Cracker crumbs fell into the thin yellow whiskers of his goatee, but he didn't wipe them away. "Whoa, now," he said. "You don't need to get riled. I was just saying I'd heard some things."

"Right. And I'm just saying I ain't got to listen to your questions."

"Fine," said Saltine, munching another cracker. "I won't ask you questions no more. I'll just come right out and tell you some things that I know." He spoke with his mouth full and crumbs flurried from between his lips. "I know

Gene is into some freaky shit for sure these days.”

Orvince sat back down at the table. His mouth grew dry. “Freaky shit, huh?”

Saltine nodded. “Strange-ass voodoo,” he said. “He’s wound up all holy and made his own church out at his place and he preaches. Wife made me go to a service back in the winter.” Saltine leered, his teeth catching the glare from the ceiling lights. “Things got spooky,” he said.

“What’s that mean?”

“Means I saw some things out to Gene’s that don’t belong nowhere but in a circus.” Saltine giggled and restacked his crackers. “This was in January. Snow on the ground. Had about a dozen of us piled in that little house and the woodstove was rolling hot. So was Gene, preaching and beating his chest with the King James, tromping all over the kitchen. Got so wild at one point that he threw the Bible down and walked over to the woodstove and gave it a bear hug. Just wrestled that thing up and yanked it out of the wall. Ash and cinders flying around and the flue banging down and Gene goes walking around the kitchen with it. Did about three laps and then sat the stove back down.”

Saltine gnawed a cracker and smiled.

“You saw this?” Orvince asked. “You were there?”

Saltine nodded and swallowed. “I seen all of it,” he said. “Gene picked that stove up and when he sat it down there weren’t a blister on him nowhere. Might as well have been toting ice water. It’s like I said. The man is into some freaky

shit.”

The breakroom seemed musky and swampish to Orvince now. He felt himself sweating. The lightbulbs hummed in the ceiling, their warmth heady and thick, and his cheeks were damp.

“I don’t see what any of that has to do with graves getting robbed,” he said.

Saltine shrugged. “Might not have anything to do with it,” he said. He folded his arms and the chair creaked under him. “But Gene is into some freaky shit. Wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to think a man that’d pick up a boiling hot stove and walk around with it would take to digging up dead folks, now would it?”

Orvince stared across the gray tabletop. “Why are you telling me any of this?” he asked.

“Because.” Saltine’s head slouched on his neck like a sack of meal. His eyes glared from beneath his full blonde brows. “I don’t like Gene. That sonofabitch is a uncle to me by marriage only. There’s no blood between us. I know you don’t like him either.”

Orvince ran a finger over the cold Formica. “What is it between you and Gene?”

Saltine picked up a cracker and held it pinched in his fingers like a dart he’d toss at Orvince’s eyes. “Gene and his freaky religious bullshit has worked a wedge between my wife and me. I don’t want to go to those meetings of his. Course, she thinks I ought to. That’s the main problem I got with him. That, and the fact he’s worth only about a

pound of boiled rat shit.”

Orvince chewed his bottom lip.

“Hell,” he said, rising from the table. “I’m clocking back in.”

Saltine grinned and munched his cracker. “Yeah. You bet. But you recollect what I told you.” He held the cracker like a fine cigar now, thumping crumbs down like ash onto the floor, and his smile broadened. “Freaky shit,” he said.

“Right,” said Orvince. “Freaky shit.”

“And I didn’t even tell you about the bones.”

“What bones?”

Saltine chuckled. “The ones old Gene had in his kitchen. Told me they were cow bones, but they looked like something worse to me.”

“What was he doing with them?”

“I asked him the same thing. And then he showed me the bucket in the corner that was full of something looked like lime. But it was bonemeal. He’d been grinding those bones. I asked him what all that was about. And he took a measuring spoon out of his pocket, dipped up a scoop of that awful-looking meal, and mixed in a cup of hot water he’d poured from the kettle and he drank that shit down like it was a cocktail. I ain’t the only one seen this. My wife saw it as well. Gene was sputtering on about life and the body and the ways to keep them both together and married, all the time guzzling that strange tea he’d brewed. That’s the word he used. Married. The marriage of life and body.” Saltine shook his head, but his smile remained wide

and bright. “I’m telling you something I think you just might need to know, brother,” he said.

Orvince wiped his face. His hands felt cold and greasy. “I ain’t your brother,” he said abruptly, glaring at Saltine. He left the breakroom then, walking back into the chasm of the factory’s noise. Somehow his equilibrium felt off. His head swam. His eyes burned. Sitting with Saltine and hearing his gusty talk had sent his internal compass awry and he spent the rest of his shift trying to regain the rhythm of work. When he finally clocked out, he left the sparking machinery and went to his truck but he didn’t leave. He only sat brooding in the parking lot. Wind rocked the truck on its chassis. Gravel dust eddied and whirled. Over the distant treetops, a simmering burnt daylight trembled.

There was no reason the things Saltine said should bother him, but they did. Driving home through the gray broken dawn, Orvince kept imagining Gene doing laps with a woodstove in his kitchen, drinking bonemeal tea. Freaky shit. Big medicine. He played the radio and tried not to think about it. He rolled the window down and tried not to think, but the smell of damp sod blowing in and the country taking shape in the dim morning made him wonder if the world that kept him was cursed and blighted, if it wouldn’t take some miraculous belief to undo shadows knotted tightly as these.



HE AWOKE IN the afternoon and Corine was gone. She'd left a note on the kitchen table: Gone Into Town Back Soon. He thought suddenly how he had no idea what she did when he was away at work or in the woods hunting. She didn't have a job because he'd asked her not to, believing it best that he be the sole breadwinner. If she had hobbies, he didn't know about them. But he thought of Saltine and what he'd said, and he wondered if Corine wasn't capable of stiff belief, if she'd started whispering prayers in his absence.

Orvince brewed coffee and stood at the kitchen window looking out at the lawn where it descended to the dark of the treeline. He thought about shadows and about Corine, the wild piece he'd managed to trap and bring into his life. When they'd first begun seeing one another, he felt as if every day was a hunt, a slip into the shade-cloaked silence of the woods where his mind cleared the way the scum on a pond clears once you drop a stone in. She was some kind of tattered woman, gamey to the taste, but full of animal energy. He'd tried to ignore Gene. Tried to ignore the whispers in town and at work about trash. About strangeness.

But now he wondered about Corine and the places a woman might go when her man was asleep. He thought about the Ratlier house over on Gristmill Road and he thought about it so much until he was in the truck and driving over there, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

It had changed, just as Elvis had told him. Crosses fashioned from bent iron bars adorned the shade trees, and a huge steeple that looked clapped together out of sheeting tin straddled the roof, its top crowned with a crucifix that glittered with red chasing Christmas lights. Old Gene sat on the porch. A cigarette burned between his yellow fingers and the hair sprang from his head, jagged and fright-wig gray.

“Corine’s not here,” he said when Orvince stepped out of his truck.

Orvince stood in the damp yard. He kept still, listening, wondering if he might hear her scream from inside, if maybe the old man didn’t have her chained to the bathtub in there, but the only noise was a ceaseless drip of water, the sound one might hear in the deep innards of a cave.

“That’s all right,” Orvince said, finally. “It was you I was wanting to see.”

Gene drew on his cigarette. His eyes were drowsy, but sly. “That’s good. I was wanting to ask you a few things, too. Like why you sent the sheriff out here.”

Orvince shook his head. “I didn’t send nobody out here.”

“Like hell.” The old man’s face had gone the color of marbled fat, cold and pale. “Elvis was out here this morning. Claims there’s vandals messing with the graveyard in your woods. Now why is it that he thinks I got something to do with it?”

Standing in the bare yard with the worn slouching house before him, its windows blank and dark, Orvince

felt suddenly cold and vulnerable, and he stepped closer to the door of his pickup. “I just talked to the sheriff,” he said. “I never sent him out here. I don’t want no trouble.”

“Trouble?” Old Gene coughed. “What do you know about trouble? If you want to find out about trouble, I can sure fix you up a dose.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Means me and mine don’t like having the sheriff knocking on our door. Means that you might think all of you is standing right there in that yard and that’s all there is of you that can be touched by trouble, but that ain’t so.” Gene leaned forward. Breath wheezed between his cracked gray lips. “I’m telling you that every man crossing God’s earth has blood and bone in that earth and if trouble touches that blood and that bone lying down, it touches the man walking upright as well.”

Orvince’s coffee-burned tongue felt like sandpaper in his mouth—rigid, stiff, flimsy. “I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about,” he said.

Gene’s lips slid into a grin. Winking down at Orvince, the old man’s face looked like a pool of dingy water at the bottom of a pit, dregs you could spit into and watch the ripple flushing to the edges before fading away.

“Just ’cause you married in don’t mean I think of you as sharing any blood,” he said. “What I’m talking about is I do what I got to so that those of mine are getting their spiritual needs met. And sometimes it takes rough measures.”

“I ain’t got one clue what the hell you’re talking about,” Orvince said.

Gene’s smile broadened. His thin lips looked like cracks in old stone. “You might yet get a chance to figure it out,” he said. Standing up slowly, he rose to his full height, totemic and gnarled. “I reckon you thought it was love that brought you and my Corine together. But I’m going to tell you some things about love. What I’m going to say is that there ain’t no love but the kind that shapes a man. The kind that makes him stand up and move along. The kind that can’t be took away no more than you can yank the bones from his body. I don’t believe what you and Corine has got is anything like that.”

“What is it then?”

“Lust,” said Gene. “Straight bonded lust. And there ain’t no part of no good in it.”

Orvince shook his head. He’d known the old man was crazy, but this talk ranged into the far off wilds of insanity. Even so, a bitter twinge sprang in him, and he wondered about Corine and her ways, the ones that made her, and if it might be true what Gene said, if maybe what kept him and Corine together was really loose and insubstantial, nothing more than fucking.

“I don’t care at all about your craziness,” Orvince said, opening his truck door. “You just stay away from me. You stay out of my woods, too.”

“Ain’t no woods you can claim.” Gene laughed, high and wheezy, like wind screaming through a tear in a barn

roof. “So you don’t have to worry.”

Orvince slammed his truck door and drove away. He watched Gene in his rearview, the old man’s form diminishing slowly as the reaching trees of the roadway thickened, and then he was gone, not there at all, like something melted, leaving only a faint residue, a taste like smoke rolling in Orvince’s mouth. He drove carefully, trying to calm himself. But all the way, he thought of claims, the things of the world Gene demanded for his own. His hands began to tremble with worry.

CORINE’S SPARK FLARED suddenly. She’d returned an hour after he’d come back from Gene’s, and when he told her about his visit, she began pacing the kitchen, flinging stares at him. Orvince had seen her angry before, but it was usually a slow-built fire, not this burning woman, her eyes stormy and flashing.

“What it is, is talk,” he said. “I’m just telling you what he said. If I was wrong to go out there, I’m sorry. But Gene is funny.”

“Funny?” she spat. “What I think is funny is the notions rolled up in that head of yours. Christ.”

She rose and went onto the porch then, the storm screen banging behind her. Orvince remained at the table with his hands pressed together, watching the trees through the window, a light breeze wiping them back and forth.



THEY ATE A mostly quiet supper of chops and potatoes. Corine kept her head down, her fork clinking on her plate, barely raising her face when she sipped water from her glass. He watched her from his end of the table. Her unpainted lips, her fingers long and white as slips of paper, her black hair leafing out across her sweating cheeks—every feature washed of color, her bones apparent beneath the taut skin. Under the kitchen lights she seemed like a woman grown suddenly strange, her silence the thickened quiet of stone left long in the earth's clutches, the soundlessness of bone plotted in black earth.

When they finished, she cleared their plates and ran a sink of dishwater. Orvince sat watching her work. His mind swung heavy and crowded. After a time, he rose and came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. Her flesh felt cold, gelid under his fingers.

“If you want me to, I’ll forget it,” he said.

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were fragile and clean.

“You have to want to let it go,” she said. “If it’s not something you want, then it’ll stay and stay until it’ll be the only piece of you left.”

His hands fell to her waist. He pulled her close. Her breath clouded around his face.

“It is what I want,” he said.

Her fingers crawled up his chest, undoing the buttons of his shirt. When she touched him, her palms were like frost. Blue crescents of earth lay under her nails. But then

she was moving against him, slowly drifting like an ice floe into his arms, and when he felt her breath again, jagged and sharp on his cheeks, his mind staggered empty and blank.

ORVINCE DROVE HALFWAY to the factory before deciding to turn around. Corine's sweat was still damp on him, and it had turned his skin clammy. But that wasn't what made him go back. What urged him to return was the memory of blue dirt under Corine's fingernails, a cold blue like tattoo ink that suggested something dark and secret.

The house stood lightless when he drove up. He sat in the driveway with his truck running, staring at the blank kitchen window. He tried not to think of what Gene had said, but the words swam into his mind and then he saw the graveyard again, the open earth dismayed by crude trespasses, and he thought about it until he finally shut the truck off and went up the stoop into the kitchen.

No one was home.

He whispered her name to the darkness, but he was sure already that she'd gone. The house echoed. Dirty plates still soaked in the sink.

He went down the hall quietly and fetched his rifle from the bedroom closet, stuffing cartridges into his coat pockets. In the garage, he found a Coleman lantern. He primed the wick and the mantles lit in a glowing rush when he touched a match to the vent.

Then he went to the woods.

The night swarmed misty and beleaguered. Rheumy gray moonlight scattered through the trees. The wind roamed thin and feral, the air seeming to gnaw at the forest tops like something starved, and the sound hid the noise of his footsteps as he walked through the moist leaves of the trail.

At the base of the hill on which the cemetery sat he stopped to listen. Other than the wind sulking hungry and lean through the trees, he heard nothing, but he killed the lantern anyway, the light fizzling down to a cold diminished glow and then nothing.

He heard voices. A whispering flutter, the drowsy drop of feathers. The wind carried the sound to him. Soft hushed grunting and then—he was certain of this—the quick suck of a spade turning earth. The sound seemed to him then, while he squinted through the trees and worn moonlight, like tired breath, a resuscitation, the slow built yearning of lungs.

Quietly, he made his way up the hill. At the crest, the graveyard came into view and he could see two forms bent over a mound of earth beside the glow of a lantern. The spade reared and fell. It flung dirt.

Old Gene, head covered with a rusty spackling of wet hair, his form meager and skeletal beneath the frayed workshirt he wore, this aged haunt leering over the stones and dirt like some kind of fiendish devil bird—Orvince saw him plain and apparent in the lantern's glow, and

beside him Corine wielded the spade. Barefoot, her face stern and chiseled as she spooned cold earth out of the ground, a spasm of shadow jerking against the lantern's hemming light.

Orvince clicked the safety off his rifle. He brought the stock to his shoulder and then watched them through the gun's scope, the entire scene funneling in—his wife and Old Gene grubbing in the earth and yanking bones free from the sod, the thump of clods striking the mossy ground like a dim pulse, the last feeble beating of a heart dying out. They piled the bones into a plastic blue Wal-Mart sack. The bones clattered like wooden chimes. Then they each stood together, Corine wiping mud from her hands and Old Gene smiling and giddy. When they embraced, Old Gene putting his dark gaping mouth over Corine's white face, their lips squishing together, they seemed, standing in the lantern's glow, like a gust of flame reaching out of the earth's molten core, their forms glistening, burning.

How long had it been this way? Since she was a child, Orvince guessed. Since she'd been old enough to tote a spade into the woods. Since before Orvince took her from the leaning junked house out in the boony-sticks where owls nested on the eaves and where dark came slithering up to the porch every evening and went scuttling around the place, searching for a cracked window or door, any way at all where it might seep in. Since always.

Orvince shouldered his rifle. Out in the graveyard, Old Gene and Corine clung together. Their shadows shook

and jarred the lantern's light. Orvince left them that way, slipping back through the trees, making hardly a sound.

When he reached the house again, it loomed white before him in the moonlight like a pale slab of marble. He crossed the yard and sat on the concrete stoop, the rifle stowed on his lap. Below the blue sky of night, the trees he'd come from were a flimsy black wall, a rampart any nearing darkness might breach, and he waited in the warm wind's ticking for Corine to return, not knowing in any way what he would say to her. ☹️



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