

Three shadows steal across a field of forgotten seed corn, stumbling over fallen husks rotted to the ground—three shadows bent low scurry past rough leaves that scrape the skin like cow tongues. Late November, deep night. Misting rain that once hung like fog sharpens into pin needles on great gusts of wind. The loamy mud sucks at their ankles, white breath blooms before their faces, and their bare arms burn with the cold as they surge over the sodden field, wild with trespass.

James Cole Prather comes last in line. He cannot keep pace with the healthy legs of his companions, he suffers a misshapen knee that makes him list to starboard at each step, his excuse for a run an awkward pole-vaulting motion mastered from childhood. He catches up to where his friends still at the field's end, hiding out before the cracked cul-de-sac drive. Their giggles and squally hushes spring from the dark stalks, a tiny crew of the stoned and invulnerable scanning for signs of any human figure, for the infamous caretaker making his rounds, the glint of his shotgun in the meager moonlight.

The spectacular ruin of the St. Jerome seminary looms before them. It's a vast keep: five stories high, the facade as wide as a football field is long, row upon row of shattered mullioned windows gaping sightless over the broken fields. At the summit towers a stone cross; above that, clouds zoom across the moon like river rapids at full rampage.

His companions bolt across the open space and disappear behind a keeling pine. James Cole watches them go as he catches his breath, used to being left behind. He raises his face to the roiling clouds, feels the cool rain mix with the sweat slicking his cheeks. His eyes close at the simple pleasure, and he listens to the swim in his brain and the thousands of sounds that surround: wind on stalks; rain on leaves; a broken shutter attacking its hinges. Each a note sung precisely for him.

By the time he makes it around the pine his friends are gone.

He calls their names, softly; only the wind rises in answer. The basement windows nearest him are securely boarded shut. Above, on the second floor, a single window hangs open not far from the tree's sturdy center, and he envisions the scene he must have missed only a moment before, Spunk and Shady hauling themselves up the weak extended branches without speaking, sneakers grabbing for toe-holds on the brick ledge.

The rain comes down heavier, in gobs. A shiver wrings his body as three cold drops shock his neck beneath the collar. Up the tree he goes, boots scrape-sliding on the slick trunk, clumps of scratchy bark pulling off in his hands. The climb requires more effort than he had expected, but he makes it to the open window and wiggles through headfirst. The wet linoleum floor shocks when it kisses him hard on the forehead.

They've left him here as well; he can feel the absence around him. The dark is such that it swallows the weak beam of his flashlight. Rain sluices noisily in one dark corner, and somewhere there sings a plopping song, an echo as water taps into deeper water, a melody without resolution. The first purl of thunder rolls the length of the sky in a gradual motion that seems to pour far into the distance and then return. And there is a stench—the room smells of piss and rot and wet dog.

The light from his hand works like an intangible guiding rope drawing him behind its lead. He has been in this place many times before, yet at each entry feels utterly lost—even, in some way, bereft; his heart in his throat. It has always struck him as the backdrop to undesirable dreams: inexhaustible in its rooms, tangled by puzzling stairways and corridors, often presenting mystical compartments

with no function he can divine. In dreams he has staggered from hall to hall with slow-thighed dogs panting unseen behind him; he has fled down stairs and stone slides; he has been swallowed altogether into the belly of the earth. As if the building masked a portal that led deep into ancient caverns, sculpted by slicked flues and hidden rivers.

Now here he is again, and, as in every dream, he is alone. But he is not dreaming. What was it the sick man had said just an hour before? *There is always something happening, you just don't know what it is.* It was a quote from somebody else.

He is twenty-three years old. He has no reason to imagine within a year he might be dead. The serrated butterfly knife folded into his hip pocket is mostly for show. Still he checks to confirm the blade is there. On such scant assurance Cole gropes forward, half-blind in the darkness, less substantial than the knife at his hip or the flashlight in his hand, an obedient and guileless spirit adrift from all familiars.

1996

The idea for the night, Cole's idea, had been to go it alone with Shady Beck, the two of them alone after much strategizing and manipulation on his part. In his heart and mind Shady Beck was an end in herself. But she needed a little party, some chemical aid she called it—*I shall be in need of chemical aid* she cooed in exaggerated high-class over the phone, her small-toothed smile a shape in Cole's ear—as an excuse to be out with him. Or maybe she needed it just to tolerate his presence, he wasn't sure. And he did not care. For years she had been a figure in the hands-off domain of his brother Fleece, a smile and a wave walking away to her car, a sunny laugh across the room to which he always dipped his head in a kind of bow.

*Chemical aid* required a stop at Spunk Greuel's house, where Cole did not want to go. He *knew* Spunk, had known him most his life, and understood that once with him they might be with him all the night long. The boy was a kind of stink that got on your clothes and in your hair and was near impossible to shake off.

Cole could accept the risk for the chance at spending time with Shady Beck. And it was unavoidable anyway, so no use in lamenting. Mister Greuel was the man to see for pills and pot and any other sin on spec. He led a loose crew—got his weed direct from growers in Clay and Harlan counties, the pills from God knew what Byzantine scams, his crank from his own cooks, most of whom followed Fleece. A dark and entertaining man, Mister Greuel—always with the *Mister*, nobody

called him *Lawrence*—him with his tongue swollen from some strange sickness, goggle eyes awry in a fist of a sweating head. He had a face as rutted and pocked as barnwood. His fat tongue made him spit everywhere and mucked up his words. Listening to him was like sitting witness to the creation of a new language, you had to match terms previously unknown to what you had thought you readily understood. Like Spunk's real name is William. Cole had called him Billy on the playground. But one night providing the boys with *the gifts of their destruction*—what Mister Greuel called the bottles and blunts—Billy's dad started to get on his son for not bringing any ass to giggle on his lap. It was for young ass giggling on his lap that Greuel gave freely of his gifts of destruction. Unhappy to see only skinny adolescent boys scouring his stock, Greuel started to mutter over how his own son William was a punk. Except for his fat tongue the word came out *shpunk*. Mix that moment with teenage boys baked on the bomb and Billy Greuel becomes Spunk the rest of his life.

Greuel made the kids laugh but they knew not to mess with him. It was Greuel the guy that took down three Gravy Berserkers (one of the biker gangs from Montreux city) who thought they could reap business from a hick dealer by showing up with no more than chugging fat-boy hogs and a flash of a semiautomatic Glock. Greuel swept them out with nothing but a rifle and a Bowie knife, and he strung those bodies from a town-square tree like so much deer meat left to ripen in winter.

Yet on many occasions this man told little James Cole to think on him as a friend.

The gate code had not changed since the days Cole used to ride up on his bicycle. He punched in the numbers and parked by the stables where the old man ran legit side-business boarding horses for city refugees, rich folk buying into the new bedroom communities mushrooming on either side of the interstate. Shady took his hand and the small gesture thrilled him. Together they navigated the great yard of oxidized farming implements and roadside statuary, a mazy museum of throwaway Americana. They halted at the front steps before a clutch of gar hung gape-mouthed and stinking, their eyes collapsed into folds. Cole had no explanation for the fish.

Professor Mule shouted greetings from his Adirondack chair. He looked nested alongside a column of paperback mysteries, a thermostat between his thighs, his Mossberg shotgun in easy reach against the porch rail. They had not seen one another in years but Mule said he would recognize that crazy eye of Cole Prather anywheres. You staying warm, Erly? Cole asked, skipping the man's nickname, ever uneasy before his grain-sack presence and the gun, though what Cole heard was you only needed to run from Mule if you saw him with his toolbox. Mule nodded and dismissed them, falling into a singsong hum as he returned to his book, a ridiculously fragile looking object in the grip of his pork-belly hands.

"I knew you'd be out here fore too long you wall-eyed rascal!" Spunk burst out, knocking open the screen door. He torched their faces with a breath that bleached the stench of the fish. Presented with someone she recognized, Shady regained composure and was in past Spunk and at the big bowl of reefer by Mister Greuel in his rocking chair before the screen clapped shut. Feeling like a calf roped on the run, Cole felt the Greuel house upon him.

They kept off the main lights by habit, the dim room illuminated by the small blue glow of a silent TV set. That and the headlight Greuel kept at hand, wired to a car battery set on the floor. As visitors arrived he liked to blind them in the glare as he waved the headlight about. Somewhere deeper in the house a transistor radio scratched out lonesome tinny fiddles and nasal harmonies that wailed tales of warning from another day. It was a greeting impossible to get used to and Cole had walked into it a thousand times.

Not Shady; she was on a mission. She pounced into the old man's lap and had her hands in the bowl saying, "Mister Greuel how do you do, whyn't you tell us a story while I roll us up a fat one."

The old man's laughter came sick and raspy but it had always sounded that way and he would never die.

"I like her!" he crowed as he shifted in his chair, the weight of them both wrenching complaints from the struts. "Who is she?"

As if he didn't know. As if anyone in Pirtle County had never heard of Shady Beck, youngest of the three daughters to Doctor Beck (the pediatrician who had booster-shot them all), one-time star of the

volleyball and swim teams, Shady Beck the walker-away from dazzling car wrecks, subject of several profiles in the *Pirtle Notice* paper, she of the hair like vivid champagne bubbling past her shoulders, hair that seemed a celebration whenever Cole saw it freed from its usual ponytail; her gray eyes had boys whispering her name into clutched hands at night before they fell into dream.

Still she introduced herself. As she did so Mister Greuel played the headlight over Cole, the beam driving heat over his face and arms. Spunk had to remind his father twice—*That's Cole Prather, Papa, come on you know James Cole*—speaking his name louder the second time in a dance with his father's shouted *What?* and *Goddammit who?* as he shook his head and dug one finger in his ear, lips curled into a snarl. He thumped the headlight against the side table as though to squash a scattering bug there, the metal casing casting a resonant bell tone.

"Come in here with a pretty girl and you know where my eyes're at. Been so long since I seen this boy I don't even know him on sight anymore." Greuel's smile unveiled a row of small crooked teeth the color of cooked bacon fat. "Well it's always good to have a Skaggs around," he said then, assuming the part of gracious host, "even if all you can get's the one what run off." Cole did not correct him. A rattling cough throttled the man and threatened to throw Shady to the floor. Greuel gasped and gulped furiously from a bottle of water and raised one arm; then, once he gathered himself again, he clarified that he knew Cole wasn't all Skaggs. Not that it mattered anymore in today's day and age.

"How is that mother of yours? Still splitting meds with patients at the clinic?"

Cole shook his head. "You know she's not. She quit that place first day she could."

"Why would I know that?"

It was nothing more than his game, Mister Greuel showing off before an attractive guest. He was nodding and smiling to spur Cole on to what he wanted him to say.

"You got her the job," Cole said to the floor. "It was you the one got her hooked up with that lawyer for the disability."

“Lyda Skaggs working a rehab hospital,” Greuel smacking his lips at the tasty ironies, “that there’s the fox guarding the henhouse if I ever heard. Now how come I never see her anymore?”

Cole raised his shoulders and held them. He didn’t know what made his mother do any of the things she did.

“Must not need anything,” Greuel said into Shady’s neck, as quiet and murmurous as a lover whispering.

Dishes clacked in the back of the house from the kitchen down the hallway. The radio back there had changed over to a basketball game. The front room shuddered with the changes on the silent TV screen, a general dark closing down and then pulling back. Shady, comfortable in most all situations, ignored the awkward stretch of silence; she asked and said at the same time (which is her way), “You want to talk to Miss Skaggs, why don’t you just call her,” and ran her tongue the length of a rolling paper. Mister Greuel patted her thigh just above the knee, his single ornament—a large gold-nugget ring set with diamonds that followed a curve into the shape of a horseshoe—glittering blue fire.

“Now I have never cared for telephones. No point in them, nobody can understand a thing I say if they don’t see me say it.” He wagged the mustard-gray eel of his fat tongue; Shady peered at the lighter she used to fire up the joint.

“She’ll come around,” he added. “You can count Lyda a loyal friend when in need. You know what I’m talking about, don’t you, James Cole?”

Cole wasn’t there to discuss his mother. They had argued earlier that evening and her voice still stung in his ears the way only a mother’s voice can sting. She had mocked his moving in, calling him her *honored guest*; she had called him lukewarm water in the mouth of God. It stung and he could not say why, or why she would even use those last words, Lyda being nowhere near religious. Her head was so blended in roofers and goofballs that no one could explain half of what came out of it. Still the insults pricked.

Lyda had asked why he was pursuing Fleece’s girl. She’s not Fleece’s girl anymore, Momma, they broke up years ago. She said, You can’t do better than pick up where your brother left off? He’s



your *brother*. Cole reminded her he was only half his brother, as everyone in the county liked to remind him they knew. She said they both dropped out of her belly so that made them all brother in her eyes. Cole said the gulf between the way she saw things and the way things were was wide enough to march an army through. *A really big army*, he stressed. Some time soon after this she came up with lukewarm water and the mouth of God.

The joint made its rounds. Cole held in the smoke for as long as his lungs would allow, as if his doing so could prevent everyone else from talking.

“You seen that Fleece of late?” Mister Greuel asked.

Cole raised his shoulders again, dropped them—he was beginning to feel self-conscious about this gesture—and passed the joint. “You see Fleece more than I do.”

“That may be but maybe I haven’t seen him *lately*, is what I’m saying. And maybe *you* have. That’s why I asked the *question*.”

Cole started to shrug his shoulders but caught himself, and turned up empty hands. He did not understand the why behind what the man was asking.

“I can spell it out. My business is such a fine-tuned machine you’d think it was designed by NASA. Fleece is my Mr. Reliable, works for me like there’s no other reason for him to even *be*. Now you move back to the Lake with momma. And last night I had delivery due from your fine reliable brother, but I don’t hear from him. This is odd to my logic: you come home—your brother, suddenly he’s nowhere to be found. I hate coincidence. Makes everybody look guilty. I hate that.”

Everyone looked to Cole, even Shady, as though he should have the answer to his brother’s whereabouts, as though Fleece and Cole were close confidants—which everyone in that room knew they were not. His body flushed with heat, and it felt like the skin on his face and neck exhaled, all the small veins that fed the skin rinsing themselves. His eyes watered and he pinched them shut with thumb and two fingers. He was the only person standing in this room. He had always had trouble with nervousness for no reason. Especially when attention turned to him. He said, “Well Fleece does what he wants.”

“I bet he’s cooling it at St. Jerome by now,” came Spunk’s voice, foggy as he held in his hit and passed the jay to his father, who skipped his turn.

This was certainly possible. The seminary of Saint Jerome sat far out in the northern ridge of the county, behind fields of seed corn backing all the way up to the Possler Woods. It was said to be haunted; to house the rituals of devil worshippers; to be a hideout for dangerous men on the lam from the law, family, their lives. A mad caretaker protected the place and supposedly shot trespassers on sight. Many of these stories were no more than legends created by Fleece Skaggs—except for the caretaker, a guy he had assured his younger brother was truly unhinged. Fleece sold the man reefer and crank and squatted on the top floor. They shot bottles together off the stone cemetery wall out back the seminary grounds.

“Always been a young man I could trust, I practically raised him,” Greuel frowning at the headlight, “so I worry. Anything can happen on a country road. What if he tumbled over the shoulder and he’s lying there upside-down in the Cumberland?”

No one answered. Whoever was back there in the kitchen scraped a plate and turned up the radio, two broadcasters speaking with dramatic urgency over the roused crowd. Mister Greuel tilted his head as if listening, or straining to listen. In time he turned to the corridor and shouted: *Hey now. It’s near ten already.*

The crowd cheered loud enough to fuzz the small speakers and the announcer’s voice accelerated, hoarse with excitement. Boots shuffled on the kitchen tile and someone ran the tap briefly and then the radio shut off. The house stiffened in silence. The back screen door smacking shut clattered like a gunshot. Mister Greuel returned his attention to his guests, and began to talk again as outside a car engine revved to life, tires soon rolling over gravel.

Shady started work on another blunt, her glassy eyes narrowing to slits. She swayed her hips in Mister Greuel’s lap for reasons Cole could not fathom.

“Honest truth, you can’t name a place your brother might go without word to me?”

Honest truth he did not know. Spunk jumped to his feet, decided

aloud they should head to the old seminary to see what turned up. His father grunted and sliced the air with his hand, said he wasn't asking him. It was a vicious gesture that cut the length behind Shady's back, and his son turned as though struck across the face, and rushed his own head into the corner of the fireplace mantel.

Seconds passed before he cried out. Like the pain needed time to alarm his brain. From above one eye blood gushed from a gash as if its entire reason for being was to be freed of his veins. Spunk clutched the wound with the hem of his T-shirt and slumped into the couch. His father shook his head and stared at the floor; Shady looked on with vague interest. Nobody moved to help him. It was like no one was sure what they had witnessed had actually happened. After a silence, he moaned.

All this transpired within seconds. Yet it seemed to take forever to Cole, and a pressure built within him, a gradual rise that swelled until it broke, setting him into the generous sniggers of the greatly stoned. He started to shake and laugh in *I'm-so-high* wiggin' giggles, an act that moved Shady and Mister Greuel from stares of blank inverted fixity to ones of mild concern, but an act too that he could not stop. And still no one moved to ask Spunk if he was all right; nobody there expected anything less of him than his smacking his head into the most convenient sharp corner. As though Spunk had survived this long, made it to twenty-two despite the parade of self-inflicted accidents and mishaps that composed his brief lifetime, the broken fingers and toes and collarbones and splintered teeth, the burns from incompetent engine work (four-wheeler, minibike, motorcycle), the concussions from irritated horses, the mishandling of knives and saws and throwing stars, the metal grinder that caught his shirt and then the rest of his torso within it—with such veteran experience behind him it was rational to assume no mantel corner could do serious damage to that head. Cole pressed his hand over his mouth and nose to cram down the laughter, it felt like his eyes were hosing streams over his cheeks, and the laughter only punched at his chest that much harder. *The hell's got into this boy?* Mister Greuel wondered aloud. Cole could not answer. All he could manage was to clamp one hand tighter over his mouth and wave away the room with the other, begging to be ignored.

“I love pot but some people it just makes stupid,” Shady said. Instantly this shut him up somehow.

Mister Greuel fiddled with his headlight. He turned it one way and then another, often staring into the beam below his chin. By now Spunk had removed his shirt entirely and held it wadded against his eyes. He mumbled the word *stitches* and his father mumbled back that such could be found in a kitchen drawer. Spunk brought away the shirt and looked at the blood spattered there, pressed it to his brow again. This was not a cheap article of clothing, he complained. *I bought this at*—he couldn’t remember. Then he yawned, resigned to the ruined fact of it.

“A lot of blood in the human face,” Shady said.

“I thought you knew everything,” Cole said to Greuel. “I thought you never let a man drive a harvest alone.”

Greuel passed his headlight over the walls and ceiling. He said there had been complications with this run, his tailer had another item of business to take care of on the way back, they’d done it before in a pinch and never had any difficulties. “But you don’t need to know my problems,” he added. Again Spunk reasoned that Fleece was fine and probably fixed up with some tail—he excused himself to Shady from beneath the bloodied shirt—and was cooling it easy in his semi-nary digs.

“I’d like to think if he’s in this county he would have sense enough to bring me my money or my goods or else have a damn good reason to be walking around. A man has standards to keep, a reputation to uphold.”

At this Greuel appeared to fall into pensive rumination, gazing absently as the shape of the room changed with the movement of his hand. Dark veils swung opposite the wash of light and the whole room swayed; shadows dipped forward to listen in, leapt back. By now Cole’s eyes felt swollen and gritty, and it seemed he could note each half-thought as it rose and floated away without his grasping it. Perhaps that was why he felt so naked and unprepared when Greuel stilled the light fully upon him.

Events have a way of fooling, the man said. You’re in it and you think they’re one way but turns out they were steadfastly another.

There's always what's happening below what *seems* to be happening. It's enough to drive a man batshit crazy. You have to ask questions, you have to ask *why* you ask the questions you ask, it just goes on and on. And every time, the questions take you where you don't want to go. Every freaking time.

"I have no idea what you are saying to me," admitted Cole. Greuel dismissed him from behind Shady again. He smacked his lips as though he did not like the taste in his mouth.

"You kids get out of here. Why not show some loyalty to the old man who takes such care of you? Get out to that old place and see what sign of Fleece you can rustle up before I forget him." Another raspberry cough erupted then, along with another squeeze to Shady's thigh that went unremarked by her and set Cole to cringing. "Get off me hon, I got pills to take. And son don't you take any more that reefer, I'm short in the pocket as of right this now."

Shady staggered up as Greuel struggled to rise, using the beveled edge of the table for stability. It had not been so long since Cole had seen him last but he could tell the man had much declined. Whatever illness that was at him had managed a great deal of work over the past several months.

From the hallway Mister Greuel bid farewell as though already his emissaries were a long distance off on their journey, and the bacon-fat teeth unveiled themselves again. With that simple gesture, any hope Cole had with Shady this night was effectively over. Spunk stood waiting outside the door in his bloody T-shirt, holding up a snagged dime bag he shook at Shady with glee. All three glided out and over the porch and through the littered yard, Spunk slithering, skeletal, and cackling in the lead.