Roads With Mirrors
Seven Interconnected Short Stories

by

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ABSTRACT

- Keywords: free moral agency; insatiable energy demands; mountain top removal strip mining; coal mine safety; coming of age in Appalachia; twelve-step recovery; 9/11 terrorist attacks; stock car racing; familial relationship; environmental stewardship; environmental terrorism

*Roads With Mirrors* is a collection of seven interconnected short stories. The collection represents a short story cycle (sometimes referred to as a story sequence or composite novel). Each story is unique and stands alone; however, the narratives are specifically composed and arranged with the goal of creating an enhanced or different experience when reading the group as a whole as opposed to its individual parts. The stories are yoked with the sturdy ties of the Singleton family and tethered to the coalfields of Appalachia, specifically Lost Creek, West Virginia. In each of the seven stories, a member of the Singleton family faces a crisis of free moral agency.

*Flower of Darkness*: The country’s insatiable demand for energy brings a coal boom to Lost Creek, West Virginia. Coal companies employ a cheap, expedient method of extracting the coal from the mountain - MTR (mountain top removal strip mining). The trees are bulldozed; the mountain tops are blown off, tons of debris is dumped into the valley. Matriarch Nell Rose Singleton lives alone at the base of Droop Mountain. Her beloved husband, Lloyd, an underground miner and rescue foreman recently died of black lung disease. The four children are grown and gone, leaving Nell Rose alone with her oxygen canister and Salem cigarettes as she faces the devastation and destruction of her home place. An oxygen canister, fuse, and detonator caps are used to blow-up the cab of an eighteen story dragline sitting at the MTR site. Local police attempt to link Nell Rose to the blown canister.
*Roads With Mirrors*, the title story, provides back-story for the collection. In 2003, sixteen-year-old Thelma Kendrick lives with her parents and four-year-old twin sisters on Shinnston Mine Rd. in Lost Creek, just three doors from the Singleton family. Together she and Jimmy Cale Singleton repair her Pop’s truck, sit on the porch swing, and ride his brand-new Harley Davidson Soft-tail custom motorcycle. Young Thelma is catapulted into a series of tragedies. As she faces devastating losses and severe injury she asks, “Will I ever leave this sorrowful place?”

*Harm*: Elliott Rose, the youngest Singleton daughter, is a pledged healer, a nurse, a grieving mother. She has landed a job as night nurse at the Alderson Federal Prison for Women. With the help of prison guard, Bill Salter, a former Lost Creek neighbor, Elliott Rose launches a plan to exact revenge on inmate Corinda Baker, the woman responsible for the death of Elliott’s beloved daughter, Amy Laurel.

*Lug Nuts*: Jimmy Cale, the youngest of the four Singleton kids, all named after stock car drivers, has landed his dream job. He is rear tire changer and newest member of the pit crew for the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series Number 11- Fed Ex Chevrolet. He ignores the advice of veteran tire carrier Ham Jackson, costing himself and his team to nearly “lose it all” at the infamous Talladega Speedway.

*Serenity*: Eldest Singleton brother, John Lee is a hard-working Emergency Room physician. He lives with his estranged wife, Taffy and their seven-year-old daughter, Olivia Rose in Pittsburgh, Pa. Taffy is an alcoholic. She is the daughter of a Nash Coal Company owner, Horace Nash, and has grown up with privilege. Following a serious
automobile accident, Taffy is brought by ambulance to John’s ER. John Lee is the only
doctor on duty and battles to save her life.

*Tethers:* Stunned by a tragic loss, oldest daughter, writer Allison Laurel,
abandons Lost Creek, and flees to New York City just six months before the 9/11 terrorist
attacks. Fire fighter, Colum McCafferty becomes her rescuer, friend, and lover. On the
Observation Deck of the Empire State Building, in the New York City subway, and in the
back room of City Quilters, Allison Laurel discovers the tethers that ground her to her
life.

*Coming In:* May 2011, the Singleton children come home to Lost Creek to
celebrate Mother’s Day with Nell Rose. Together the entire family treks to the top of the
Bridle Veil ridge. They witness first-hand the devastation and destruction of mountain
top removal. The family stand arm in arm and grieve for their home place. Before they
depart Lost Creek to return to their lives, all four Singleton children must decide what
part they are willing to play in the battle to preserve their birthplace.
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For Lloyd, Betty, and God's Country
In an imprint of coal, the fronds overlap, sealing the moment more than 250 million years ago when a swamp forest sank and plant became stone. This piece of earth-memory, unlike our own, is exact in its detail. But what kind of power would crush massive life and sustain the frivolous curl of a fern?

Because the Earth is Dark and Deep—Marat Moore

FLOWER OF DARKNESS

Tuesday, May 3, 2011

The back road to Lost Creek is narrow – unlined. It meanders alongside a shallow, moss-green creek. The surface is fractured asphalt and cracked macadam, put down long ago over Appalachian rock and bituminous coal. Creek-side: goldenrod, Indian grass and Queen Anne’s lace sprout between gaps in rusted guardrail. A hapless opossum lay pummeled in a bed of brown-eyed Susan. Mountain-side: yellow road-signs caution, Look out for falling rock - Deer Crossing - Curves. Midway between Lost Creek and Jane Lew, a pick-up-sized slice of Droop Mountain juts into the middle of the road. The asphalt darkens under the shadow of the timber train trestle. A few feet from the sway brace of the trestle a hand-carved wooden sign reads, Welcome to Lost Creek, West Virginia - pop. 416.

Virgil’s Grocery Store and Live Bait Shop sits on the eastside of Main Street. Virgil has adorned his single self-serve gas pump with blue and gold Go WVU Mountaineers! bumper stickers. Across the street, a decrepit pine-green train depot leans over abandoned railroad tracks. Next to the depot a two story aged-brick building houses
The Public Library. Gold letters Est. 1938 flake on a cracked transom above a brown weathered door. A metal breezeway connects the vintage Dairy Queen to a white-wash cement restaurant that sports a hand painted sign, Oliverio’s - Best hot dogs and pepperoni rolls in West Virginia! Flanked by Oliverio Brothers Funeral Home and Busy Bee Florist, The Lost Creek Volunteer Fire Station serves as The Knights of Pythias and The United Mine Workers Meeting Hall.

Lost Creek Assembly of God Church rises up as Main St. crests and merges into Hwy. 39. Six arched windows of beveled yellow glass sparkle on either side of the white clapboard structure. Freshly painted red double doors stand unlocked. The letter-board on the front lawn warns, A wise man feareth and departeth from evil: but the fool rageth and is confident. Prov. 14:16.

Just before the high school football field, Shinnston Mine Road turns off to the left. On the first silver mailbox, SALTER is painted in careful black cursive. Bill Salter and his wife have moved to Alderson. Their tidy two bedroom cabin stands empty. A blue For Sale by Owner sign leans on their overgrown lawn. Half-mile down on the right, Sally Kendrick, her daughter Thelma and the twins keep up a three bedroom cottage with gray asbestos shingles. Their cinder-block garage sits out back. A few feet before the gravel road that leads to the mouth of Shinnston #9 coal mine, the Singleton house, a milk-white four over four with mountain green shutters perches on the side of a grassy hill. Red, pink, and yellow knock out roses bud on either side of a wrap-around porch. Nell Rose Singleton lives here alone. Her husband Lloyd is buried just a few yards from the sagging back porch. Their four kids are grown ... and gone.
Nell Rose sits in the living room. She is exhausted from her first day of spring cleaning. The worn, beige recliner feels good under her. Its wide, tufted back supports her aching spine. She tugs a plastic cannula from her nose and lays it on top of the green ammunition can cradled in her lap. With a bare left foot she pulls the oxygen canister trolley toward the chair and leans to turn the flow rate valve up a liter. After placing the cannula back in her nose, she reaches toward the end table for her cigarettes, draws a Salem extra-long from the pack and sticks it into the corner of her parched mouth. She strikes a wooden match on the side of a Red Diamond box, and lights the cigarette. After a long drag, hot smoke fills her mouth and creeps into her chest. Following a slow exhale, she blows a trail of grey shade toward the fireplace. Is it the warmth of the smoke, the cool of the menthol, or the soothing effect of the nicotine that compels her? Perhaps it is the ritual of striking the match, the smell of sulfur and the sight of smoldering fire. Nell Rose has smoked since she was thirteen-years-old, nearly forty-eight years. It is unlikely that any warning from a Pittsburgh pulmonologist, young enough to be her son, will ever separate her from matches and cigarettes. She lifts a hot mug from the side table and gulps sweet sassafras tea.

Nell Rose is the seventh daughter of the seventh son. Her father warned her, “The gifts of the seventh child are inborn, God-given, and carry great responsibility.” She has always felt burdened by all the talk of her ability to divine thoughts, heal, and prophesy. She claims she is “just sensitive and mindful.” All her life she has sought refuge in the dense mountain woods and the musty stacks of the Lost Creek Library. Most of the hard-working people of Lost Creek have been wary, jittery and stand-offish toward her. Lloyd Singleton was the exception. He found her gifts to be as seductive
and miraculous as the orange-red curls on the back of her neck and the tiny flecks of gold in her gray eyes. The first time he saw the extra digit that sprouted from the webbing between her left thumb and pointer finger, he pulled her hand to his lips and kissed her tiny extra thumb as if it were his treasure. Black lung claimed him last fall, leaving a deep festering wound in Nell’s middle that will not stop aching. A long day of deep cleaning, dragging a three pound oxygen cylinder on its trolley has taken a toll on her frail body. She leans the chair back one notch and takes stock of her home. The kitchen’s pale yellow walls reflect bright spring sunshine streaming through vinegar clean windows, framed in blue and white checkered curtains. Spotless white tile counter tops are clear except for three jugs of store-bought water. Brown liquid now oozes from her faucets. The well water is no longer fit to drink. The Harrison Times lay in her lap—more news of deals struck between Nash Energy and state government. Black and white photographs of drag-lines crawling over mountain tops and 400 ton trucks hauling over the back-roads cover the front page. “High Coal Demand Brings Strip-mining to Local Mountains,” is the headline for the lead story she does not want to read. Nell folds the paper, tosses it on the floor beside her and stares at the widening, deepening crack that slithers like a copperhead, down the golden wall, around the back-door frame. She remembers the day after Thanksgiving, the snowy morning she and Lloyd heard the first blast. They were sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, sharing the newspaper. Lloyd was spreading apple-butter on toast. She felt it long before they heard it. Her body seized as if a frozen shard had been thrust into her back. She jerked, jumped-up from her chair and shouted, “What the devil?” Minutes later they heard a loud boom echo from the direction of Droop Mountain. Arm in arm, eyes wide in fear and disbelief, they
stared out the backdoor window, toward Droop. Plumes of smoke rose from the summit. Nell whispered, “They’ve gone on and done it and they won’t stop ‘til they’ve blown the whole top off the mountain. Goddamn them!”

Lloyd tightened his arm around her.

Nell pulled away. “What in God’s name are we going to do?”

Silence fell between them. Lloyd pulled the curtains over the back door window and paced from door to sink and back. “It’s a lazy man’s way to get at coal. They’ll blast and let the shit roll down hill …, mess and slurry everywhere!” His face flushed, beads of sweat burst on his upper lip. The wretched sounds of his deep, hacking cough filled the kitchen. Nell watched his narrow, concave chest heave to pull oxygen into starved lungs. He shouted between gags, “We’ll make them listen. We’ll fix this … wait and see. Don’t worry. I never had the time of day for strip miners … greedy Nash sons-of-bitches. Only decent way to get coal is to mine for it … no use for goddamn strip miners.”

“You’ve said,” Nell chided.

The sound of another blast shot through the valley. The floor under them trembled as they watched the back door shimmy. A black fissure erupted on the yellow kitchen wall. Nell moved away from him and hobbled into the living room. She sank into her chair, and lit a cigarette.

Lloyd tramped to the hall closet and jerked a green and orange quilted jacket off the hook.
“Just where do you think you’re going?” Nell shouted.

“Down the road, to the Union Hall,” he answered.

“You have no business going anywhere. The doctor said you need to rest. You’ll lose your breath; you go out in this cold. I’m going with you, then.” She crushed her cigarette in the ashtray and struggled to stand.

“You stay put, now. You’re in no shape, yourself. Stay here. No sense both of us out in the cold. I’ll be at the Hall, back by dinner. I’ll call you later. Don’t worry, now. Stay warm, put your oxygen on and for heaven’s sake put those cigarettes up.”

“You forgot your inhaler and your pills. What about your own oxygen tank?” she yelled as the back door slammed.

“I got one in the truck,” he said. “Now quit you’re worrying.”

Lloyd didn’t come home for supper. Reverend Thomas came to the house to break the news to Nell. The union men said another coughing spell had brought on a fatal stroke. Lloyd had died in the county ambulance as it sped, lights and siren from the Union Hall to Miners Hospital. “They better never again tell me that I have healing powers” she said. “I couldn’t even save my own husband.”

Its six months later and Nell still regrets the argument they had that day. But Lloyd always had a way of saying he could fix a thing that drove her crazy. He shouted and repeated himself as if everyone was as deaf as he. He forced her to lose all patience. Now, she looks at his empty chair and feels relieved he hadn’t lived to hear the explosions become more frequent, louder, and closer to home.
She wrings work-hardened hands, cramped from the day’s cleaning and takes in whiffs of lemon-scented furniture polish and Pine Sol. She has organized all of her books, dusted the bookshelves and arranged them in alphabetical order by author, Alcott, Austen at the top Walker and Whitman on the bottom. She set aside a shelf for well-worn children’s’ books she’s saving for the grandchildren. Her West Virginia books lay neatly stacked on the floor beside her chair, within easy reach: Buck, Giardinia, Pancake, Phillips, Price… like trusted friends waiting to talk.

Nell feels guilty. It’s as if a sacred trust has been breached. This morning, she rummaged through Lloyd’s wardrobe. She had put off closet cleaning as long as she could stand but her promise to send his work clothes to the Union Hall had to be kept. It surprised her to find the ammunition can behind the slew of ball caps that lined his closet shelf. She lets a cigarette burn in the ashtray while she pries open the latch.

On top is a lump of coal, the size of a deck of cards, shiny black, hard and cold in her hand. When she turns it over she discovers a perfect etching of an ancient fern. Miners call them “flowers of darkness,” evidence left of tropical jungles compressed over 250 million years. She lifts it to her mouth, kisses it, and places it in the wide pocket of her seersucker duster. Marine Corps medals lay beneath it. She creates an orderly row of medals on the coffee table: two staff sergeant chevrons, three service ribbons, an expert rifle and two pistol shooting medals, a brass belt buckle engraved with USMC eagle, globe and anchor and a tarnished bronze star. Three gold blasting caps are wrapped in a red work handkerchief and twenty feet of red, white and blue fuse is coiled around a parcel of letters. She carefully unwinds the fuse, sliding it through her extra digit and
places it beside the medals. She recognizes her own adolescent scrawl on the front of each sheer, yellowed envelope.

#1
Staff Sergeant Lloyd L. Singleton
United States Marine Corps
FPO Box 7328
San Francisco, California 94118

July 4, 1967

Dear Lloyd,

How are you? I hope it's okay that I'm writing to you. Pop said that he loved getting letters from folks back home when he was in Korea. I don't know if you remember me. Despite the fact you and your folks live in Jane Lew, we go to the same church, Lost Creek Assembly of God. I'm about three years younger than you, seventeen to be exact. When the church handed out a list of soldiers to write to, I picked your name. I know you can't tell me exactly where you are in ---- ---- (She noticed the words Viet Nam had been cut out.) but maybe you could send me a picture of yourself standing next to a Huey helicopter or something. Pop says you're a door gunner and that it is a very important and dangerous job. I hope you are taking good care of yourself and being careful.
Is it hot over there? We hear that it is very hot and rainy.

West Virginia is having a scorcher summer. Today, The American Legion had its customary Annual 4th of July Parade, Lost Creek High School majorettes in the front, mules in the back, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Mine rescue and fire trucks in the middle. Nothing new ever happens in Lost Creek, except for boys getting shipped overseas and the mine going on strike. Pop says that he doesn't know when the mine has ever been in such turmoil. He thinks United Mine Workers might go on strike any day. He brags on your dad and says he's the best superintendent they ever had but that it's hard to keep the Union from fighting with the coal company.

After the parade, the church went to Tygart Dam for a picnic. I didn't want to go and begged Mom to let me stay home to listen to the NASCAR Race, Charlotte being my favorite track. Looks like Petty's going to win the Cup again this year. I'm an Allison fan myself. Well, good thing she made me go. Maxine Singledecker's baby boy choked on potato salad. She had no business giving a baby barely weaned, potato salad. But she did and the baby turned blue as berries and Maxine started screaming for help. I pulled the baby out of her arms and folded him over my knee, then struck him with a hard open hand
between his tiny shoulders. A chunk of potato the size of a ping pong ball flew out of his mouth and landed right back into the Tupperware bowl it came from. I handed the poor little fella back to his mother. The incident drew a crowd of onlookers. Pop called them the "ooh ahh squad." I took off for the woods as mortified as I've ever been. On the way home Pop told me that it was surely evidence of my gift of healing and I should be proud of myself. I told him it was just common sense and paying attention. He told me not to sass him.

I'm babysitting and working at Dairy Queen, saving up for college and grateful as I can be that I got the full-freight scholarship to WVU, thanks to my English teacher, Miss Everhart. I'm begging Mom to take me to up to Morgantown to see my dorm. When I'm not working I'm at the Library. I have six brothers and sisters, three of each. I'm the seventh. So I crave quiet. I've got a pile of books on my nightstand. I'm reading The Good Earth for the tenth time and loving Steinbeck again. I'd rather read a good book three times than a bad book once. If you have any time to read over there just send me a list and I'll send you a box full of books. I could put some of Mom's brownies in there too if you think they won't melt.
Well, I'm rambling on. Please let me know if it is okay that I'm writing to you.

Yours truly,

Nell Rose

p.s. If you get time to write back that would be just fine. My return address is on the back of the envelope and a picture would be just great. Be safe!

Nell wraps her arms around her waist and rocks as if she could bring back the feel of him. He had neatly numbered all of her fifty-two letters. She had written almost one each week before he finally came home. Her eyes close to conjure the image of the day he stood on the steps of her dormitory, tall, lean, and straight as a poplar tree. He wore his Marine winter dress greens, and held out an armful of yellow, pink, and red roses, grinning as if he had a secret. "The sight of him," she whispers.

He wore his dress blues when they married in the sanctuary of The Lost Creek Assembly of God Church - just three weeks before he went back for a second tour. Nine-and-a-half months later she gave birth to John Lee. She left WVU and lived with her folks until he was discharged and came back to work in the mine. Lloyd embarrassed her when he told folks that their marriage was built on sex, love, and compromise. She wanted to name the boys after her favorite presidents, the girls after fine writers and West Virginia flowers. He wanted to name them all after stock car drivers. Thus: John Lee (John Kennedy and Lee Petty), Allison Laurel (Bobby, Donnie, and Davie Allison,
mountain laurel), Jimmy Cale (Jimmy Carter and Cale Yarborough), Elliott Rose (Bill Elliott and her namesake flower.) Lloyd called them all his motley crew and loved them nearly as much as he loved the coal mine and the miners he rescued. With four kids to raise and a husband working shifts and running rescue teams there never had been time for her to go back to the university.

“Lloyd Honey, when the kids come in I’ll show them your ammo can. But I’ll keep the letters all for myself,” she whispers to the empty gray chair. As she carefully returns the letters in the can, she hears footsteps on the front porch.

“H-e-l-I-o, Nell? It’s Thelma.”

“Wait a minute.” Pulling the oxygen trolley behind her like a clacking toy, Nell shuffles to the kitchen, leans over the sink and pours cool water over her swollen eyes. Dabbing her face with a dishcloth, she cracks the door.

“Going up to Wal-Mart, do you need anything?” Thelma asks, jingling car-keys in front of her face.

“Well, I don’t know, maybe more water,” Nell answers. “Let me go get my purse. I was just getting ready to sweep-off the porch before dark … didn’t expect company. Come on.”

Thelma shoves her car keys into the front pocket of her jeans and says, “I tried to call, it went right to voice-mail - didn’t mean to barge-in, just thought I’d see if you need anything.” She wipes her feet on a worn WV doormat. “I’ve got a book for you, Reverend Thomas asked me to pass on. It’s a green Bible. Here ...” Thelma moves
toward Nell’s chair and lays a beige cloth Bible on top of the West Virginia book stack.

“Look here; let me sweep the porch for you. I’ve got plenty of time. War-Mart’s open 24 hours and just a little ways. Where you keep the broom?”

“Broom is in the kitchen pantry, hanging between the duster and the mop. You’ll find a black dust-pan propped against a couple oxygen tanks there on the floor. Well, alright then - I’ll just come out and sit on the swing to rest a minute,” Nell says as she makes her way to the porch swing, dragging the canister trolley behind her.

Thelma says, “I found the broom and pan. I’ll be out in a minute. You’ve only got three gallons of water left. I’ll pick up four or five more and bring them by on my way home. You need anything else? You can pay me when I get back. Don’t worry ‘bout getting your purse.”

“I suppose you could pick-up a bag of soft peppermints,” Nell answers as she gingerly lowers herself onto the wooden swing.

Thelma jerks up the porch mat, pitches it over the rose bushes, and into the yard. A puff of gray dust settles over the grass. “Would you look at that? I’ve never seen this porch in such a mess. I’m afraid your rose bushes are dying here under all this coal dirt. They look smothered.” She fiercely swings the broom, attacking each painted board of the porch, one by one, moving mounds of soot and dust onto the yard below. “Mom says there is not much sense in cleaning as long as Nash keeps blasting, flinging coal dust and dirt all over Lost Creek. She’s about fed-up. Talks about packing-up the twins and moving to Charlotte or up to Pittsburgh, God forbid. Nash wants to buy the house but she
says not until they offer what its worth. Hauling water is getting old…fast. I can tell you that. We can’t really afford it but what’s coming out of the faucet is not fit.”

“What’s it worth,” Nell asks?

“What’s that?” Thelma looks surprised.

“What’s your house worth?” Nell repeats.

“Well, I don’t guess I know an exact amount,” she answers right back, quick, agitated.

Nell peers over her glasses and stares at Thelma. Despite the bad left leg she favors when she walks, Thelma Kendrick moves with graceful determination. Slight and long-limbed, she reminds Nell of a white tail deer, not a timid fawn, but, a bold, young buck with bulging brown eyes, wide and vigilant, always scouting for threats to the herd. Nell notices a nasty red and blue bump swelling on Thelma’s pale freckled forehead. Thelma Kendrick is soon to be twenty-five years old. She’s smart, a hard-worker. It’s a mystery to everyone but Nell why she hasn’t married.

Thelma takes the mat to the far end of the porch and beats it against the rail, whacking it again and again, sending trails of soot into the evening air.

“That’s good enough, Thelma, best we can do for now. You’ll get yourself all dirty. You had your supper? I was getting ready to heat up some soup beans and cornbread.”

“No, thank you. I made pigs in the blanket for us tonight. I’m still full.”
Thelma drops the mat in front of the door, wipes her feet and follows Nell into the living room. She starts to sit in the empty grey recliner next to Nell’s but quickly takes a seat on the sofa facing the fireplace. The mantel is neatly lined with pictures of the Singleton kids. Thelma speaks softly and points, “Great pictures of the kids.” Nell can see Thelma’s eyes fix on Jimmy Cale’s senior football picture. They stare at the framed 17-year-old boy in a #82 red and white football jersey. He is lean faced with a wonky grin; a swath of yellow hair hangs on his forehead. His long fingers grip a white helmet with a red stripe. Most Valuable Player - Lost Creek High School - 2003 – is etched into the bottom of the gold-frame.

Nell breaks the silence, “Been a busy day… got a lot of my spring cleaning done … ‘about wore me out but feels good to get a start on it. Think I’ll tackle the cupboards tomorrow. Good to have the porch swept.”

“Yes … bet it does. House looks nice and neat and smells good. Her eyes scan rows of books. “You sure keep a lot of books. Would you mind if I borrowed one?”

“Pick out what you want,” Nell said.

“No, you pick.”

“You read Silas Marner, Middlemarch, Adam Bede?”

“No … not yet.”

“Look over there in the E’s, Eliot with one l - George Eliot is the author.”

“Who’s he?”
“She … George Eliot is a she; Mary Ann Evans is her given name.”

Thelma runs her fingers over the book spines. *Middlemarch* looks good … long.”

“It’s well-worth the read. Take it. Bring it back when you’re done with it.”

“Thank you.”

Nell looks back at the mantle and says, “Allison Laurel called, says she’ll be in for Mother’s Day. She’ll fly down to Pittsburgh, meet up with John Lee and Livie and come on in with him. Haven’t heard much from Elliott Rose lately but I expect she’ll make it. Be good to see them.”

Thelma glances at the empty grey chair and back to the mantel. “Well, yes that would be real nice, if they all come in. I know you miss them.”

No mention was made of Jimmy Cale.

“You want a cup of sassafras tea?”

“I’m not one for sassafras. Mom says I should drink it for a spring tonic, but it’s a little bitter for my taste. I like a Nehi orange or a root-beer myself, especially with a good hot dog or a pepperoni roll. It’s hard to find a decent pepperoni roll these days, since Oliverio’s shut down and moved to Florida. I bought one down at Virgil’s other day…pepperoni roll wrapped in cellophane...made in a factory somewhere in Morgantown...heat-up in the microwave. Can you believe that? It tasted worse than cardboard.”
Thelma glances at the ammo can that sits on the coffee-table. “That an ammo can?” she asks.

“Just an old keepsake,” Nell replies.

She leans toward the oxygen cylinder and turns the valve up to three liters, reaching for the matches and cigarettes.

Thelma’s eyes widen.

“Thelma, I don’t believe you came all the way over here to thrash my porch, fetch my water, and talk books or rolls.”

Thelma holds her breath, wrestles a ring of keys from her pocket and drops them on the table. Twisting a stray strand of fine, beige hair, she waits for Nell to take a long drag before she speaks. “Nash coal truck ran me off the road yesterday, on the hairpin, up the mountain. He came right at me in my lane, hauling a full load – forced me into the guardrail. I smacked my head on the steering wheel. It tore up Pop’s truck -- had to tow it home -- put it in the garage out back ‘til we can fix it. I’m driving Mom’s old Geo.” Her wet eyes scan the room as she lifts a worn sleeve to wipe her nose.

They hold onto the silence.

Nell finally speaks as she leans over to crush her cigarette in a metal ashtray.

“Awful shame.” She looks at Thelma’s forehead, “What can we do, girl?”

Thelma chews the inside of her cheek as she circles the bump on her forehead with her finger. She picks up her keys and glares at the fireplace. Her voice cracks over the jangling of keys, “Anything gets done, I expect I’ll have to do it myself.”
The swish of oxygen flowing through plastic tubes...the only sound in the room.

Nell says, “Well, don’t be too proud to ask.”

Thelma picks up the book and stuffs it into the pouch of her sweatshirt. “Enough said. I’ll get on down the road. I’ll go on out the back.” Upright, shoulders pulled back, she walks toward the kitchen trying not to favor her left leg.

“She deserves better than she gets,” Nell whispers as she hears Thelma shut the pantry door and wash her hands at the sink.

“I’ll be back in a little bit with your water and your peppermints,”...you still be up?” Thelma asks.

“I’ll be up,” Nell replies, as the back door slams.

Nell watches night settle over the house. The windows turn from yellow to gray. A shadow lay on the white wood planks that frame the fireplace. The hallway to the bedroom is dark. Nell hasn’t been in the bed since Lloyd passed. What sleep she summons is in her chair. She reaches for the TV remote but thinks better of it and picks up *The Green Bible* Thelma brought. A yellow brochure falls out and lands in her lap.

Bright orange letters over a black and white picture of a strip mine read: **Mountain Top Removal Destroys Our Homeplace. Stop the Devastation.** She pulls her reading glasses out of the chair cushion and places the earpieces under the plastic straps that hold her cannula in place. She reads, “**Important facts: 3,000,000 pounds of explosives are used against West Virginia Mountains every working day. The 800+ square miles of mountains already destroyed equals a one-quarter mile wide swath of destruction from New**
York to San Francisco. Over 1000 miles of West Virginia streams have been buried in valley fills. In 1950 there were 125,000 miners in West Virginia; in 2005 there were 15,000. When we destroy God’s mountains, we reject his blessings.” ~ Mountain Watch needs your help!

Vivid images of Droop Mountain flood her mind, a mountain as familiar to her as the faces of her children. She has gathered ginseng and picked ramps and blackberries on Droop since she was old enough to hold her mother’s hand. She and Lloyd conceived John Lee in the deer moss on the East Ridge.

In late autumn, Lloyd loved to hike the mountain’s “secret trail” with the kids. She’d pack a breakfast of tea and hard-boiled eggs, homemade bread and apple butter. All six of them walked up the narrow trail to the summit. She picked lobelia, goldenrod, and ironweed, and held it up to their noses, teaching them to “mind the wildlife.” Mid-trail Little El would beg John Lee to carry her piggy-back on his broad shoulders. Allison sulked and dawdled, while she collected leaves to be named and ironed between waxed paper, then placed into scrapbooks. Jimmy Cale always ran ahead, the self-appointed scout. They stopped to make walking sticks and to put salamanders into jars of mud. When they finally reached the peak, the family of six stood still and hushed as they looked out over mountains known and named: Wauca, Saddleback, Holly, Seneca, Nathaniel, Grandpa’s pipe, and Bridal veil – like a plush quilt of yellow-gold, rust, and crimson swatches spread under a silver-blue sky. Lloyd never failed to shout, “Now, look there kids, that’s God’s Country!” “You’ve said,” Nell always replied.

“Now God’s Country is being blasted to Hell,” she cries. She jerks The Green Bible over her head and hurls it across the living room. It lands with a loud thud on the
kitchen floor. She stares at Lloyd’s truck keys hanging on a hook next to the crack in the kitchen wall. In the light of the reading lamp, she opens the ammo can and spills the letters onto the coffee table, wraps the blasting caps and fuse and puts them back into the can. She throws her cigarettes and matches on top of the red handkerchief. With the ammo can tucked under her arm she staggers to the kitchen, dragging the trolley behind her and snatches the truck keys from the hook. The backdoor screen slams as she totters down the porch steps. The oxygen cylinder thumps on each step behind her. Cold night air strikes her face and chest as she opens the door of the old black and blue Ford truck he’d named, “The Bruise.”

She wrestles the cylinder into the cab of the truck and places it on the seat beside her. Her husband’s pick-up smells of Old Spice, motor oil, and coal dust. She turns the key. “Goddamn it, it won’t crank,” she screams.

***

Nell’s startled awake by heavy footsteps on the front porch. Hard knuckles pound the screen-door.

“Just… a … minute,” she answers in a voice raspy and hoarse from smoke and sleep.

On unsteady legs, she moves to the door. Deputy Sheriff Sherman Becker reaches to knock a second time as she turns the lock and cracks the door. Her eyes focus on the brown paper sack wedged in the crook of his left arm.

“Is Lloyd Singleton here? Are you Mrs. Singleton?” he asks.
Nell Rose commences a fit of deep wheezes and loud, hacking coughs. She barks and gags, spits into her hand.

“Ma’am, you all right?”

Eyes wild and pained, she whispers, “Can’t breathe … took my oxygen off to get over here to the door.”

He quickly places the bag on the floor of the porch and moves toward her.

She sways and stumbles as he places a heavy arm around her waist and leads her back to her chair. She points to the oxygen canister. He fumbles to help her place the cannula in her nose and hovers while she adjusts the flow valve, and takes a long slow breath. Her eyes fix on his wide leather utility belt, a 40 Glock pistol and clips, taser, handcuffs, radio.

“Give me some air, m-o-v-e!” she orders.

The sheriff steps back, nearly tripping over the stack of books. “You need me to call for some help?” He shouts as if she were deaf.

“No!” she shouts back, louder.

Deputy Sheriff Becker gawks at the red wiry hair that frames Nell’s ashen face. He waits for her to speak. She carefully wipes her hands on her purple chenille robe, folds them in her lap and holds the silence. Becker goes back to the porch to retrieve the bag. The screen door bangs against its frame as he walks back into the living room. He sits down in the grey recliner.
“Don’t you sit there,” Nell orders.

He stands, circles the room, and stops in front of her chair.

“You tracked in,” she scolds.

“Ma’am?”

“You tracked coal-dirt in the house, there on the floor,” she points. He looks down at a trail of gray-black boot prints.

“I’m sorry; you were choking’ and I . . .”

“Ought to wipe your feet,” Nell says.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he says, red-faced.

“Ms. Singleton, do you recognize this?” He pulls a green oxygen canister out of the bag.

“They all look the same to me,” she murmurs.

“Ma’am?”

“I said, they all look the same to me,” she repeats louder.

He stands-up and tugs his belt over a water-melon sized paunch. Vandals set off an explosion up at the strip mine. They tore up a million and a half dollar dragline. Cab’s blown out. We found this oxygen cylinder about thirty feet from the site.

Cylinders have a serial numbers right here.” He turns the canister upside down and
points to a white sticker with a black barcode. “Clarksburg Medical Supply says this number right here traces back to Lloyd L. Singleton.”

Nell leans in and with a steady hand turns the cylinder flow valve up to 3 liters and sticks a cigarette into the corner of her mouth. She reaches for her Red Diamond match box, pushes the cover to one side, strikes. As the match burns between her thumb and extra digit, she stares at the flame. “My husband is dead, buried out back, and I don’t suppose I’d know one explosion from another.”

Scratchy, static echoes from his waist. A women’s voice says, “Unit 6, what is your 10-20?”

Deputy Becker jerks the radio microphone from his belt and speaks, “Unit 6, Box 9 Shinnston Mine Road, 10-24 complete. Copy that?

“Copy.”

He looks at Nell, “I need to get back to the office.”

“Let your-self out.” she says.

“I’ll be back. Don’t go anywhere, Ms. Singleton,” he shouts as he rushes to the door.

“Do I look like I’m going anywhere?” she shouts, louder.

She hears his heavy boots on the porch steps and stretches to snuff the cigarette. Her cool hand feels for the chunk of hard coal in the warm pocket of her robe. Six fingers rub across the smooth imprint of fern. “Lloyd, I know I promised not to worry
the kids. You said, “They have their own lives, their own troubles.” God knows you were right. But I think they’ve a right to know what’s happening to their home-place.
"I have been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and sword in my hands." ~ Zora Neale Hurston

ROADS WITH MIRRORS

July 13, 2003

Jimmy Cale has passed. When her cell phone jerked and jumped on the nightstand at 2:40 a.m., she was certain it was not for any good. It could not be word that he woke up and asked, "Is Thelma all right?" Or, knowing him, he first inquired about the bike. No. When a brand new, black and chrome, 2003, seven-hundred and thirty-eight pound, One-hundredth Anniversary Edition, Harley Davidson Heritage Soft-tail Custom motorcycle is run off a West Virginia mountain pass, no good comes. She, Thelma Kendrick, the sixteen-year-old passenger thrown free, would wear a purple cast around her left leg for eighteen weeks or more. The steel rod placed inside the bone, she would carry for the rest of her life. She had held a daily vigil in The Miner's Hospital, ICU Waiting Room for over a week, leg propped on a worn-out, bottle-green chair while she breathed Lysoled air. Tonight, against her will, Mom had insisted she come home to sleep in her own bed. Jimmy Cale, the driver of the motorcycle, who wore only a red work-handkerchief on his head... she was sure he had passed.

Before he was killed in the mine last winter, Thelma's father had taught her to drive his ninety-three, S-10 Chevy pickup. "Pay attention now, Little T," he said. "Now,
you got to lean into these curves, and be always on the lookout for the convex mirrors nailed up on highway poles just before a hairpin. Look hard into those mirrors to see if something is coming at you, and don’t forget to downshift when you’re coming back down the mountain. You’ll burn up your brakes if you don’t.”

She wondered if Jimmy Cale had looked hard into the steel road mirror before he screamed at her to “Jump off!” She wondered if he knew she had landed in a mountain laurel bush with her leg pretzel-twisted up her back, her toes folded under his silver helmet he insisted she wear. No, she would not put that cell phone to her ear and hear them say, “Well, hello. We are so sorry. We did all we could. He has passed.” She would listen to it buzz and watch it blink and jerk before it fell to the floor.

She yanked the stray sheet wedged under her throbbing leg, pulled it up over her heart and covered her head. Tucked in caterpillar tight, she prayed for needed sleep. Shrouded in flannel violets, she listened to the curtains flap against the sill. A gust of mountain air blew in, circled the bed and dropped her back to July fourth, back on the warm, pulsing, black leather seat: rummmm, rummmm, potato, potato, potato. Summer sun scorched her pale skin. Her skinny bare-legs, whole and light, squeezed the small of Jimmy Cale’s firm back while her freckled arms coiled ‘round his belt. His silver helmet rested heavy on her head. She lifted the visor to breathe in rushes of summer air and to smell his neck, Dove soap and wind cooled sweat. Rrrrrrrrr hummmm, potato, potato, potato . . . the sounds of a perfectly tuned, big twin Harley engine soothed and carried her to sleep.

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Jimmy Cale Singleton was the only boy Thelma’s Pop had not run off. Last summer he had bragged on him down at the mine, told about how the foreman’s boy, Jimmy Cale “tore down the engine of the ninety-three Chevy pick-up and put it back together... just perfect.” Her Pop had failed to notice that it was his own fifteen-year-old daughter, Thelma, who stood alongside the boy in the cinderblock garage. He had not heard Jimmy Cale say to her, “Hand me that socket wrench.”

Her right back, “Now, which one?”

“Gimme the 9/16.”

“Ask me nice,” she said.

“Thelma Rene Kendrick, will you please hand me the 9/16 ratchet?”

“Well, I’d be happy to.”

She slapped the wrench to the middle of his hand... as nurse to surgeon. And they went on like that, her holding the Chilton manual and reading to him all measure of instruction, until late in the morning when he was hungry.

“T, how about walking down to Oliverio’s and pick us up a couple hot dogs, a pepperoni roll and some orange pop?”

“You buying?” she asked.

“Well, sure,” he replied.
With a greasy hand Jimmy Cale fished a ten dollar bill out of his jeans and pretended to hand it to her, then hid it behind his back. She reached around his waist, grabbed the bill, and stuffed it into the pocket of her shorts.

“I suppose you want me to work your money before it spends,” she teased.

He winked at her, his right eye, brown as a chestnut, and the left, green as the pond. Thelma thought his mismatched eyes were his strongest feature. The honey-yellow hair that hung on his forehead and curled almost to his neck, was likely the second. Never one to waste a minute, he turned his attention back to the engine block while Thelma sprinted as fast as her scrawny legs could move. All the way to Oliverio’s and back, she prayed his food would stay hot. They sat together on the porch swing to eat two warm dogs tucked in steamed, white-bread buns, lathered with spicy hot chili and mustard, smothered in finely chopped onions. He opened the pop and gave her the first swig of the sugary citrus fizz. Thelma’s twin sisters, four-year-old twins pushed the screen door open and pleaded with them to share.

“Can we have some pop?” they begged in unison.

“Why, sure you can,” said Jimmy Cale. “Come on over here.”

They giggled and hopped toward him. He held the Nehi bottle up to Carley’s puckered lips, then to Marley’s. By the time the bottle got back to Thelma, her last taste was laced with baby spit.

She told her twin sisters, “Go-on now, go watch cartoons; we’ve got a truck to fix. You scoot.”
Jimmy Cale wiped mustard from his lip with a hotdog wrapper and gulped the hot pepperoni roll.

“You better slow yourself down and chew,” she said. “Where in the world do you put it all?”

“Oh, I’ll burn it off at ball practice,” he answered.

After he hurried off to the football field, Thelma borrowed clean rags from Mom’s precious stack and wiped down every tool. She returned each one to its rightful place, just so, in the nine-drawer, Craftsman tool chest, Pop’s pride and joy. “A place for everything and everything in its place,” he always said. Pop was particular and sometimes hard to figure. He had never liked any of the boys that came by the house. At dusk he’d jiggle the front porch light switch and shout, “Times up, so goes the news!” When that porch light flickered, the scared lads would run off like they’d been shot at. But on the night that Jimmy Cale Singleton sat on the porch swing; events were different. Pop came to the door and said, “Well, we’re going to put the twins to bed and call it a night. Don’t stay up too late. Night, Jimmy Cale. Night T.” He said it sweet and low, as if he were talking to the twins. Then he turned off the porch light, read a story to Carley and Marley, tucked them up and went on to bed. When it was finally quiet and dark, Jimmy Cale scooted to Thelma’s side of the swing and waited for her to signal that the coast was clear. She nodded. He laid his arm on the back of the swing to place a hand on her bony shoulder.

“You chilly?” he asked.

“Little bit,” she said back.
“Want my jacket?”

“That’d be good.”

He took off his Lost Creek Panthers letterman’s jacket and put it over her shoulders.

“Thanks.”

“Sure.”

She laid a hand on his knee, signaling that he could move his other arm into the warmth of his coat and wrap it around her tiny waist. She felt his lips on her neck while he waited for her to lift her chin and offer him her mouth. He gently rubbed his tongue over hers. She and he went on like that until he could hardly stand up. Then he pulled her up by her slender wrists, lifting her light body from the swing and onto him. They stood together, squeezing out all the air that was between them. She rose up on her toes so he could reach her ear.

His breath warmed her ear. “Well, I guess I better go on and get some sleep before practice in the morning. I’ll call you as soon as I get home and get to bed.”

“Don’t forget,” she said.

She returned his jacket and watched him slide his long arms into the white leather sleeves and pull the red wool collar up over the yellow curls on his neck. She stood alone in the yard; her bare feet on cold dew, and watched him stop to scratch the dog before he walked the road home. He walked bow-legged and turned to watch her laugh. Then he waved like a homecoming queen on a float, hopping backwards, pretending to trip and
fall. Thelma pulled her red sweater, wrinkled and wrong-side-out, around her chest and ran to her room to wait for her phone to buzz and light. She talked to him until he fell asleep.

The summer morning after the pickup finally cranked, Thelma lay in her bed, satisfied. Her bedroom window, opened wide, white cotton curtains tied back, gave her the mountain to breathe... laurel, ginseng, and pine, dandelions gone to seed. Warm, moist air from Whitetail Pond settled over the bed. She lifted her hand to smile at a dab of truck grease that wouldn’t scrub. The smell of strong coffee drifted under her door. She heard the back porch screen door open and double-slam shut. “Pop’s home,” she whispered.

When Pop worked the midnight shift, Mom made early coffee and waited for him at the kitchen table. Thelma heard him put his dinner bucket in the sink and remembered back to the day he had given her a surprise from the bucket, a piece of thick, yellow roofing chalk from the mine. Tired as he was, he had stayed up all day to teach her to write her ABC’s on the sidewalk. Later he had drawn a just perfect hop-scotch court that was all the envy. She wondered if the twins had been given any of that miner’s chalk.

The walls of the company house were thin. Thelma listened.

Mom spoke first, “How was your shift? Frank, you look awful tired; take your blood pill today?”

“All right, I guess. Yeah, I took it with my supper. Shift was okay. They put me at a new seam. I think Singleton’s got a purty good handle on it. He’s knows the mine...good foreman,” he reassured her.
“What’d you make of Jimmy Cale fixing your truck?” she asked.

“Can’t believe the boy got that thing to crank,” Pop said. “We ought to give him something for his trouble.”

“I’ll take something over there after-while, couple jars of apple-butter, some homemade bread. Nell Rose says the boy’s about to eat them out of house and home. I’ll tell you what, he’s her heart; can do no wrong in her eyes. Don’t worry about it...I’ll see to it we return the favor,” Mom reassured him.

“Good to have the truck back; runs like new. Awful good of him to take the time... with school and ball,” Pop went on bragging about Jimmy Cale.

“Well, comes from good people, I suppose,” Mom said. “Nell Rose can be a little peculiar at times, but she’s raised her kids up right...two well-behaved girls, pretty too. Don’t you think?” I don’t believe she’ll ever get over Allison Laurel moving all the way up to New York City. Good thing Elliott Rose is planning to stay on in Morgantown when she graduates. A nurse at the Medical Center... bet she’ll be making good money.”

Mom scooted the chair over the linoleum...slow to get up. She poured more coffee into his cup before he asked for it. The kitchen fell quiet. A long silence was natural between them. Thelma had often heard Pop say, “you can tell more about a person in quiet than when he’s jabbin’ his jaws.”

Mom went on about the Singletons, “I don’t know about that oldest, John Lee doctoring in Pittsburgh, taking up with a Nash, money to burn? Him buying Jimmy
Cale that flashy motorcycle for his high school graduation? I better never lay eyes on Thelma Rene riding around on the back of that thing. If you ask me, Dr. John Lee Singleton’s gone way past his people... just showing off, spending the money his wife’s daddy is making off coalminers’ backs.”

Pop came right back, “A doctor’s pay is nothing to sneeze at, might not be his wife’s money, or her daddy’s he spends. Jimmy Cale could probably handle hisself on any vehicle he gets. The boy knows for sure how to handle a football. The University would be crazy not to give him full freight up to Morgantown. You keep an eye on Thelma, now. Keep her off the back of that thing. Good Lord, I hope she don’t have her heart set on leaving home to go off somewhere to college.”

Thelma felt her stomach knot. She pulled the covers over her head and prayed they wouldn’t say another word about it. She had made her plans.

Mom surprised her. “Well, we’ll see. She’s an awful big help to me around here, especially with the twins, but she’s got the grades, Frank. That English teacher, Mr. what’s-his-name, says she is smart, has a gift. She’s got her the job a Virgil’s Grocery and we could probably find a little money to help her out.”

“And just where’d you think we’re going to find it?” Pop asked.

“Well, I guess we’ll just wait and see,” Mom replied.

Pop had said his piece. He scooted his chair out and walked to the bedroom.
Thelma watched the window screen sift the gray dust that floated above her head. Unsettled in the silence she knew would be shattered when the twins got up, she scanned the room Pop had built for her. When she turned twelve, Mom had said, "Thelma’s getting too big to sleep in the room with the babies. She needs a room of her own." Pop had spent every minute he wasn’t at the mine, building a new room on the house. Thelma had shown her gratitude by painting the room herself, pale green walls with violet trim. Years of wear had begun to show. The big poster of the state capital building in Charleston had faded and hung lopsided. The gold dome had begun to lose its shine. The maple dresser Jimmy’s sister, Elliott Rose had given needed a new coat of varnish. The old, metal office desk English teacher, Everhart loaned rusted under the window. Three of the pale green walls were lined with bulging white plastic shelves that sagged under the heavy load of neatly stacked books and notebooks, framed pictures and what-nots. The room was kept just as Pop insisted, neat and clean.

The pine floor chilled her bare feet as she walked to the window. She looked past the pond, into the deep wood and up to the summit of Droop Mountain. Droop Mountain felt like thick, sturdy arms wrapped around her, keeping her safe, holding her back. Three whitetail deer, a large doe, her tiny buck, a smaller fawn leapt out of the woods and pranced to the pond. Thelma quietly watched them browse the meadow grass and drink fresh pond water. She grabbed a handful of her matted hair and twisted it into a knot. Her plan was forged: read, write, study, work and apply for every scholarship she could find, no need for a cent of Pop’s pay. The pond and the mountains were what she’d miss the most.

***
The day after Christmas Jimmy Cale’s twenty-year-old sister, Elliott Rose, had planned a holiday party at her university apartment in Morgantown. She had invited Jimmy Cale, and told him he could bring a few friends. Thelma begged Pop for permission to go.

“His sister, Elliott, will be there. You know she’s real nice. I promise I’ll be home by eleven o’clock,” she pleaded.

“A sixteen-year-old high school girl has no business going all the way up to the university to a party. You stick around here tonight,” he said.

“Pop, please, Jimmy Cale will be driving us. His mom and dad said he could go. They are letting him borrow the truck. You know he’s a good driver. He never drinks or anything if that’s what you’re worried about. Other kids from Lost Creek are going. I promise; I’ll be home right on time.”

“Frank, I think it’ll be all right. Elliott Singleton is a responsible girl. Jimmy will have her home on time. She’ll be all right,” Mom said.

Frank Kendrick stared into his coffee. “My mind’s made up, now. Girl, you go on, find something to do closer to home.”

Thelma snapped. She had never talked back to Pop but her disappointments were piling-up.

“Your mind’s made up about everything. You don’t ever let me do anything I want to do. You just wait and see. I’m getting out of here the day I graduate high school. You’ll see. I’ll get my own money, and I’ll go off to college and never look back. You
won’t be the boss of me forever.” She ran to her bedroom-room and locked the door. Thelma paced from door to window, chewing the tender skin inside her mouth until it bled.

***

On New Year’s Day they had held Frank Kendrick’s memorial at the Lost Creek Assembly of God Church. It was the first time he had ever crossed the threshold of a church of any denomination. Afterward, most of Lost Creek came to the house. Thelma went to her room to get away from the fuss. Cheek-kisses, stiff hugs, and the smell of tuna-noodle casserole made her stomach churn. She wished the walls would block the sound.

Foreman Lloyd Singleton’s deep, loud voice could be heard above all the rest.

“Football and Jimmy Cale was the last thing I believe Frank talked about,” he went on. “After that mean ice storm passed, we waited outside the mine for the three-to-eleven to do inspection and give us the okay. John gave us the thumbs up. Frank and me stepped out of a cold rain and on into the mine elevator. We had just turned our cap lights on and begun the descent when Frank started in about the Friday night game with Lumberport.”

Thelma covered her ears, but his voice grew louder. He bragged on his own son, right there in a home that had just lost its only man. She wanted to leap out of her window and run to the woods.
“Frank was in good spirits and getting a big kick out of retelling how Jimmy Cale had ‘pulled off the right hand shoulder-twist, Jimmy going left when the Lumberport defense was sure he’d go right, third down, eighty-two yard run to score.’”

Lloyd Singleton failed to say that her Pop had mentioned it was his own daughter, Thelma, who copied the playbook for Lost Creek’s star senior wide receiver, or that she had printed all of the plays on three-by-five cards, studied them and ran the moves with him, over and over and over, until he knew them in his sleep. No, it seems there was no talk of her at all before her Pop rode off alone in the Torkar into his section of the mine and commenced his work of driving roof bolts into the ceiling of coal. Mr. Singleton didn’t say that Pop started to feel light-headed and sick from the methane that had gone undetected. She prayed he’d tell them that he was sure Frank passed out before the explosion, and that Frank had not heard the running and rushing of bad air before roof bolts, mine timbers, flying coal dust and hot fire came blasting toward him out of the pitch black. He didn’t. He didn’t say that her father had surely had time to bring someone to mind before he caught fire.

Thelma wished Lloyd Singleton would go home to his peculiar wife and his perfect son. She fought to hold on to the bitterness she felt. But, she remembered it was Lloyd Singleton who saw to it that Pop’s remains were covered with a yellow canvas tarp before they brought him out in the Torkar he went in on. She remembered Mr. Singleton’s face, black with coal dirt and full of torment when he walked out of the mine elevator carrying Pop’s cap… the light still on.
Mom ordered the crematorium to burn Pop’s remains again and put them in a cardboard box. She and Thelma and the twins scattered them over Whitetail Pond. When Thelma took her handful of Pop to throw, she curled her fingers around him, raised her hand and released the dust into the air. Brown and white ribbons of dust furled over the pond and settled on the green water.

For months after Pop’s funeral, Thelma trudged from her room to school, to work and back again. She read, wrote, worked and studied. She held a part-time job at Virgil’s Store, helped Mom with chores and drove the truck to Clarksburg when they needed supplies. The twins were ill and whiny, soothed only when she read to them. Mom fussed at her to eat. Thelma didn’t talk to anyone about the pain, a feeling like a fallen mine timber had left a splinter in her stomach. Jimmy Cale came by every Sunday after church, behaving as if she was his Christian duty. He’d coax her to go for a walk or a ride. Until the Fourth of July, Thelma had said to him, “No, not today.”

July Fourth was different. Lost Creek was well into dog days. The mountain air was heavy and hot. Thirsty trees stood still on parched ground. Virgil had given Thelma the day off. She and Mom had spent the morning cleaning out the garage, sorting through Pop’s tools and belongings, deciding what to keep or sell. They’d come across an old coffee can he’d labeled Thelma’s. It was stuffed full of dollar bills and change.

Mom handed it to her, “No doubt he was saving up for you.”

Thelma shoved the can back into her mother’s hands. “You keep it. We’ll need it for gas and groceries,” she said.
Mom wiped her eyes with the bottom of her shirt. Thelma looked down the broom handle.

“You go on and take the twins up to the parade and the church picnic. I just gassed the truck. The twins need to get out. I’ll stay here and finish up,” Thelma said.

“I don’t want to leave you here by yourself,” Mom said.

“I’ll be all right. You go on. I need the peace and quiet,” Thelma said.

“Well, all right then. It would do them some good to get out a little bit. I’ll go put them in the tub,” Mom said.

Thelma lay on the porch swing reading *Machine Dreams* when Jimmy Cale cruised up the driveway on the Harley he’d just washed and polished. He took off his helmet, shook out his yellow hair, and shut the engine down. His heavy motorcycle boots thumped the porch steps.

“Can I sit?” he asked.

“Go right ahead,” she said and looked away.

He sat down on the end of the swing and wrapped his gloved hands around her bare feet. She jerked and tried to sit up. He tugged on his black leather gloves and tossed them on the swing. His warm bare hands gripped her feet and pulled them into his denim lap. “Lay still, now,” he said. He circled his knuckles over the bottoms of her feet. She squirmed.

“My feet are filthy, been cleaning all day,” she said.
“I don’t care,” he said. His strong fingers pulled on each toe.

“Thelma Rene, you ever going to talk to me?” he said.

“Nothing to say,” she said.

“Well, I’m not budging until you talk to me,” he said. “I won’t take no.” He tightened his grip on her feet.

She stared at the shine on his boots while they sat in the heat and the quiet. He outlined each bone and blood vessel of her skinny feet with his long finger.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Sorry ‘bout what?” she said.

“For all that’s happened to you,” he said.

“Wasn’t any of it your fault,” she said. She swallowed the salt that dripped behind her throat.

He pressed her feet into his stomach. His legs pumped the swing… forward and back. They listened to the creak of the swing and the low, steady hum of the window fans.

Thelma spoke first. “I don’t know when I’m gonna feel like talking,” she said.

“Well, you call me when you do. You hear me?” he said.

“Well, all right then.” Thelma stared at a wet yellow curl on his neck.

He wiggled her toes. “This little piggy,” he teased.
“Stop foolin’ around. That tickles,” she said.

“I know it tickles. Made you smile. Ha ha,” he said.

She threw her book at his head. He caught it with both hands and placed it back on her lap.

“Lucky catch,” she said.

“Always,” he said.

She laughed and sat up. He scooted closer. His arms gave off the sun’s heat. He pulled her hair up and kissed her neck. “Please come on and go for a ride with me. You can’t stay cooped up here. We’ll go up to Morgantown, cruise around campus. We’ll take a picnic down to the river,” he said.

She stared at her feet and chewed the skin inside her mouth.

“All right, but I have to be home before Mom and the twins get back,” she said.

“What time’s that?” he asked.

“Seven or so,” she answered.

“I’ll have you back by six thirty. I promise. Come on.”

“Limme go get my shoes on. I’ll be right out,” she said.

Jimmy Cale handed her his helmet and helped her adjust the chin strap. He hooked his heel to the kick stand and started the engine.

“From the left,” he yelled over the rumble of the engine.
Thelma walked around bike and stood at his left side. She grabbed his shoulders, planted her left foot on the passenger peg and swung her right leg over the seat. She slid down the hot black leather and straddled his waist.

"Lean in and hold on," he shouted.

***

Nine days later, while Thelma slept, a mid-summer front moved in from the Northwest bringing thick clouds, white at the top, swift, darker gray at the base. Large drops of warm rain puddled at the porch steps. Mom knocked open-handed on the door.

"T, you awake?"

"Come on in," Thelma answered.

As the door opened, whiffs of coffee and cinnamon toast blended with damp morning air. The twins in their matching, shiny-blue, Snow White nightgowns, crouched on either side of Mom’s heavy legs.

"You two skedaddle while I talk to your sister. Leave her be now, and go on."

She closed the door with one hand and a hip, and carried a mug of strong coffee stirred with canned milk and honey to the nightstand. Mom bent-over stiff-legged to pick up the tiny, black cell phone lying on the floor and sat it next to the coffee. Thelma leaned on one elbow and wrapped her tangled hair into a knot.

"T... honey, Nell Rose just called," Mom whispered.
Thelma wrestled her heavy purple leg from the sheet and sat up to stare at the window sill.

Mom raised her voice and spoke faster than usual, “Jimmy Cale woke up about two o’clock this morning. He opened his eyes and talked a little bit. His big-sister, Allison, was sitting right there by his bed. She told Nell Rose that he asked her for her phone so he could call Thelma to see if she’s all right. His sister told him it was after two in the morning, but he wouldn’t take no.”

Thelma fixed her eyes on the window and waited for it to rise up on its own. Mom reached under the sheet and squeezed her hand. The room stood quiet. Old water, dammed behind Thelma’s swollen eyes, broke free and ran down her face. It stung the scratches on her cheeks and chin as it trickled down her neck and into the valley between her tiny breasts. Her deep moans filled the room, stole through the house and traveled down the hollow. The twins tapped on the door.

Mom lifted her hand from Thelma and spoke, “Early this morning the ambulance took Jimmy Cale to a special rehab’ hospital. His Mom said they didn’t use the siren, just the lights, all the way up to Pittsburgh.”

The splinter in Thelma’s stomach eased and drifted. She pressed the heels of her bruised, scrawny hands against her eyelids and pictured how she’d leave this sorrowful place.
Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil. Ephesians 4:26

**Harm**

*February 14, 2011*

Alderson Federal Industrial Institution for Women hunkers in a deep and narrow valley. The Allegheny Mountains coil around 105 acres of prison ground. The Greenbrier River cuts through the land on either side. The river runs swift and cold for small-mouth bass. Ice patches form and fracture in shallow pools near its banks. Twenty-seven prison buildings stand on kept lawn, most are brick and mortar, functional, unremarkable. The only memorable architecture is a 1927 dormitory, two-story, pocked red brick, four white square columns, pitched roof above a down-sized palladium window, a widow’s walk. Two three-story concrete-block dormitories built in a later year spring up from a maze of gray cement sidewalk. There is no high granite wall or tall chain-link fence topped with concertina wire. There is no guard tower with siren and rotating red light. No. It is medium security. The last winter snow will fall on Alderson on Valentine’s Day.

Alderson prison is suffering a shortage of guards. With increased demand for coal, the mines have picked-up and Consolidated Coal Company pay and benefits offer a better living for West Virginia family men. Prison guard supervisor Bill Salter turned his back on coal when his boy was killed in a methane gas explosion at Consol No. 13. He and the boy’s mother moved from their cabin on Shinnston Mine Road in Lost Creek, to a small farm near Alderson Village. The boy’s mother wanted clean air
and the quiet of the foothills. Bill wanted steady pay and the bass in the Greenbrier River. The Marine Corps and the mine were all he had known until he came to Alderson.

The other prison guards avoid night duty. They have kids to put to bed or ballgames to coach. Some have second jobs. But Bill always prefers the midnight shift, less hassle and no bullshit. Bill Salter hates bullshit. He craves stillness and loves the dark. He is a soldier and a guard who seldom wanders outside the lines of his job description.

Bill walks bent, favoring his right knee, a souvenir from a pothole in a make-shift runway on Marble Mountain in South Viet Nam. In 1968 his life expectancy as a Marine Corps Huey Gunship helicopter door-gunner was nine weeks. Knee surgery and two months of rehab in a hospital in Guam probably saved his life. Tonight he is breaking in a new pair of black leather combat boots bought at Old Sarge’s in Alderson Village. Painful blood-blisters fester on the heels of his tired feet. Bill is sorry his guards want to be called corrections officers, and he is sorry he is unarmed.

At 4:10 a.m. the prison grounds are quiet. Five hundred or more female inmates are asleep, tired from work given and worry caused. Bill’s flashlight shines a yellow stripe on the concrete walk as he makes his last rounds of the night. The outdoor common area, posing as a picnic site is dark, empty. Shadows formed by lamplights through old oak trees cover four empty picnic tables like gray tablecloths. All lights are out in Dormitories I and II. He fingers the keys on his belt as he pulls the steel handle on the double door of Dorm Number II and finds it secure. He steps sideways down five narrow steps, and glances at four old, white-frame cottages that once housed Tokyo Rose--spy, Billy Holiday--blues singer and drug addict, Squeaky Fromme--Manson
family failed assassin, Sara Jane Moore--failed assassin, and other notables whose names and crimes he can’t remember. The dilapidated cottages stand vacant, without padlock, bolt, or chain. He is grateful Martha Stewart--cupcake queen, is gone. Bill does not have the manpower or patience for celebrities and the commotion they bring. He limps past the dimly lit Prison Infirmary and reminds himself that Lloyd Singleton’s girl is night nurse tonight. He knows her schedule.

Bill Salter takes a last gulp of cold, fresh air and unlocks the door to the guardroom. He feels relieved that he will be alone in the cramped space. Monroe called in earlier with another lame excuse about coming in late. Bill told him not to bother to come in at all. The room is chilly, sparse and clean, with a metal desk, two chairs, a table-lamp, magazines and a newspaper. It smells of strong bleach and burned coffee. He checks the armory cabinet twice and finds it well-locked, then lays keys, flashlight, and a can of mace on the desk. Snyder calls in on the two-way from the front gate and tells him, “All’s quiet.” Bill slumps into the khaki office chair and leans it back to prop an aching leg on the desk. The inside pocket of his quilted, green jacket is bulging with a half-pint. He looks at his watch, 4:35. He has worked a double shift, and he’s beat. Bill reads the Mountaineer Times until the Jack Daniels eases the ache in his knee and delivers its promise of sleep.

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The light from The Infirmary flickers dim to bright. Treatment Room I is dark and empty. In Room II, night nurse Elliott Rose Singleton attends to her patient. The patient, Inmate Corinda Baker suffered a nasty fall earlier in the evening. The story told was that she’d slipped on a recently mopped floor and fell, head over feet, down a
flight of concrete stairs in Dorm I. The back of her skull struck the iron handrail. The prison doctor was called and asked for phone orders. He gave verbal orders to Singleton, telling her to start an intravenous of Ringers lactate to replace fluids lost and to watch her closely. The diagnosis written on the chart is *severe concussion due to blunt trauma.*

Elliott Rose Singleton has given inmate Baker 20 mg. of Ambien for sleep. The customary dose is 10 mg. She slides her stethoscope side to side, back and forth around her tired neck and stares out the single frosted window in Corinda Baker’s room. A lamppost near the common grounds shines yellow-gold light up to cirrus clouds as they drift in from the hills...snow. She remembers a book Joe bought for Amy, *Kid’s Book of Weather.* He read to them in a deep low voice, “Thin, razor looking cirrus clouds indicate a cold front is coming. A cold front is a front in which cold air is replacing warm air at the surface. Cold fronts tend to move faster than all other types of fronts and tend to be associated with the most violent weather.” Joe had been a good pilot who knew weather and a good father who loved his daughter. Elliott Rose is certain Joe Hubbard was the right choice to father her child. She never imagined marrying Joe but had always dreamed of a daughter. “Cold fronts tend to move quickly, maintaining their intensity,” he said.

Elliott Rose nervously fingers her necklace, a habit she shares with her older sister, Allison Laurel. She moves a tiny silver cross up and down the chain, around her neck, back to the front, listening to the sound of metal sliding over metal. Her father had given them identical necklaces. He’d glued a tiny piece of coal to the middle of the cross. “Wear this and you won’t forget where you came from,” he’d said as he locked the clasp behind their necks. His daughters never take them off.
A pine limb brushes the window. A clump of sagging evergreens shake and bend against the winter wind. Elliott Rose thinks about how each member of her family plays their part: Jimmy Cale, the youngest, everyone’s favorite, the tension breaker, soothing with a smile and a wink. Allison Laurel and John Lee were the bossy, overbearing, big sister and brother. When they were kids John and Al fuzzed and bullied. She and Jimmy Cale ran to the woods to escape them. In later years they jumped in one of his old clunkers and went for long rides. The baby boy loved his vehicles. She wishes Jimmy Cale would come and drive her away from this dreadful place.

Nine years to the day Elliott Rose had told Mom and Pop she was pregnant with Amy. She was twenty-years-old with six months of nursing school left to complete at West Virginia University and no plans for marriage. They were hurt and surprised, and she hated being the cause of their worry. They had their notion of family and had been well-married over forty years. No one in Lost Creek ever mentioned Lloyd Singleton without placing his wife, Nell Rose’s name in the same sentence. Lloyd Singleton had lived for mine rescue and family, stock-car races, cornbread and dumplings. Nell Rose lived for family and books, the Lost Creek Assembly of God Church, and extra-long Salem Menthols. Pop and big brother, John Lee, helped her pay for nursing school. Pop, always the rescuer, and John Lee, the hard-working ER doc with the well-heeled wife. The entire family came to her graduation: Pop, Mom, John Lee and his wife, Taffy, Allison Laurel, and Jimmy Cale. They rode in Taffy’s new Cadillac Escalade from Lost Creek to Morgantown, Jimmy Cale taunting John Lee the entire trip about the size of the vehicle and the gas it guzzled.

“You need a ship’s pilot license to back this thing up?” Jimmy chided. Then he
turned his teasing to his sister’s bulging tummy. “Hey, you’re the only graduate wearing loose scrubs with the drawstring untied...but the best lookin’ that’s for sure.” Her nursing school graduation ceremony was short, tasteful, and efficient. Fifty-six men and women stood on the stage in the WVU Auditorium and recited the Nightingale Pledge; diplomas were distributed alphabetically. She can hear her name, and feel the pride she felt that day when “Elliott Rose Singleton” was called out near the end.

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I solemnly pledge myself before God and in the presence of this assembly, to pass my life in purity and to practice my profession faithfully. I will abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous, and will not take or knowingly administer any harmful drug. I will devote myself to the welfare of those committed to my care.

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She has been told that her memory is her strongest feature. Her memory has given her spelling bee championships, honor societies, a summa cum laude diploma, poker winnings, and scholarships. She keeps a cedar box full of Assembly of God Sunday School pens and ribbons won for Bible verses memorized. A picture of Sweet Jesus is pasted on top of the box. He stands on a bridge holding the dimpled hands of blonde children. But now her memory haunts her. Since the accident, it brings painful nightmares and daytime terrors. She shakes her head, pulls a rubber tourniquet from her scrub pocket, and jerks a long wave of brown curls into a tight ponytail.

Her feet, tied inside spotless, chalk-white shoes, feel swollen and heavy. Her slender body is taut, fixed. She recalls the painful argument with Allison Laurel and John Lee about keeping the baby and marrying Joe.

“You’re too damned independent,” John Lee yelled. “And you’re worrying Mom and Pop sick.” He knew where to strike.
Allison Laurel came to her defense. "Leave her alone," she said. "It's none of your damn business. She's smart enough to build a life for herself and the baby."

She did not defend her actions nor reveal Joe's secret of a bitter, jealous wife who would fight divorce. After harsh words were spoken and forgiven, they all showed-up for Amy's birth. Joe flew John Lee in from Pittsburgh on Alleghany. Allison Laurel caught a red-eye from New York. Jimmy Cale cranked the old black and blue truck and drove Pop and Mom from Lost Creek to Morgantown in record time.

"Your baby is breach," the obstetrician warned, "frank breach, bottom first. But she is small, and we think you can have a vaginal delivery. You'll have to push, push, push!"

She didn't want a C-section. In Labor and Delivery her mother and big sister refused to leave her side and drove the nursing staff mad. She and her baby girl worked hard, she pushing, Amy wiggling and squirming her way out. Finally, Amy emerged...a perfect, beautiful, blue-eyed screaming daughter. Allison cut the umbilical cord while the nurse placed Amy on her chest. She looked into Amy's familiar eyes, "Hello, my sweet girl, hello. I've been waiting for you." She held her to her breast and felt her latch-on, suckle, squirm. Waves of heat moved through her body, nipple to toes.

"Elliott Rose and Amy Laurel," Allison said peering through choked tears.

"Would you look at them, they're a pair."

Joe cradled baby Amy in his thick arms and rocked her to sleep. He built a good case for marriage on the day his daughter was born, but Elliott Rose was never one to change her mind.

Mom helped care for Amy through croup and chronic earaches. Pop
taught her to wink and to whistle. Allison drove down from New York to see her niece and namesake graduate from Kindergarten.

They had all been good to her when Joe and Amy were killed. Mom and Pop rushed to the hospital and held her between them. Allison, John, Taffy and Jimmy Cale kept the vigil with her at the funeral home. They all walked behind her up the long path to the top of Droop Mountain and helped her scatter Amy’s ashes over Lost Creek Valley. Mom and Pop begged her to come home with them. They said she needed family and rest.

Just one year after Joe and Amy died, Pop had a fatal stroke. She’d disappeared the day after his funeral… too full of her own grief to be of any help. Now, nobody knows where she is. She is certain that Mom is lost without Pop and probably not well herself, still smoking despite a diagnosis of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease…Mom, Nell Rose, stubborn and noncompliant, scary smart…sometimes just scary.

“We were wise to name you after your mother,” Pop always said. “You are your mother’s daughter.” Three months without a word, I know Mom is worried sick. I should call. I should let them all know I’m all right; she thinks… well, not all right, but alive. Losses pile-up. Grief burns a hole in the lining of her stomach. Painful ulcers form. She wraps her arms around her waist and bends to ease the aching.

Elliott Rose inspects her hands as she places her palms on the cold window pane. Well- scrubbed nails short and manicured, no polish, no rings or embellishments, capable. Her wrist-watch reads 5:35. I must stop thinking and get on with it.
Across the room, Corinda Baker lies in induced, restless sleep. Loud snores and intermittent hacking coughs bounce off painted concrete walls. A white hospital sheet and a loosely woven, beige blanket are neatly tucked around her skinny frame, a skeleton papoose. She is emaciated and looks much older than her thirty-six years. A twenty-gauge butterfly needle protrudes from a vein in back of her bony left hand. Just above the taped needle, four tattooed fingers read H.A.T.E. The right hand L.O.V.E scrawled above cracked and chewed wine-purple fingernails. Her coarse, pitch-black hair pokes the pillow. Thin, sallow skin is pulled tightly over the bones of her face. Two open cold sores ooze from either side of thinly drawn lips. Blemishes dot her right cheek, a blue and yellow bruise paints the left. Crack pipes and random Bic lighters have singed away eyebrows and lashes. Corinda Sue Baker is returned to the place of her birth. Her mother was sent to Alderson in 1975, three months pregnant, an accomplice in an armed robbery with multiple drug convictions. Corinda’s father would have sold his daughter, if he’d had a buyer. Lately, she had been taking-up with any man who had a joint, a pill, a bottle or a cigarette. The latest was Terrance Nichols from Georgia. He had built a profitable meth lab in a suburb of Atlanta. He’d persuaded her to carry product all the way to Pittsburgh. Her 14-year-old son is in the custody of the Georgia Department of Family and Children’s Services. Her five-year-old daughter has been adopted by a family in Pikeville, Kentucky. Corinda Sue Baker never folded any card she’d been dealt.

Elliott Rose walks to the bedside to check the flow of the intravenous. She feels for two vials of succinyl choline in the right pocket of her scrubs, vials taken from the intubation box during restock. She had read the instructions: 1 mg for every
2.2 pounds. Administer slowly, wait for paralysis of striated muscles, administer additional dosage. She had memorized the rest.

Elliott Rose moves a small desk chair to the hospital door and wedges it under the handle. She sits rigid, upright in the bedside chair as she replays the scene she has crafted and rehearsed for three months. She will draw the clean syringe out of the left pocket of her scrubs, the vial of succinal choline out of the right. Pulling the cap off the syringe needle with her teeth, she will hold the vial up ninety degrees to draw the first 70 mg. After taking the green cap off of the patient's IV line, just below the tattooed T on Corinda's third finger, she will push all 70 mgs. into the iv. The patient's eyes will pop open like window blinds yanked. There will be loud, raspy gasps. Corinda Sue Baker will jerk and twitch, then lie wide awake, flaccid, paralyzed. All of her striated muscles will spasm rendering her unable to speak, breathe, or move, "locked in" as they say in the ER. She will lean over the patient's body, almost touching her, and stare into her fixed, terrified eyes. She will say, "This is for Joe and my baby girl. You and all the bottom of the food chain lowlifes like you will not get away with minor injuries."

Then she will pull a newspaper clipping from her pocket and read it to Corinda Baker while the patient lay paralyzed:

November 21, 2009

Thirty-six-year-old, six time DUI offender, Corinda Sue Baker, has been charged with vehicular homicide following the deaths of 32-year-old Joseph F. Hubbard, a captain for Alleghany Airline, and his daughter, 7-year-old Amy Laurel Singleton. Baker, driving a blue 2005 Ford truck belonging to Terrance P. Nichols of Decatur, Georgia, was driving southbound on the northbound ramp of Exit 23 on Interstate 72.
Hubbard, the driver of a 2008 Honda CRV was traveling northbound on the ramp.

Baker’s vehicle struck the passenger side of the Honda, forcing it over the guardrail and into oncoming traffic. Mr. Hubbard and his daughter were pronounced dead on the scene by Marion County Emergency Medical Services. Baker received minor injuries.

She will carefully fold the paper and place it back in her pocket. Then she will tell Corinda Sue Baker more about the hell she’d made. She will say: “Amy and Joe were going Christmas shopping. Amy was in her new purple soccer shirt and jeans. She was wearing white princess sneakers with lights in the heels that blinked pink and red when she ran. She smelled like Johnson’s No More Tears Baby Shampoo when she hugged me and said, “Goodbye, Mommy” for the last time. And that is all I think about now…goddamn Johnson’s Baby shampoo. I have bottles of it in the closet at the filthy Red Roof Inn in Alderson Village. I open a bottle and put it to my nose and scream.

Three weeks ago, I left a nice, clean apartment in Morgantown. On my refrigerator there are crayon drawings of turkeys made by little hands turned sideways. I had a good job as nurse clinician in the ER at The Medical Center, the fine, reputable, spotless Medical Center. I traded it in for this hellhole Prison Infirmary, just so I could track you down. And it was easy finding you, because I’m smart. I am very, very smart and I have friends. It was a cinch landing a job in this goddamn place. The newspaper says you received minor injuries. Minor injuries? I don’t think that’s good enough. I’ll push a second dose of succinyl choline into your IV. Then your pupils will fix. You will not be able to blink your eyes. You will die a painful drowning death, smothered in your own vial secretions. I’ll shroud you in stiff, cold hospital sheets that smell of Betadine and trailer trash sweat, and you’ll go straight to your own hell. I’ll tell them the succinal
choline had passed its expiration date...threw it away. A mortality review on a prison inmate won’t happen, because no one on the face of this earth gives a fuck about you. You, Corinda Sue Baker, will never do harm to anyone ever again.”

She had constructed and rehearsed every action, every line.

Elliott Rose lowers her head and shakes her hair loose from the rubber tourniquet. She stuffs the tourniquet into her scrub pocket next to the vials. She looks at her watch. Shit, it’s almost 6:05...daylight soon. She stands. Her weighted feet step back to the window. Her hands tremble as she paces back and forth. Her pulse is rapid and irregular. Her stomach burns. She checks the window lock and takes a last look outside. Snow, she thinks, my God, it’s snowing. Here it comes! Large, thick flakes are piling quickly on the frozen ground. The flakes float and break apart over the lamppost. They hypnotize her. Sweet Jesus. Get on with it, Elliott Rose. Relief. There will be relief. The Nurse’s Oath scrolls again below her field of vision: Do no harm. Do no harm. Do no harm. Do no harm. Bible verses, memorized long ago begin to stream, Thou Shalt Not...

...eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves... Vengeance is mine; I will repay. She tightens her grip around the vials in her scrubs and paces from one end of the room to the other. She wraps her arms around her waist and bends to ease the sharp pain in her stomach. Corinda’s snoring grows louder; her hacking cough ricochets off the tile ceiling and hits the concrete floor. The snow is pelting the ground, freeze-fall-cover-chill, freeze-fall-cover-chill. Goddamn it. Snow. Pain.

She summons her dark demon. It does not come. The part of her that can do this thing is frozen. But, she had conceived it, molded it from all the loss. Once it
was hot and fluid, feeding off grief and pain. It had devised the perfect revenge. When
did it freeze, now a shard of dry ice lodged in a hole in the pit of her stomach? She
smells baby shampoo...feels Amy’s tiny arms tug around her neck. Amy’s voice
whispers, “Snow, Mommy, feel the snow.”

Elliott Rose moves to the door and throws the chair that holds it shut. As
the chair topples, she runs out the door and down the hallway, through the double doors
and outside to the common ground. She paces and cries, frozen flakes falling on her bare
arms.

***

Bill Salter hears a commotion on the common ground. He grabs his coat,
shoves a can of mace in his pocket and stumbles through the door to the picnic tables.

He puts his firm hands on her shaking shoulders and steadies her until she
stops shivering.

“Sit down here at the table.” He brushes the snow from the picnic table
bench and helps her lower her shivering body. She opens her fist. Bill stares at the vials
in her hand.

“You wanna give me those, now,” Bill says. She hands him the vials and
watches him stuff them into his jacket pocket.

“I couldn’t...” she cries.

“Just breathe. It’ll be all right. Not another word now. Settle yourself,” he
says.

She lifts her face to the falling snow. Flakes melt on her hot cheeks, mix with
tears and run down her neck. Bill takes off his thick coat and places it on her shoulders. She breathes in the smells of Vitalis, whiskey, and tobacco. He sits next to her, their necks bent while bonnets of white flakes form on their heads. She places her hands on her stomach and rocks forward and back, forward and back. He lays a steady hand or her back and pats.

“How ‘bout I walk you back to the Infirmary. You can get your coat and purse, then we’ll go to your car. You go on home and get some sleep.”

“Wait. Wait. Give me a minute.” She lifts her hand to her necklace, and slides the tiny cross up and down the chain. She rocks. He pats.

Bill notices lights coming on in dormitory rooms. “They’ll all be up by 6:30,” he says.

Elliott Rose looks at her shoes and says, “I meant to. I couldn’t find it in me. I meant to.”

“All right, now. It’ll be okay. They’re getting up. Need to get you inside.”

“Sure, sure, you’re right,” she says.

Bill helps her to her feet, and they walk together to the Infirmary. Elliott Rose takes off his coat and hands it back to him. He leans on the door frame of Treatment Room II and watches her.

“Thank you,” she says squaring her shoulders and walking to the sink. She turns on the faucets and soaks her hands and forearms with warm water, pushes the soap dispenser with her elbow and lathers her hands, wringing them over and over each other, left to right, right to left, between each finger and back around again. She brings the
lather up to her elbows and scrubs up and down her forearms. She rinses, bending her arms, careful not to touch the faucet with her skin. She pulls a paper towel from the holder and thoroughly dries her hands and arms, then carefully places it in a covered trashcan.

Bill tracks each graceful and deliberate gesture. She steps to her patient and places four clean fingers on Inmate Baker’s radial artery... strong pulse, eighty beats per minute. She puts a thermometer into the gaping mouth and waits two minutes while she counts eighteen respirations, temperature normal, ninety-eight-point-seven degrees. The nurse reaches to the headboard for the blood pressure cuff and wraps it around the top of the patient’s arm, securing it with the Velcro strap. She places her stethoscope in her ears and presses the bell-end against the brachial artery to hear the systolic thump, then the diastolic blub, and makes note and returns it to her neck. The pressure cuff is then carefully draped over the right side of the headboard. She firmly tucks the patient’s blanket under the mattress and says, “She’s sleeping restlessly.” She closes the door and walks back to the nurses’ station, face forward, erect. Bill walks behind her. With a careful pen she writes the vital signs on Corinda Sue Baker’s chart.

L.P.N. Susan Vickers pulls the hood back from her soaked navy parka and tugs at her wool gloves as she hurries into the Infirmary to begin her day shift.

“Morning! Some weather, huh? Coming down like crazy out there. Snow day. Kids are home from school. Good thing Jerry is working nights at the mine.” She brushes the snow from her parka and lays her gloves on the desk. “You have a report for me, Miss Singleton?”

“Quiet. Quiet night. All we have is Baker in Room II. Fell down the
steps in the dormitory - concussion."

Susan Vickers tilts her head and scowls. “How in the world did she manage to fall down the steps?”

Bill is quick to answer, “No tellin’. I’ll write up the incident report – turn it in tomorrow.”

Elliott clears her throat, “Doctor Harkrider was called, gave phone orders. She’s still asleep. Vitals stable. Blood pressure is 120/80. No problems. All in the chart. You have a good day. Stay warm.”

Bill holds her coat open while she slips her arms into the sleeves. She pulls her purse to her chest.

“I’ll be right back, Miss Vickers,” Bill says. “Gonna walk Miss Singleton to her car.”

“Sure, Bill. Be careful out there. It’s a mess.”

Bill and Elliott Rose step gingerly onto the frozen sidewalk and walk toward the parking lot.

She turns to him and says, “Bill, my daughter...”

He cuts her off. “I know. I know.” The night his boy, Daniel, died in the mine... he stood frozen and watched while Elliott’s father, Lloyd Singleton, led the rescue. He stood alongside Elliott Rose while she held her older sister, Allison Laurel, Daniel’s pregnant wife. Allison’s screams still pound his ears.

Bill shakes his head. “This here...it just wasn’t yours to do,” he says.

He steadies her as she starts to lose her footing on a patch of ice.

“There’s nobody here that’s made any connection... you to her. Never
mind this, now,” he says.

“I’m going home,” she says.

“Well, you be careful now, driving to Alderson Village. I don’t know if
the cinder and salt trucks are out yet.”

“No, Bill, I mean... I’m going home,” she says as she opens the car door
and lowers herself to the cold seat.

Bill uses a gloved hand to scrape the snow from the windows of the car
and waits until he hears the motor turn.

She lowers the car window. “I’m grateful to you,” she whispers, staring at
the deep folds of skin that circle his eyes.

“You be careful, now. Take the main road. I’d stay off that back road to
Lost Creek,” he warns. Bill turns, lifts his collar against the wind and makes his way
back to the prison through the pelting snow.
“There are only three true sports: bullfighting, mountain climbing, and motor-racing. The rest are merely games.” ~ Ernest Hemingway

LUG NUTS

Huntersville, North Carolina
Friday, April 15, 2011

Half-way between the Appalachian Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean, vast clusters of Loblolly pines, thick barked and coarse grained, ninety to a hundred feet tall, reached for the Carolina sun. Gusts of warm spring air dropped stiff needles onto the race shop’s asphalt parking lot. The shop, a semicircle of steel, concrete, and glass, was teeming with hundreds of workers: race team executives and administrators, engineers and technicians, mechanics and machinists, fabricators and frame builders, coaches and crew chiefs, pit crews and drivers. Beyond the wide double doors, three polished stockcars sat idle on a glossy showroom floor: a Home Depot orange No. 20, an M&Ms yellow No. 18, and a black Fed Ex No. 11. Wall to wall, gleaming glass display cases were crammed with race booty: gold pistons and grandfather clocks, wooden plaques and silver cups, ribbons and medals, champions’ fire suits and helmets.

Upstairs, a make-shift training room was perched behind a long, narrow window overlooking the vast assembly floor. The room was jammed with weight racks and treadmills, lat pulls and leg presses, kettle bells and ab’wheels, cross-trainers and benches padded in Carolina blue leather. “Sweet Home Alabama,” echoed off plate glass, and mirrored walls while three members of the No. 11 pit crew worked out after drills. Rookie rear tire changer, Jimmy Cale Singleton lay on a flat bench, pressing a 250 pound barbell over his chest. Rear tire carrier, Ham Jackson, hoisted a forty pound kettle bell to
his shoulder, squatted, and thrust it over his naked head. Next to the open door, a gray wall phone rang. Ham dropped the kettle bell to the floor and grabbed the receiver.

“Weight room!” he shouted over Lynyrd Skynyrd.

He clutched the receiver against his chest. “J.C.… telephone. You, ever heard of cell phones?”

“Don’t believe in ‘em.” J.C. grunted as he dropped the bar back on the rack and moved to lat pulls. “Who is it?”

“Well, please allow me to ask.” Ham stuck the phone to his ear. “This is J.C. Singleton’s private secretary; may I please ask who is calling?” He hollered, “Says she’s your sister.”

“Which one? Allison or Elliott?” Jimmy wiped sweat off his neck.

“Come on J.C. is this a joke? Allison or Elliott? Your sister? Your sisters are named after drivers?”

“Yep, sisters for Bobby Allison and Bill Elliott. My brother, John Lee … Lee Petty.”

“… and J.C. would be?” Ham asked.

“Jimmy Cale,” Jimmy puffed his chest. “… Cale Yarborough: semi-pro-football, Golden Gloves, four time NASCAR Winston Cup Champion, first driver on the cover of Sports Illustrated.”

“Holy shit!” Ham laughed.

“Don’t curse. The phone? Ask who it is.”
“Is this Allison or Elliott? Says she’s ‘Allison.’

“She’s the older one. Tell her I’ll call her back later. Get a number.”

“Well, my pleasure, Mr. Jimmy Cale Singleton. Ham hunted a pen, scribbled a number on a yellow Post-it, and stuck it to Jimmy’s wet forehead. “There ya go. Next time you look in the mirror... again... you’ll see it.”

Jimmy felt the post-it slide down his nose.


“She’s gorgeous, but don’t go there. She’s a writer, not your type, a real nerd, bossy and headstrong and she lives with a sizable New York City firefighter.” Jimmy stuffed the note into the pocket of his gym shorts.

“All right, then. She said she’ll call you at home tonight, because she knows you won’t call her back.”

“See, I told you she was bossy.” Jimmy moved to the leg press, and set the pin.

“Don’t forget you’re going with me today.” Ham lay across the stability ball and crunched elbow to knee.

“Go where?” Jimmy looked in the mirror and winked, first his brown eye and then his green one.

“Don’t wink those freaky mismatched eyeballs. The elementary school in Huntersville... shit, I knew you’d forget.”
“Don’t curse. I didn’t forget. I’m going. You driving?”

“Of course. You didn’t think I’d ride on the back of your donor cycle did you?”

“What time?”

“Right after the little darlin’s eat their lunch, twelve-thirty sharp. And don’t forget to wear your fire suit, and bring your helmet. They’ll want to see the full getup.”

“Yes, dear, I won’t forget.”

Jack-man, Todd Reynolds, looked up from the blue bench. “You two lovelies on public relations duty today?”

“Yeah, going to talk to third graders. Want to come along? The more the merrier. I bet they’d love to see a real live jack-man.”

“Third grade, huh? That sounds about right. Naw, I have a ton of stuff to do before Talladega. You two have fun. Hey, how about changing that CD before you go? I’ve had about all the Skynyrd my Yankee ears can take.”

“Whoa up now...Talladega is this Sunday. We have to get in that Alabama groove.” Ham strummed air guitar and sang out, “Big wheels keep on turning...carry me home to see my kin... singing songs about the Southland, I miss ole’ baney once again, and I think it’s a sin, yes...”

Todd shook his head and pressed his hands to his ears. “Ham, p-l-e-a-s-e, stop...new rule - no singing in the gym.”
Ham bowed and yelled across the room. “J.C., Shower and change, meet you at my car outback, 12:00 sharp.”

“Yes, dear,” Jimmy tossed his towel in the hamper and hurried to the locker room. He stood under the pounding hot shower, humming “big wheels”, wondering how his first PR gig might turn out, praying he wouldn’t mess up. He was glad he was going with Ham.

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“Hey, you don’t have to drive it like you stole it,” Jimmy yelled.

“Just practicing for race day.”

“You aren’t driving, you’re carrying tires.”

“You ready for the Big One? Your first time at ‘dea..., the biggest, fastest track of them all,” Ham checked for Carolina troopers in the rearview mirror.

“I’m ready, no worries,” Jimmy lied. Mention of “the Big One” made his stomach lurch. “First time I’ve ever been to Alabama.”

“No shit... you poor, deprived man. I’d never left sweet home Alabama until I came to Charlotte... grew up in Sylacauga. Uncle Donnie, Daddy and me never missed a Talladega Race. I went off to play ball in Tuscaloosa, then straight to Charlotte.”

“You played for Alabama, huh?” Jimmy pretended not to know Ham’s stats: Sylacauga High School all state defensive end, four years starting for the Tide, All Southern Conference, six years NASCAR tire carrier, best time overall in 2009 and 2010
Pit Crew Challenges. He assumed Ham was well aware of his: Lost Creek, West Virginia all state wide receiver, three years starting Allegheny College, First team-All NCAC, three years NASCAR shop mechanic, six-months Sprint Cup rookie rear tire changer. Yeah, he was sure Ham knew his stats. All the guys in the garage knew each other’s stats.

Jimmy stuck his head out the window and pulled his long fingers through a mane of thick, yellow curls.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Drying my hair.”

“Car window, a hillbilly hairdryer?” Ham laughed and shook his bald head.

Jimmy lowered the visor and glanced in the vanity mirror. “My dad took me and my brother to local dirt tracks but he never made it to a NASCAR race...never missed one on TV, though. Sundays at our house: Sunday school, church, dinner, NASCAR on TV. Pop loved restrictor plate racing...Daytona and Talladega, his favorite tracks.”

“Your Pop tell you about the curse, the Talladega jinx?” Ham asked.

“We don’t believe in curses.”

“You should. Listen up. First off, the track is built on ancient Indian burial ground. Some say a shaman put a curse on it. Back in the day, Bobby Isaac left his car during a race because he heard voices telling him to park it. Later on, drivers found their cars sabotaged with cut brake lines and sand in the tank. Oh, and there is, of course the time in '87 when your bossy sister’s namesake, Bobby Allison, blew his engine going
through the tri-oval, dislodged his driveshaft and went airborne, nearly taking out a whole
grandstand. And... I think I was about ten years old when Bobby’s son, Davey, to my
mind, one of the great drivers of all time, died in a helicopter crash in the Talladega
infield. It’s jinxed, I tell you. You have to respect the Big One.”

“I respect it all right,” Jimmy said between gulps of lemon-lime Gatorade. “I was
three years old when Bill Elliott set the 212 mph record there. Pop never stopped talking
about it. He’d say, ‘Good-Gawd, can you imagine, 212 mph? Good thing NASCAR
mandated restrictor plates on those carburetors or they’d all be flyin’ into the catch
fence.’ He stared out the car window as they sped past small truck and tobacco farms
chewed-up by new subdivisions with names like Moss Creek, Timberwalk, and
Wellington Chase. Jimmy thought about how fast things change. Pop was gone and he
missed him. He wished his father could have seen him on pit road, just once. “I just
don’t believe in curses,” he repeated.

“Whoa, here we are.” Ham made a sharp left turn into the Huntersville
Elementary School parking lot and wheeled the red Supra into an empty spot. The school
message board featured a smiling bulldog in a navy-blue sweater pointing to the words,
*Live Your Dream! Miss Baker’s Third Grade Welcomes No. 11 team.*”

“Shit, I hope they’re not expecting the whole team.” Ham lifted a silver toolbox
out of the trunk and slammed it down.

“Don’t curse in front of the children. What’s that?” Jimmy asked, shoving his
black helmet under his arm.

“Visual aids, Rookie. Just hide and watch the master.”
Jimmy strode ahead and opened the door. A comely, young blonde woman with wide powder blue eyes, wearing jeans and polo-shirt stood at the hallway entrance. She tucked a brown clipboard under her arm. "Welcome, and thank you so much for coming. I'm Miss Baker." She smiled and gestured to the right. "Follow me, please. The class is sooo excited."

"You said M-i-s-s Baker?" Ham's voice quavered as he gaped at the tiny, grinning bulldog sewn to the pocket of her shirt.

"Yes, I said Miss." She stepped out in front.

Ham pulled his knee to his elbow, "Yes," he whispered.

"Shhhhh," Jimmy scolded as he stared at her wagging yellow pony tail, her slender waist, and the bulging pockets of her snug Wrangler jeans.

"Told you this would be fun," Ham whispered.

"Shhhhh." Jimmy set his jaw and squared his shoulders as they followed Miss Baker through the narrow classroom door. He took a deep breath. The room smelled of apples, hand sanitizer, and curdled milk. Just below the low ceiling tiles, a row of green cardboard squares with perfect white cursive letters encircled the room. Colorful posters of presidents, astronauts, firefighters, police, doctors, nurses, dancers and athletes were pinned to the bright yellow walls. Twenty-one yapping third graders sat cross-legged in a semicircle. Miss Baker moved her fingers like a zipper, across her puckered, wagon-red lips. The children hushed and sat at attention.

Jimmy leaned into Ham. "I'm gonna try that one."
Ham shrugged, never taking his eyes off Miss Baker’s embroidered bulldog.

"Class, in keeping with this month’s theme, *Live Your Dream*, I would like you to meet our guests: rear tire carrier and rear tire changer for the No. 11 Fed Ex Toyota, Mr. Hamilton Jackson and Mr. J. C. Singleton. They will explain a bit about what they do and then they will take your questions… one at a time."

Ham nudged Jimmy and said, “Follow my lead. Chime in… whenever.” He moved in next to Miss Baker and gently placed his broad hand on the small of her back. “Thank you very much for inviting us, Miss Baker. J.C. and I are very happy to be here in the home of the mighty Bulldogs.”

The children cheered and clapped, their wide-eyes fixed on the gleaming black fire suits.

Ham’s deep baritone filled the small class-room.

“How many of you have ever been to a stock car race?”

Three rambunctious boys, one wearing a green No. 88 Chevy sweatshirt, jerked their arms up and waved the air. A birdie, pig-tailed girl in a No. 4 Red Bull t-shirt, adjusted her thick pink glasses and nodded.

“Well, I see we have one Earnhardt Junior fan, and a very pretty Kasey Khane fan over here. Listen-up, they’ll be a quiz at the end of our presentation… just kidding.”

Ham squatted and placed the toolbox on the floor in front of the kids.
"Last count, NASCAR claimed seventy-five million fans. At next Sunday’s race at Talladega we expect about 135,000 at the track and fifteen to twenty million watching on television. How many of you have ever watched a race on TV?"

Ten or more eager hands went up. "I have, I have."

"Very good, we have some experts here to help me out."

Ham pulled a thick piece of yellow chalk out of the box. "Is it okay if I draw on the floor here, Miss Baker?"

"Sure," she said.

Ham drew a wide limestone oval around the kids. "First we have a track. It might be round, oval, figure eight, dog legged, all different shapes. Some are half-mile, mile, mile-and-a-half… the biggest being Talladega at 2.66 miles. The tracks are all over the country. He stood and walked to a map of the United States that hung next to the Smart Board. He poked his thick fingers on the states and waited for the children to call out, "Florida, Arizona, Nevada, California, Virginia, Texas, Alabama, Delaware, Kansas, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, New Hampshire." Ham looked at Jimmy. "What track am I leaving out, here?"

Jimmy quickly moved to the map and pointed to the Carolina Piedmont. The kids screamed, "North Carolina."

"Very good." Ham nodded to a beaming Miss Baker.

"Now…we have thirty-six races a year, February to November, on twenty-six tracks across the country. So I know you have already figured out that we go to some
tracks twice, like the one right down the road here in Charlotte. So the next question:

How many cars start the race?”

Jimmy watched the twenty-one youngsters squirm in silence, wondering what the master’s next move might be.

“Don’t worry. I have my toolbox right here.” The kids scooted to look inside the silver box. Forty-three, 1:80 scale die cast, miniature replica NASCAR stockcars were piled inside. “Each of you take two of these little cars.” The kids scrambled for the cars and clutched them in their fists.

“Now… line ‘em up around the oval here, side by side,” Ham instructed.

Jimmy moved in next to Ham and watched the third graders arrange their cars on the chalk. “Hey, easy now, two-by-two, remember,” he reminded them.

When the cars were lined up in perfect double file, Ham crouched and carefully placed a tiny black No. 11 Toyota Camry out front. “How many do we have in the field now?”

Miss Baker jumped-up and waved her arms in the air. She yelled from the back, “Forty-three!”

“Yeah, Miss Baker!” She blushed and sat down.

“Next thing, a guy waves a green flag and the race is on.” Jimmy chimed in, “Now, let’s hear a vroom, vroom, vroom.”
The third-graders screamed, "Vroom, vroom." Jimmy hollered over the din, "Much louder, now. C'mon, you can do better than that."

The kids roared, "VROOM, VROOM!"

"Awesome!" Ham zippered his lips and the kids hushed. Now, imagine all forty-three cars are racing around the track, two-wide, three-wide, sometimes four, all jockeying for position, all racing toward the front for a hundred-and-eighty laps or more, 400 or 500 miles, racing for three, four, sometimes five hours. They are going to need fuel, new tires, adjustments, water for the driver, clean windshield, who knows..., right?"

The kids echoed, "Right!"

"That's where J.C. and I come in.

Ham drew a thin rectangle along the front side of the track and made forty-three tiny boxes inside. "Now, this is pit road. This is where J.C. and I do our work. Our mom's told us never to play in traffic, heh heh and now we make a living of it." The joke was lost on the kids but Jimmy heard Miss Baker giggling in the back.

"The cars come down pit road at 45 or 55 miles an hour and pull into their assigned boxes. The pit crew, six guys in fire suits and helmets, jump over a two-and-a-half foot wall and service the car." Ham looked up at Jimmy. "Put your helmet on for them, J.C."

Jimmy shoved the glossy black helmet onto his head, tucked his hair underneath and adjusted the strap. He lowered the visor and through a thermoplastic prism he stared back at twenty-one mesmerized children.
Ham moved to the Smart Board and picked up a black marker. “The race team has a captain, a boss called a crew chief. He sits up on a huge box, watches the race, makes all the calls to the crew and coaches the driver. Of course, you have the driver. Our driver for the No. 11 is Denny Hamlin. And, you have the pit crew, six guys called ‘the over the wall gang.’” He carefully printed on the board: (1) **Jack-man.** “He carries a twenty pound hydraulic jack and raises the car on both sides, first right, then left, to allow the tires to be changed.” (2) (3) **Tire changers.** “We have two tire changers, front and rear. They first remove and then replace the right tires using an air-powered impact wrench to loosen and tighten five lug nuts holding the tire rim in place. Then they move to the opposite side of the car to change the left tires. J.C., here does the rear tires. Show them, J.C.”

Jimmy squatted to the floor and gave his best impression of the sound of an air gun.

““We have a guy, Boot, who changes the front tires.” (4) (5) **Tire carriers.**

“That’s me, rear tire carrier. Two tire carriers, front and rear, start on the right side of the car and repeat the whole process on the left. We carry the tires over the pit wall and index, or hang them perfectly on the studs. Tires weigh about sixty pounds… just about as much as some of you weigh.”

The boy in the No. 88 shirt blurted, “I weigh seventy-six pounds.”

“I see you’re a big guy, maybe a future gas man,” Ham said as he wrote: (6) **Gas man.** “He fills the car’s fuel cell with twelve gallon cans of fuel. Full gas cans are eighty-one pounds each. The pit crew also make needed adjustments to the car: track bar
changes, wedge adjustments, clean grille, pull the fenders away, tear off adhesive windshields, on and on.”

Ham held his fingers in the air. “Now, count with me… one-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand, four-one-thousand, five, six, seven, and eight.

The children cried out, “…nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.” Ham pumped his arms. “That’s it, stop! That is all the time we have for a pit stop. We do not want to go over sixteen seconds. Twelve is a good stop. More than sixteen is not so good.” He frowned and shook his head. “Got it?”

The kids answered, “Got it.”

Ham stepped back. Jimmy was still squatting with his helmet on his head. He felt a poke.

“You can take that off now,” Ham instructed.

Jimmy felt his face flush. He stood-up, slowly lifted his helmet, tucked it under his arm, and shook out his hair.

Miss Baker walked to the front and stood next to Ham. “Thank you very much Mr. Jackson, Mr. Singleton. Class, let’s give them a hand.”

The children clapped.

“Does anyone have a question for our guests?”

No. 88 eagerly waved his hand. “Do you know Junior Earnhardt?”
“We get asked that pretty often,” Jimmy said with a grin. “Yes, we do. Most of the folks in the garage know each other. He’s a great guy, good driver.”

The birdie girl in the Red Bull shirt shyly raised an arm. “Have you ever seen Kasey Khane? My mommy l-o-v-e-s him.”

The class snickered. Miss Baker picked up her clipboard and poised her pen. “Can you please say something to the class about our theme this month, living your dream?”

Ham looked at Jimmy and asked, “You want to go first?”

Jimmy’s voice cracked, “Sure.” He cleared his throat and paced in front of the board. “I guess, since I was your age or younger, I loved cars. I had a box full of matchbox cars, like the ones there.” He pointed to the floor. “Then I started building models and later got into working on real cars. My neighbor down the road had an old truck I loved to fix and fiddle with. My dad took me and my brother to local dirt tracks, and we watched NASCAR every Sunday on television. I played football in high school and went off to college, majored in mechanical engineering.” He scanned the children’s bright, eager faces. “I studied hard.” Right out of school, I came to Charlotte and was hired as a shop mechanic. For three years I worked-out every day, enrolled at Pit U in Charlotte, and bugged them like crazy to let me try out for the pit crew. I finally got my shot at it this year. This is my first year as rear tire-changer for the No. 11. Talladega will be my eighth race so far. I work in the Machine Shop until three in the afternoon, then I practice with the crew five days a week, and go to races on Sunday. I get a little
homesick for my family and the mountains...not many hills around here... but I am living my dream. There is nothing like it.”

Miss Baker looked at Ham and asked, “And how about you Mr. Jackson?”

“Same story, pretty much, except I grew up in Alabama. My family loved racing too. We went to as many stockcar races as we could afford. When I was a kid, football was my big dream. I played in high school and at Alabama. Race team recruited me right out of college. I don’t know one end of a wrench from another, so I set up and teardown the hauler, the big semi-truck that carries all the stuff to the race, and I’ve been rear tire carrier for almost six years now. I love it. I can’t wait to get up in the morning and go to work. I don’t know many guys who can say that.”

Miss Baker tucked a stray curl behind her ear and smiled. “I know the class had a great time and learned a lot. Thank you so much. What do you say to our guests, class?”

The kids echoed, “Thank you, thank you”

Jimmy reached into his pockets and said, “I have a little something for y’all.” He handed each child a yellow lug nut. “Here’s a little race souvenir.” The kids squealed, lifted the nuts to their eyes and squinted through the holes.

Jimmy whispered to Ham, “You go on, get the car and bring it around. I’ll clean up and bring the tool box.”

Ham looked puzzled. “Well, all right.” He waved goodbye to Miss Baker and the kids.
Miss Baker helped Jimmy pick-up and walked him to the front door. He ran out, jumped in the car and threw the tool-box on the backseat. They turned onto the highway.

“Here ya go.” Jimmy stuck a pink Post-it to Ham’s huge thigh.

“What the hell?” Ham looked at his knee… *Caroline Baker - 704-549-1888.*

“Shit, did you tell her it was for me?”

“Of course, I did. She said she was hot for lumpy, bald guys from Alabama. She’s not my type, anyway. I like brunettes… brunettes with freckles. I’m crazy about freckles.”

Ham laughed. “Thanks, man. I owe you. Well, how’d you like public relations? Fun, don’t ya think?”

“The kids were great. Visual aids, huh?”

“Yeah, with kids you must have aids. You get all my cars back?”

“I think so.”

“Sometimes the little buggers hide ‘em in their pockets.”

“I bet they do. I would have.”

Ham pulled a protein bar out of his pocket. “Want one of these, they’re good?”

“No thanks. You plan on kids?”

“Hell, yes, a whole yard full. A wife first would be the best plan. How about you?”
“Yeah, someday,” Jimmy said, his eyes fixed on the road. The kids took him back to eight-years-old: building tree-houses in the backyard with Thelma and El, mountain biking West Virginia mountain trails, lining-up matchbox cars on the rug in front of Pop’s chair.

“Nice touch there, with the lug nuts,” Ham said.

“I try.”

“I know you do.”

Ham made a sharp turn into the shop parking lot and pretended to aim for Jimmy’s motorcycle.

“You wanna die?” Jimmy shouted.

“Not today. We’ll see you at the Concord airport, 10 a.m. tomorrow. It’s off to Talladega, baby!”

“No, I’m riding the bike. I’ll leave tonight, probably stop over in Atlanta.”

“No, no, no, very bad idea. Chief likes the whole team on the plane.”

“No worries. It’ll be fine. I’ll be at the garage gluing lugs before y’all land.”

Jimmy pulled his keys from his pocket and thrust them into the ignition.

“Very bad idea,” Ham yelled over the thunder of the engine.

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Talladega, Alabama
Sunday, April 17, 2011

Eleven o’clock Sunday morning, hot Alabama sun exploded off the windshields of thousands of sedans, SUV’s, station wagons, vans and trucks. Miles of vehicles inched along Interstate 20 headed west from Atlanta. Jimmy weaved his motorcycle in and out of traffic, down the white center line, and along the guardrail. A skinny, bearded guy sporting a red No. 14 cap lowered the window of an army-green pick-up. The guy stuck a finger in the air and hollered, “Pick a lane, you crazy son uva bitch!” Crazy son uva bitch for sure, Jimmy thought. He’d stubbornly insisted on getting to Talladega his own way. He’d chosen the open road, wind at his back, bugs in his teeth, seven-hundred and thirty-eight lbs. of steel in his crotch. He’d never considered what it might cost him. “Shut your goddamn mouth,” he cursed.

Streams of sweat flowed down Jimmy’s neck, soaking his chest and back. He unzipped his leather jacket and prayed, “Sweet Jesus, please don’t let an Alabama trooper catch me driving like this. Just let me get to the track, p.l.e.a.s.e.” He tried to remember a Bible verse or a hymn to offer up, something he’d memorized at the Lost Creek Assembly of God. Nothing righteous came to his addled mind. He was beat. Working on the bike for hours had left him frustrated and fatigued.

He looked up at the cloudless, blue southern sky and saw the silver belly of the navy-blue and gold Goodyear Blimp and an old red and white Cessna tail dragger, pulling an orange banner: *Rick Hendrick Chevrolet welcomes Talladega fans!* He knew he was finally getting close. He janked the throttle and snaked his way to the gate. Thousands of fans walked toward the grandstands. They wore ball-caps with car
numbers and t-shirts emblazoned with drivers’ faces and stock cars. They shouldered coolers, seat-cushions, back-packs, and small children waving race flags. Binoculars and cherished race tickets in plastic sleeves hung around their necks. Smells of strong coffee and stale beer, roasted peanuts and funnel cake, chili dogs and smoked bar-b-cue drifted under Jimmy’s helmet, reminding him he hadn’t eaten since Saturday morning. His last meal had been at a Waffle House somewhere between Lawrenceville and Douglasville, Georgia. The bike had refused to crank…ignition failure. Thank God, the chubby waitress, Kayanne or was it Roxanne, offered to drive him to a Harley dealer to get a new ignition. And thank God, he had the tools he needed in his saddle bags.

Jimmy flashed his credentials at the guard and found the No. 11 haulers. He grabbed his fire-suit, and helmet out of the locker and sprinted to pit row.

Boot, the front tire changer, was gluing the nuts on the rims. He looked up.

“Where in hell have you been?”

“Bike broke down… outside Atlanta… ignition. I’ve been bustin’ it to get here …sorry. Here, I’ll take over.” Jimmy reached for the glue.

Boot jerked his hand back. “I got this. You better let the chief know you made it. He’s already pulled Jason from the Nationwide team to do the rear. Hey, you ever heard of a cell phone?”

“I thought I could make it long before now. Traffic was unbelievable.”

“Hey! This is Talladega, man! Ain’t no hillbilly dirt track.”

“I’ll go tell him.”
Jimmy ran to the pit box and waved his arm at the crew chief. Chief pulled his Rayban’s down on his nose, leaned over the box and stared at Jimmy. “I don’t have time to deal with this right now. You all right? You ever heard of a phone? You got your head in this?”

“Yes, sir,” Jimmy yelled over the track noise.

“Go tell Ham and the guys you’re here. Tell Jason we’ll use him another time. After tear down, meet me in the hauler.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jimmy ran to the garage. Ham and Todd were helping the mechanics clean up. “I made it,” he announced.

Ham shot him a fierce look. “You better go on and let Jason do it. You look like shit.”

“No, no, I got it. I’m good. Bike broke down…traffic.”

“Don’t have to time to hear it. You better get back there and help Boot with the tires.”

Jimmy ran to the twelve sets of Goodyear stickers baking in the afternoon sun. Boot didn’t look up.

“Limme help you finish this.” He picked up a tube of Norton’s and carefully squeezed a dab of weather stripping glue around each nut. Gluing lug nuts was a job he’d taken over and preferred doing alone, unhurried and unhassled, exactly three hours before