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ROCK CHILD

Deborah Garwood

Rock Child
A Novel
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ABSTRACT

Physician Lawrence “Doc” Bass lives in Ellington, Missouri. Forced to close his practice due to crippling arthritis, Doc has resigned himself to early retirement—until the day he meets Aubrey, a boy with an unusual birthmark on his back. Aubrey fits perfectly into the already quirky family of Hickcocks. He may be just a child, but strange things—good things—begin to happen whenever Aubrey is around. But not all of the Ellington folks feel the same way about him; some have an agenda for the boy. Doc, his good friend Sheriff Baines, and a host of other folks come in contact with Aubrey and his family during the boy's early years. “Rock Child” explores what happens in a small town when faith and science, friends and strangers, and courage and fear collide.

COMMITTEE

Michael Nye

Eve Jones

ROCK CHILD

by Deborah Garwood

June 11, 2000

This is the first day in four years I've held an ink pen for any length of time. My hands, just hours ago, were of little use to me; the pain of the arthritis was extraordinary. How long will this last?

Elizabeth Hickcock called from the Perry County hospital. "Doc Bass," she whispered into the phone, "you've got to come, quick."

"What is it, Lizzie?"

"It's my baby. There's something . . . please come." Her voice shook and I could tell she was fighting tears something awful, like she did the night her daddy, Sam Monroe, passed.

She was nine years old then, a sweet little thing with brown hair and bangs that needed scissoring. Her momma had died when Lizzie was only two. Annie was her name. We tried four separate antibiotics, had respiratory therapists pounding at her ribs for days on end, but the fluid just wouldn't evacuate. Annie held on until Sam brought Lizzie to the hospital. I remember how, as a toddler,

she wasn't afraid—wiggling her way under tubes and wires, she snuggled up to Annie's neck, stroking her hair. Annie's pulse had slowed tremendously; she used her final bit of strength to pull her wrist from my pulse-monitoring hand, wrapping her arms around her daughter for the last time.

Seven years later, Sheriff Baines called saying *Lizzie's done lost her daddy, too, on Highway Ninety-five*. Sam was not the first. Over the years, I've pronounced a number of Ellington's fine citizens dead on that stretch of road, also known as Killer Way; some folks from our neighboring town of Beaufort, as well. Many of them, I helped bring into this world, especially the younger ones—also delivered a good number of their parents. Sam was hanging part way out of the driver side, his torso nearly cut in half on the shattered window. I am trained to say *he died instantly, he felt no pain*, but it was likely Sam watched his life flash before his eyes a dozen or more times before he left this world.

Lizzie was at home preparing dinner, expecting her daddy any minute. Self-sufficient by necessity at nine years old, she'd made peanut butter and blackberry jam sandwiches and macaroni and cheese. Her cheeks were streaked with purple when she opened the door. But this is all another story that, God-willing and my hand holds out, I will return to later.

Many years ago, when I was child, Perry County hospital was an asylum. I remember visiting there once, after my own mother died, tagging along with my

father while he examined the inmates. Before entering each private room, he tapped on the door, announcing himself. I held his hand and squeezed as the wide steel doors swung into the space, never knowing if the body on the other side would be dressed, sleeping, or cowering in a corner. "They're patients," he told me with fatherly firmness, "or you may call them residents, but they are not inmates. Good doctoring is good manners." This code I have tried to live by ever since; I admit, I have sometimes failed.

The steel doors—covered over with oak laminate in the late 50's—are still as heavy as anchors. I tapped on the one affixed with a "Hickcock" label. Lizzie sat on the bed holding her swaddled baby to her chest. "Doc, you came," she said. "Close the door."

She laid the quilted bundle on the white bed sheet, unwrapping it with great care. I recognized the blanket, a Hickcock family heirloom, hand-stitched by Velma Hickcock herself when she was pregnant with Donny, her oldest boy. Since then, I'd seen each of the five Hickcock children wrapped in that blanket, shortly after their births.

"Look here," I said, "Another little Hickcock. A grand-Hickcock. He's a cute one."

"No, Doc," she said, unsnapping the infant's tee shirt, rolling him softly onto his belly. The child slept through the disrobing, suckling the air as he should. "Come closer."

She slid her palms under him, lifting him toward me. "I can't, Lizzie. My hands." I held them out for her to see. The arthritis had gotten so bad a few years back, I'd been unable to examine patients properly. My fingers—once so sensitive to touch that I could find the tiniest of tumors—were now swollen and twisted, bending at the outer knuckles in distorted angles. It hurt to perform even the slightest of professional tasks; the worst loss of which was that I could no longer care for the children and grandchildren I'd once delivered. Charting was out of the question as gripping a pen was impossible. For awhile I used a recorder but, when I could no longer grasp a stethoscope, early retirement was my only option.

"Here," she insisted, taking me by the wrist and placing my hand on the baby's back. "What is that?"

I sat near the foot of the bed. "What's his name?" I said.

"Aubrey."

"He looks perfectly fine, Lizzie. Did your doctor tell you something different?"

She pointed, guiding my hand. "Look closer."

Whatever it was she wanted me to see, I didn't see.

"Use your reading glasses," she said, pointing to my shirt pocket.

There, just between the shoulder blades, was a birthmark, like a light sun burn—as if he'd been left on his own outside and fallen asleep with a doily on his

back. It was perfectly symmetrical. In the center was a six-point star surrounded by tiny arrowheads that spread further and further out until they formed a complete circle, an exquisite pink snowflake imbedded into his creamy white baby skin.

I ran my hand over the mark. The pads of my fingertips, where I'd lost nearly all feeling, tingled. I pulled away.

"What is it?" Lizzie said, biting at her lips.

With both hands, I touched the mark again and felt the sensation—a massaging electricity—running quickly up and around my distal phalanges, the intermediates, the proximals, the metacarpals and carpals, swirling into my palms and up through my wrists.

"Doc," she said again, pulling at the cuff of my sleeve, her eyes pleading, watery.

"I don't know, Lizzie." The current was radiating from the baby's back, soothing years of crippling pain, escaping through my pores. Reluctantly, I pulled away and took Lizzie's hands in mine. "What does your doctor think of it?"

"Dr. Rose doesn't know," she said. "I just saw it myself, right before I called you."

"Maybe you should ask—"

"What if it's something bad?" She pulled her hands from mine, quickly

redressing Aubrey. The last thing I wanted was to deliver bad news to Lizzie.

Having no idea what I was looking at was an honest relief.

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” I said. “Where’s Ed?”

“He’s gone to fetch his mom. He probably passed you on the highway.”

“Velma? Good.” She could ease Lizzie’s mind, I thought. Then again, if after forty years of doctoring I’d never seen anything like it, maybe surprising others with it wasn’t a good idea. “Does he know? I mean, has Ed seen it?”

“Not yet,” she said. “But I can’t keep it from him forever. Please, Doc, you know Eddie. He’s the only regular one in his family. I don’t want him worrying if there’s nothing to worry about. Let me tell him you said everything’s fine, that you’ll be Aubrey’s doctor.”

She was right about that. As Hickcock children went, Ed was quite plain. I remembered how he’d come in to see me before he and Lizzie started trying for a baby. “Level with me, Doc,” he said. “What are the odds of something, you know, being ‘off’ with my child?” That was six years ago.

It had taken them five years to conceive. I couldn’t very well deny them a simple request and, besides, if the boy really needed anything beyond my physical ability, I could refer them to someone else. My hands stopped tingling, and I noticed something else: I could bend them. I could squeeze my crooked fingers in and out without pain.

“Will you be his doctor?” she said. “Please. I’m scared. What if something’s wrong with him? The mark wasn’t there and then it was. I saw it appear, Doc. I don’t want a stranger looking after him.” She finished swaddling the baby and, once again, lifted him toward me. “Aubrey, say hello to Doc Bass.”

Not thinking, I held my hands out, cupping them under his head and buttocks. He was the first child I’d allowed myself to hold since retirement. I could feel his warmth through the blanket. He opened his eyes, looking directly into mine. “Well, hello, Aubrey,” I said. “Maybe it’s best you keep your shirt on til you get home . . . where I can examine you again.”

Lizzie clapped her hands and smiled. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

By the time I left at three o’clock, the temperature had climbed to ninety-six degrees; the steering wheel in my open Jeep was blistering hot. I ran the air conditioner, rubbing my palms over the leather as it cooled. Halfway into the two hour drive back to Ellington, I loosened my fingers, releasing them from their hold on the wheel, and nearly ran off the road with surprise. They were flared out, splayed like a child counting to ten, and straight. My reading glasses, I thought, I must still have them on, they’re distorting my vision. Reaching for them, patting at my nose and face, I found nothing. A quick glance down told me they were in my breast pocket, as always.

June 13, 2000

I don't know what's happening. A child enters the world and changes everything. That's to be expected. But this child, Aubrey, is different. He's for certain a Hickcock.

The door to my office and exam rooms hadn't been opened in five years. I'd handed over my patients' records to Dr. Amanda Rose who worked at the Ellington clinic. Amanda's father, Shepard "Shep" Rose, was a classmate of mine in med school, a dear friend and a good man. Shep was another casualty of Killer Way, on his way to see a patient. Amanda was a fine physician, a superb diagnostician. Just last year, before scheduling any tests, she determined old Frank Watson had a hidden heart—not just a murmur—by placing two stethoscopes simultaneously on his chest and back, *listening to him in stereo*, she said. I wondered if she'd ever read the Hickcock files.

My house sits on the corner of Main Street and Mud. As one might imagine, Main Street runs through the center of town. Mud is one of twenty or so cross streets, each named after an indigenous reptile, specifically turtles. It's a split home, some folks call them duplexes. My residence is on one side, my office on

the other—separate front entries—with an adjoining door between my office and kitchen by way of a pantry. It was a fine set up and I missed it terribly.

I turned the doorknob with my happy new fingers. Things were exactly as I'd left them, stacks of notes on every surface, my exam coat hanging on a corner coatrack, walls lined with books and rubberized models of the womb, heart, brain, and vertebral column. My bag, black cow's hide covered in dust, sat on the corner of the oversized walnut desk. No more time to reminisce, I checked the bag for proper supplies, running an alphabetical list of items in my head.

Like many places in Ellington, Ed and Lizzie's house was a ten minute car ride away.

"He looks fine," I told them. "Nothing to worry about."

"But, Doc," Ed said. "It's getting darker, don't you think?"

He was right. We were standing over Aubrey's crib, watching him sleep after I'd finished my exam. He looked small in his bed, a boy adrift in a blue flannel ocean surrounded by stuffed animals. Except for his diaper, he slept naked on his belly—not the current safety sleep position but Lizzie said he'd rolled over on his own. I wouldn't have believed her—many new mothers exaggerate their babies' abilities—but I'd witnessed it twice since arriving. His birthmark looked like it was stamped onto a ripe peach, its fuzzy baby hair lifting and settling with

each tiny breath. In just two days, it had deepened by at least that many shades. Although out of practice, I tried to be reassuring. "I suppose it's a little darker."

There was a knock at the door. "That's Mom," Ed said.

Velma Hickcock stood in the bedroom doorway. Her hair, which had been peppered with gray over the last few years, was darker, shinier than when I'd last seen her at the annual Stinkpot parade. She fixed it in a different way, too, pulling it back from her face with combs, revealing her natural beauty. Normally I wouldn't notice such things, but it was Velma. I'd been sweet on her in grade school and on through junior high. But Herman Hickcock, an older boy of twenty-one, had swept her right out from under my best intentions when we were but fourteen years of age. Her momma signed papers and allowed Velma to marry at age fifteen; back then it was still legal. Turned out Herman and Velma were distant cousins but, in small Missouri towns, nothing was ever that far. Herman prided himself on being grouped with the likes of Jerry Lee Lewis, though Herman never owned a piano.

By the time Velma graduated high school, she'd had four children, which made her somewhat of a living legend. Town folk dubbed Velma "Mother Hick" and it stuck. Too bad, I always thought, to be so young and have a name like that.

A number of the Hickcock offspring had birth anomalies. Donny, the oldest boy, had webbed toes. Next in line was Calvin who was born at home. He had an extra pinky finger on his right hand. Before I could get to the house, Herman's

brother, Verl, who'd read a lot of veterinary books, amputated the extra appendage with a pair of tin snips. I truly thought Velma was going to kill that man—which would leave the children in the care of Herman—so I told her it wasn't a bad procedure at all, similar to how it's done at the human hospital. Calvin also had a roaming eye that even his siblings could not abide and in conversations lasting over a minute they'd get queasy keeping track of it. On numerous occasions, I suggested corrective surgery, but Herman feared hospitals and, as he called it, "unnecessary cosmetology surgery." He was a good man for certain, but he had a way. Norene, the baby of the bunch, was quite normal except that she never lost her baby teeth, so by the time she had grown to a full-sized woman of eighteen she'd taken to ventriloquism. When you wanted to talk with Norene, you also had to talk with a ratty-haired doll that had one arm missing and was never properly dressed. She shook the doll to draw attention away from her own tiny-toothed face. Norene didn't go out much. Ed was the second youngest. He came with no spare or unusual parts; fortunately, his family did not hold it against him, though they did consider him dull.

"Hello, Velma," I said. "You have a handsome grandson."

"Thank you, Lawrence." She smiled. I could not remember the last time I'd seen her smile. Recent years had been hard on her. In 1992, shortly after Ed and Lizzie were married, Calvin—being of legal age—disobeyed his daddy and got surgery on his eye which enabled him to join the Navy. He came home often

enough but, after his first hitch, he re-enlisted and was zipped off to places he couldn't talk about. Ironically, Herman lost his eyesight from macular degeneration. He quit his job at the hardware store and developed a deathly fear of falling. Before long all he did was sit on the front porch of the Hickcock home, rocking on a metal glider and swatting flies. He gained nearly a hundred pounds in two years, which was not good for an already large man. On one particularly humid day in August, Velma came home from the grocery store and found him slumped over dead from a heart attack. Poor Donny was inside the house talking on the phone when he heard his mom cry out. Velma was always an active woman, working at the school, holding babies in the nursery at the First Baptist Church, and volunteering at the parade, but she wasn't the same after that. So afraid was she of losing more of her family that she refused to leave Norene home by herself, even though by then Norene was in her twenties like her siblings.

"He's God's special angel," Velma said, looking over the bed railing. "Look at him. He's so perfect."

"But what about the mark? What do you make of that?" Ed insisted, pointing at Aubrey's back as though Velma may have somehow missed it.

She placed her palm on Aubrey's mark and closed her eyes. A smile crossed Velma's lips. Aubrey stirred, lifting his eyelids. "Eddie, you go on and help your brother with his car," Velma said. "Leave me alone with my grandchild."

"Donny doesn't know the first thing about cars," Ed said, cocking his head,

a scrunch of concern on his brow. "What's he doing with his car?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," she said. "Now go on. And Lizzie, you go lie down and rest for awhile. I'll watch over him."

"I don't know," Lizzie said.

"It'll do you good to get some rest," I said. "Velma knows what she's talking about."

Ed shrugged in agreement. "I won't be long," he said, kissing Lizzie and Aubrey goodbye and heading out the door.

Lizzie pretended to pout at being dismissed but couldn't hold back a yawn. "Maybe just for a little while," she said, exiting down the hallway.

Velma held Aubrey in the living room, rocking him, patting his back, singing. I sat with them, quietly observing, pretending to pack and repack my bag. I wondered if she noticed my hands.

"You think you're about finished there, Lawrence," she said. The longer I stayed, the more radiant she became. Her eyes took on a sparkly happiness that I did not wish to leave.

"Yes," I said, snapping the closure on my bag.

Lizzie came back into the room. "I can't sleep."

"He's a special boy," Velma said, "a gift from God. Don't let no harm come

to him.”

I thought she was talking to Lizzie but she cleared her throat to get my attention.

“No harm,” I said. “I’ll do my best.”

“You don’t understand. That mark’s a sign. Their boy is special.”

“I know, Velma. Look at my hands.” I wiggled my hands at the two of them, snapping my fingers like an Argentinean dancer.

“You felt it, too?” Lizzie said, slapping her hand up to her chest, sighing with relief. “Thank goodness. I thought it was just me and Ed. What is it? What’s happening?”

“I can’t say I know at this point. Let’s just wait a little while and see.”

Velma kissed Aubrey’s cheek and handed him to Lizzie. “Don’t you go worrying about him,” she said. “You and Ed just enjoy your time with him. Like I said, he’s a gift from God.”

Lizzie started to speak but Aubrey sneezed, drawing her attention.

“Lawrence,” Velma said, “would you mind giving me a lift home?”

September 14, 2000

My hands continue to improve. Dr. Rose has asked me to fill in at the clinic while she takes a short vacation. I am enthusiastic about once again caring for the people of Ellington.

For his earliest check ups, I visited Aubrey at home. For this appointment, I asked Lizzie to bring him to the clinic where there were better resources. Aubrey, at three months old, was an alert child, passing or surpassing all of the appropriate growth and development landmarks. His visual tracking was astounding. The boy seemed to know what was going on in the world. After examining Aubrey, I pretended to make notes in his chart, observing mother and child together. Lizzie seemed to have already found her way as a first time parent.

“Any concerns?” I asked.

“No,” she said but her eyes looked away. “Well, just the one. He doesn’t—I feel stupid for even saying it—but he doesn’t cry, Doc.”

“You mean he’s a happy baby?” Funny, I thought. Most parents worried about their babies crying too much, that they might be unhappy. Lizzie was just the opposite.

"No," she continued, lifting him into the air above her head. "Aubrey doesn't cry at all, do you?"

"Hm," I said, making a real note of that.

"Is that bad? It's bad, isn't it?" She took a step back, toward the door.

"Not at all, Lizzie. You just, well, we know he's special, don't we?"

For good measure, I checked his eyes again. "His tear ducts are fine. I suppose when he has something to cry about, he will."

Lizzie smiled. I remembered how good it felt to reassure a young mother and, yet, I recalled no case histories of children who didn't cry.

"Are you and Ed getting out much?" I asked her.

"We do sometimes," Lizzie said. "But mostly we keep to ourselves. Just the three of us. And Velma visits a lot."

"What about Norene and Donny?" I asked. "Have they seen their nephew?"

"Not yet. I know it sounds weird, but Donny is terrified of babies. Ever since he was a kid. Ed says its because he saw a bunch of stillborn ducks by their pond, but who knows."

I knew. Donny was ten at the time and he'd run two miles down his road into town, gasping for air as he entered my office on Main and Mud. "The baby ducks all have webbed feet," he said, holding up his filthy bare feet, "just like me.

That mean I'm gonna have webbed-toed babies?" I couldn't lie to the child so I sat him down and gave him the facts as best I could. "You know how you study fractions in school? There's a fifty percent chance that your children could have webbed toes. That means if you have two kids, probably one of them will and one of them won't." He stared hard into my eyes, as though checking to see if I was lying. "Okay," he said. Then he took a deep breath, and shook my hand. Donny was a boy of few words.

"What about Norene?" I said.

Lizzie bit her lip. "Well, to tell you the truth, I've been sort of putting that off."

"Why's that?" I asked. The baby looked at me and I could hardly pay attention to his mother.

Lizzie rubbed her hand softly over Aubrey's new hair growth, light brown wisps that would eventually have curl. "It's her teeth. Not her teeth, really, but the doll. I love Norene. She's like a real sister to me, but I'm worried about her shaking that doll at him. I don't want her to scare him."

"I see. So, it's just the three of you still, and Velma?"

She nodded. "We take him for walks, up by the clearing, near the tracks. You know the place?"

Everyone knew about it; most folks had been there. It was the best view in

all of Ellington and it was on the Hickcock property. Herman and Velma owned about eighty acres. For a wedding gift, they'd deeded over a small house and ten acres, roughly a mile down their gravel road, to Ed and Lizzie. The Hickcocks were not especially guarded people, worried about trespassers and all. Up the steep hill through the pines behind Ed and Lizzie's house and west along a foot trail for about a half mile, was a really nice clearing with a single willow tree, perfect for shade and sight seeing. On the far end of the clearing was a bluff overlooking the quarry. Just beyond the edge of that, trains came and went, transporting gravel and gravestone granite.

Rock. That's about all Ellington was known for.

There's not much to do in small towns, so kids invent their own sort of fun, in this case, Gravel War. I thought of all the kids whose cuts I'd stitched up over the years—thinking that with my fingers working so well, I might even be able to lend Dr. Rose a hand in that area. There was a "secret place" near the rear entrance of the quarry where kids could slip under the gate. They played for hours on the mounds of gravel; war being their preferred game. They broke into teams—units, they called them—and pretended to overtake hills only to be shot by imaginary bullets at which time they'd fall backward and do their best stuntman rolls down the sloping, sliding rocks. That's how they spent their summers in Ellington: climbing rock hills, getting filthy, and running through sprinklers in lieu of baths.

"I think he likes them," Lizzie said. She was holding Aubrey around his waist, his legs dangling, kicking."

"What?"

"Trains," she said. Aubrey waved his arms at the mention of the word.

"Trains," I said, and the boy flapped his arms again. "I'd say you may be right. It's good you're getting out with him. Think about letting Norene visit."

It was then we heard a commotion in the hall, voices arguing, escalating quickly, heading in our direction. I directed Lizzie and Aubrey away from the door, just in time as Roberta Fulton burst in, dragging seven-year-old Randall by the arm behind her, "Doc, you gotta come quick, Jimmy's fell off the barn roof."

"Let me gather my things," I said, opening a cabinet and scanning for everything I could manage that might be needed, tossing it into a plastic basin.

Lizzie had backed into the corner of the room. "That your baby?" Randall said, breaking free from his mother and coming toward her.

"Randall Ray, get back over here," Roberta snapped. "Sorry, Lizzie."

Lizzie and Roberta had been friends for years, both of them working at Sherell's Five and Ten up until the time Lizzie left to have her baby.

Randall was not known for obedience. "Ain't seen you since you was fixin'

to calf, Miss Lizzie.”

Roberta raised her hand in the air, tapping at that the back of Randall’s dark hair. She motioned toward a small supply cabinet on the opposite wall. Randall turned his attention to the metal cabinet, opening and closing its doors repeatedly. “Doc,” Roberta whispered through gritted teeth, away from Randall, “Jimmy says he can’t feel his legs.”

“I’m ready,” I said.

“Let me take Randall,” Lizzie piped in as we headed out the door. “He doesn’t need to be there right now.”

Randall rushed to Lizzie’s side, reaching up to Aubrey’s legs, grabbing at his ankles and swishing them roughly back and forth. “I want to stay with Lizzie, I want to stay with Lizzie.”

Roberta looked back at Lizzie and mouthed *thank you* as we raced from the room. Halfway down the hall, I heard Aubrey wailing.

The Fulton house was about a half mile from the North end of town—directly off Highway BB, toward Beaufort. Roberta swung her rusted old Impala into the driveway, spewing gravel twenty feet back, dusting my Jeep and me but good. It was one of the oldest houses in Ellington, and it showed. Jimmy wasn’t very handy with tools. He was more of an animal person. Over the years I’d seen

him and Roberta in all sorts of novelty breeding adventures: pot bellied pigs, fainting goats, naked neck chickens, and others. This year, it was the guinea fowl. The barn was loaded with them, their squawks screeching through the air without warning. Jimmy was still on the ground when we arrived. Bill Pike had been chasing some meandering cows down the highway and heard Jimmy and the hens calling for help out near the barn, a couple of hundred feet from the garage.

Roberta sprung from her car and crossed the yard in seconds, kneeling at Jimmy's side.

Bill walked toward me, tipping a cowboy hat.

"Is he in pain?" I said.

"Can't really tell, Doc. I think he's drunk. Ambulance should be here soon, I hope. There's some hold up over on Killer Way."

"What was Jimmy doing on the barn roof?"

"Not sure about that either. He may not have been up that high. He mumbled something about chasing Randall into the loft."

Jimmy was directly below the opening to the loft, sprawled in a mess of hay dusted dirt. On first observation, other than probable fractures to both of his arms, he looked good. "Afternoon, Jimmy," I said.

"What's up, Doc?" he smiled. "Help me up, will ya?"

“Stay put just a bit, then we’ll see about getting you on your feet.”

I squeezed his legs, palpated his torso to check for swelling—thinking how grateful I was to have my hands functioning again. “You took a pretty good fall, Jimmy. Do you know what day it is?”

“Aw, Doc,” he said. “Is it your birthday? Roberta probably has some cake in the house.”

“Jimmy,” I said. “I need you to pay attention now. I’m gonna check some things and I need you to tell me if anything hurts. You understand?”

“Hey, look. It’s Bill Pike,” he said. “When did you get here? You seen Randall? He’s got them kittens again. Gotta watch that boy. He don’t know his own strength.”

“Roberta,” I said, “Help me with his boots.” Jimmy’s response to the examination of his extremities was not hopeful. He didn’t flinch at pin pricks to the soles of his feet. I worked my way up to his calves and thighs. Jimmy stared at the sky and started humming “Blue Moon.”

“Try again, Doc,” Roberta said, kneeling at Jimmy’s side. “You hush now, Jimmy, and pay attention.”

The results were the same.

We followed the ambulance to Perry County Hospital, Roberta crying in the passenger seat the whole way.

The surgery to reduce swelling in Jimmy's brain was almost over. We were in the waiting room, Roberta pacing maniacally. She was a large woman; she only stood maybe five feet two inches but each time she passed my chair, I felt the floor vibrate. I'd talked to her over the years about proper nutrition but she always said, "Unless you got a cure for the sweet tooth, Doc, there's no cure for me." I figured she was topping two hundred fifty pounds by now, her knee joints deforming to support the weight. In another ten years, she'd need assistance walking. I wondered how she'd manage Jimmy's care, if she'd be able to push a wheelchair at least until his upper body healed. I was right about the arms. They had multiple fractures, a dislocated elbow, and both wrists were broken. That kind of injury—the head, neck, and arms—meant he probably fell backwards out of the loft, heels over head, and instinctively used his arms to brace for impact. Nothing he could do to reduce the force of his head hitting the dirt. The possibility of brain damage was high, especially given his earlier ramblings.

Around midnight, Jimmy was in post-op, opening his eyes and tracking: a good sign.

Roberta fell asleep sitting straight up on the waiting room sofa where we settled in for a long but quiet evening. Before daylight, before the morning shift change, we heard Randall's voice. "Where's my daddy? I wanna see my daddy!"

He came around the corner in mid-air, arms and legs kicking as though he was swimming, or drowning, I couldn't tell which. Ed was holding him sideways, carrying the boy by the waistband of his jeans. An athlete in high school, Ed had earned all sorts of medals, his picture frequently in *The Perry County Gazette*. At twenty-six, he'd bulked up even more working at the saw mill over in Beaufort. Internally, he was as soft and kind-hearted as they came. Externally, Ed was a powerfully built man. But Randall Ray Fulton was a different kind of force.

Ed's face was red with sweat and exhaustion. He grabbed the back of Randall's shirt with his free hand and swung him upright to his feet. "Randall, you're gonna be quiet and sit in that chair."

Randall leaned in, swinging his fists at Ed, pummeling Ed's hips and thighs. "I don't have to be quiet," he yelled. "I can scream as loud as I want. You're not the boss of me!"

Roberta, whom I assumed was used to drowning out Randall—for sheer survival if not to ward off the temptation of abandonment—didn't budge from her position on the couch.

Once again, Ed grabbed him by the waistband, this time swinging him in mid-air. Randall screamed "Put me down, put me down," but Ed swung him even higher. "I'll be quiet," Randall said. Ed ignored him. Then, "I promise. I'll be quiet."

Ed lowered him into a chair by the window. The boy immediately found a chain for the vertical blinds and began opening and closing them, tapping his feet.

"Sorry, Doc," Ed said. "We just couldn't take it."

"I watched him take his first breath in the world," I said. "You don't have to explain. Boy's been a handful his whole life."

"Two handfuls," Roberta piped in, her eyes still closed. "And then some. Randall Ray, you been actin' up?"

Randall ran over to his mother, scaled the couch and shimmied up her chest, wrapping his arms around her neck. Roberta opened her eyes and looked at her boy.

"I love you, Momma," he said, laying his head on her chest.

"I know. Now tell Mr. Hickcock you're sorry."

"Sorry," Randall mumbled, closing his eyes. Within thirty seconds the tension left his face and he fell dead asleep on Roberta who shook her head and sighed.

"I'm sorry, too, Eddie," she said. "It was good of you and Lizzie to take him. I hope he didn't cause too much trouble."

Turns out Randall caused a sublime ruckus at the Hickcocks. He'd been the

initiator of Aubrey's first cry, which caught Lizzie by surprise and caused her to cry, too. Despite her insistence that he stop pulling at Aubrey's legs, Randall kept his hands at the baby all the way to Lizzie's car. Aubrey was not happy.

The ride home was even worse because—given Randall's age—she could not let him ride in the front seat. Buckled as tight as Lizzie could safely buckle him, far across the back seat from Aubrey, Randall still managed to irritate.

“You ever heard of a two-headed calf, Miss Hickcock?” His voice was pitched high and, for some reason, he felt the need to yell, even with the air conditioning on and the windows up, intensifying the air around them. Aubrey continued crying. “I seen a two-headed calf once. And a sheep with six legs. And one time we had a chicken borned with no wings. My daddy cut his head off and we didn't even eat him for supper. Your baby's only got two arms and two legs. Too bad he got no wings or he could fly. Why's he gotta cry like that so much?”

“He just needs some quiet time,” she told him. “Maybe we can all be quiet until we get home. Why don't we try that?”

“Crybaby, crybaby, crybaby,” Randall sang the rest of the way.

At dinner, Lizzie and Ed took turns holding and rocking Aubrey, trying to comfort him as best they could, but they'd had no practice with an unhappy baby. Finally, while Lizzie sat at the kitchen table with Randall, Ed took Aubrey out to the front porch.

"I swear, Doc," he told me, "before the screen door even closed behind me, Aubrey stopped fussing. We stayed there on the porch for a good ten minutes but as soon as I opened that door and took a step inside, he tightened up his whole body and started crying again."

Eventually, Ed took Randall down the road to Velma's place where—before he finally fell asleep—he broke Velma's favorite lamp, kicked Donny in the groin, and tried to tear the head off of Norene's non-talking talking doll. At four in the morning, Velma found Randall in the kitchen pouring half a bag of sugar into a bowl of cereal. She woke Ed and told him to take the boy back to his mother.

"He must be upset about his father," Velma said. "At least let's hope."

October 31, 2000

My profession teaches observation, diagnosis, and course of treatment. On days like these, I look at the waning moon and think perhaps I rely too much on science.

I was preparing for the evening's event: a night of witches, pirates, and princesses tapping at my door, holding out plastic pumpkins and old pillowcases, some whom I'd seen at the clinic or around town, showing me their latest bumps and bruises. Interior lights out, porch light on, I readied a bowl of miniature candy bars by my entry door and—in the spirit of the season—settled into my seasoned recliner with a collection of Stephen King short stories, waiting for the first joke-telling visitor.

The footsteps on the stairs were heavy for a child, even a group of children. Before the bell rang, I opened the door. It was Norene Hickcock, one hand waving her doll at me, the other hand over her mouth, blood seeping between her fingers. Velma was to her left, Donny to her right, holding a well-saturated dish towel, trying to catch any escaping drops from Norene. "Lawrence," Velma said, "it's her teeth."

"This way," I said, guiding them quickly through the house, through my office and into an exam room. "Donny, help her onto the table," I said, grabbing a kidney tray from the cabinet and holding it under Norene's chin. "Spit in here."

Norene hesitated at first, looking at her mother. "Do as he says." She placed her hand on Norene's shoulder, her fingers rubbing encouragement.

Blood and saliva oozed from her mouth in long drips. "Come on, now. Let's clear that out of there," I said.

"Spit like a boy," Donny said.

Norene pursed her lips together and forced air into the dish, pushing her tongue between her lips. A small clot of blood flew into the tray and made a tinny sound. She stopped, panicked, and clamped her mouth shut.

"You're doing fine," I said, but not knowing what had caused her injury, I was concerned. "Try again."

Norene shook her head, refusing, her lips not budging.

"Look, it's not really a lot of blood, and it's actually a good thing. Clotting is good." She refused again. I shook the tray hoping it would loosen but, again, I heard the tinny sound. "Let me just give this a rinse."

At the sink, as the water slowly mixed with the blood, the clot dissolved leaving one of Norene's baby teeth.

"Norene," I said, turning back to her, "it's one of your teeth. If you have more, you need to spit them out before you swallow them."

The look on her face said she thought I was crazy. Velma leaned over and saw the tooth and took the tray from my hand, "Norene J. Hickcock, you spit into this thing right here and now."

She opened her bloody mouth and spit, over and over. Tink, tink, tink, came the teeth, one after another into the metal basin, until she was all spat out. I fashioned a compress from gauze, ran it under cold water, and wedged it into her mouth where she could apply pressure. It took two more compresses, but the bleeding stopped and we all breathed a sigh of relief, sitting for a few moments in welcome stillness.

A Trick or Treater knocked at the door but we didn't bother.

"Velma," I said, "I need to know what happened. Did she fall?"

Velma smiled. "No. We were at Eddie and Lizzie's house for Halloween. They had Aubrey dressed up like a little pumpkin. Cute as pie."

"Okay. Then what?"

"That's it. It was just us. Nothing happened." She turned to Norene.

"Feeling better?" Norene nodded and pulled the last gauze from her mouth.

"I got to hold my nephew," Norene said, holding her doll directly in front of her mouth. "He ith thuch a thweetie." She laughed. "Did you hear how I thaid

that?"

Velma and Donny and I looked at each other, then at Norene, then back at each other.

"What?" she said.

The banging returned. "I'll get it," Velma said.

"I want you to open as wide as you can," I said. Norene was completely toothless; they'd all come out at once. I shined a pen light over her tender red gums. There, in the center of each dark divot, was the unmistakable white-lined edge of a new tooth.

I motioned for Donny to have a look. "Norene," he said, "your adult teeth have finally decided to join the party."

She stared at us for a few seconds. I could tell she didn't believe a word we were saying. "Scouts honor," I said. "I can see them, they're already coming in."

A smile crept across her face growing slowly until, finally, her lips parted into a full toothless grin. She held her rag doll in front of her and pat its hair. "Here," she said, handing it to Donny.

Velma returned, followed by Eddie and Lizzie who was carrying a wide-awake Aubrey.

"Are you all right, Norene?" Ed said, his palm pressed against his forehead.

“One minute you’re rocking the baby and the next your bleeding all over the place. Doc, is she okay?”

From the edge of the table, Norene’s legs swung in happy circles. “Aubrey!” Her mouth was wide open, beaming and bare. Reaching toward him and wiggling her fingers she said, “You brought me my thweetie.”

Ed didn’t say a word. Lizzie looked at her husband and saw that his mouth was wide open, too, only his was full of teeth and in shock. “Ed,” she said. “Say hello to your sister.”

“It’th okay,” Norene said. “Let me hold my nephew. Doc Bath thaid my new teeth will be here thoon.”

“You’re getting dentures?” Ed managed.

“No, Eddie. My very own new teeth. My adult teeth are coming in. Look and thee.” She tilted her head back and Ed leaned in, examining. I offered my pen light.

“Sure enough,” he said. “I can see ‘em right there. What do you make of that?”

Norene held the baby for a few minutes, the two of them smiling at one another, both toothless. “Here, Donny,” she said, passing Aubrey to him. “I want to get a look at mythelf.”

Donny took Aubrey into his arms without hesitation, “Hey, Rock Star.”

There we were—Me, Velma, Norene, Ed, Lizzie, Donny, and Aubrey—all crammed into one small exam room, watching Norene grinning at herself in the mirror. I glanced at Velma. She was smiling, too, enjoying her children's happiness, but there was a hint of concern behind her eyes. I knew how she felt.

Around midnight, after the Hickcocks had all gone home, there was another knock at my door. It was Donny—like he was as a boy—barefoot, sweating, and out of breath. For a moment I thought I was dreaming.

"Doc," he said. "You gotta see this."

He sat on the couch in my living room, resting his dusty bare feet on my coffee table, spreading his toes until I thought for sure he'd get a cramp. "Pretty neat, huh?"

His toes were no longer webbed. "I'll be damned," I said. I didn't want to seem unprofessional but, up until that point, I'd sort of told myself that time away from my practice had somehow helped with my arthritis, and I knew long ago that Norene would eventually lose those baby teeth, even if seeing her spit out a full set at once was somewhat astonishing. But the unwebbing of Donny's toes was downright impressive. Miraculous even. I snatched an ink pen from the coffee table and slid it between each toe until he pulled back with laughter.

"That's what I thought," Donny said. He stood up to shake my hand and I

walked him to the door.

“Hey Doc,” he said, turning back toward me when he reached the walkway.

“Any chance the odds have changed for my future children?”

I shrugged. “Can’t say for certain.”

“That’s progress,” he said and took off jogging back toward his mother’s house.

It was then I realized that science and nature should probably have a meeting.

May 5, 2001

I have reopened my practice, taken on a partial load of patients, weekday mornings only. Norene is my receptionist—her first real job—and now all of the single young men in Ellington and Beaufort, and a couple as far as Crystal Lakes, are making appointments for the tiniest of ailments, just to see her smile at them across the waiting room.

After the business with the teeth and toes, the Hickcocks agreed to take part in a case study. It was partly my own curiosity, but mostly because I raised the issue of Aubrey's safety. If folks started connecting Aubrey's proximity to physical healing, there would be no stopping complete strangers from showing up at Ed and Lizzie's door.

"He's right," Velma said to her children. "You've heard about the people praying to that cornflake Jesus. And the ones who travel halfway round the world to have a blind man touch them."

"I'm hoping there are scientific explanations," I said. "A gene or something unique to your family that can explain this. I can't do it all, but I've got a friend in Boston who'll run some tests for me."

“That doesn’t explain you, though, does it Doc?” Donny said, at our first consultation.

He had a point. I decided that I would also test water from their property and surrounding areas, as well as soil samples. For that, I would need to enlist the sheriff’s help. In Ellington, no one would think twice about Sheriff Baines needing to test soil or water; we’d once served as the control for a county wide environmental toxin sampling.

Ron Baines was a good man, one of my oldest friends. We’d worked a lot of Killer Way fatalities together and he was always discreet, saving family members from the unkindest of information whenever possible. He’d been with me when we told Lizzie about her daddy dying. It was his idea to pick up Velma on our way to the Monroe house. I wasn’t the only one who’d been sweet on Velma as a kid. Ron liked her, too, and in school we sometimes pushed each other out of line to be close to her. When she went and married Herman, we were both devastated, but Ron recovered in the tenth grade when Sue-anne Colton moved to town. She was from Crystal Lakes and she was a beauty. Unfortunately, she died of breast cancer a few years back; Ron was still in mourning, though he put on a good bit of stoicism for their son, Trent, who’d just just finished a tour in Iraq and was due home any day. I hoped like hell that Trent would travel home through Beaufort instead of down ninety-five.

Delivering death notices was not something we got used to. “It might be

easier coming from a woman," Ron had said. "Velma's kids go to school with Trent and Lizzie don't they?"

We stood on the Hickcock's porch, telling Velma about the accident and Sam dying. Her delicate hands pressed against her cheeks as she shook her head back and forth, "Oh, my lands," she said. "That poor, poor child. First her momma, then her daddy. Where's she gonna go? She has no other family besides an old uncle of Sam's who lives in Arkansas."

Lizzie opened the door, her jam-stained face smiling up at the three of us. "Hi ya'll," she said. "My daddy's not here but he'll be home soon."

"Lizzie, honey," Velma said. "Let's you and me sit over here in this chair for a minute." She pulled Lizzie onto her lap and smoothed her unruly bangs from her face. "Now, I have something to tell you that's gonna be real hard to hear, but I want you to know that I'm gonna be right here with you. Me, and Doc Bass, and Sheriff Baines. We're gonna be right here, alright?"

Lizzie shook her head and bit at her lips. "Is it bad news, Mrs. Hickcock?"

"Yes, darlin', I'm afraid it's the worst kind of news." Velma looked at Ron and I, her eyes filling with tears, and turned back to Lizzie. "Your daddy's had an accident in his car and he's died, honey. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Lizzie didn't move. She tilted her head just a smidge and looked at Velma.

“My daddy’s not comin’ home ever again?”

“That’s right, Sugar. I’m so very sorry.”

Lizzie threw her arms around Velma’s neck and cried. Tears poured down Velma’s cheeks, too, but she sat firm, absorbing as much of Lizzie pain as she could. Ron and I had to excuse ourselves from the room. We waited maybe twenty minutes outside and then the front door opened. Lizzie walked out carrying a small suitcase, her face smudged with jam and tears. “Mrs. Hickcock says I’ll be coming to live with her now.”

Ron and I looked at each other. I think we were both wondering—knowing Velma as we did—why we hadn’t seen that coming.

Years later, of course, Lizzie became a Hickcock by marriage. Funny how tragedy sometimes turns into something else.

I met with the Hickcocks on Saturday mornings at my home office. After six months of gathering and recording pedigrees, blood tests, and developmental assessments, I’d found no scientific evidence or discrepancies. There were no indications of cell mutation or unusual new cell growth. Sheriff Baines had enlisted Trent’s help and together they gathered soil and water samples from the Hickcock property at the South end of town, the Fulton property at the North end of town, the Pike’s property to the West, and for the sake of thoroughness,

included samples from the woods and a number of private backyards near the Quarry.

Trent made a special effort to check on the progress of the samples. At least that's what he claimed. It was sorely obvious to me that he was inventing excuses to chat up Norene, especially when he stopped in during one of the family appointments. Including me and his daddy, Trent was the only one outside of the Hickcock family aware of the unusual occurrences.

Until we knew more, Lizzie and Ed decided it best to seclude Aubrey from the general public, especially since at eleven months he'd begun walking and talking.

"Hi, Mr. Doc," he'd said, sticking out his dimpled little hand. Donny had shown him a proper handshake. We had gathered in the waiting room where there was enough seating for everyone. Aubrey made the rounds, spending time with each person. "Hi, Mr. Trent," he said, pulling at Trent's arm, guiding him into an empty chair next to Norene. "You sit here."

"Your nephew is a pistol," Trent said to Norene when he thought all eyes were back on Aubrey.

"I think he's pretty special," Norene smiled.

"I think his aunt is kind of special."

Norene muffled a laugh and spoke quietly to him. "Trent Baines, I've

known you all my life. You gonna keep coming in here with dirt and specimen cups filled with pond scum or you gonna ask me out?" He was the first suitor Norene had actually considered and I was quite proud of her judgment. Trent was an honorable young man, decorated for bravery in combat at age twenty-four.

"I suppose I'll just ask you out," he said.

"Eventually or was that it?" she said.

"You busy this afternoon?"

She was about to respond when we all heard tires squealing in the parking area outside the house, stopping abruptly with a thud. Trent and I ran outside, quickly followed by Ed and Donny. The front end of the Fulton's Impala was resting halfway over a parking median, Randall in the passenger seat, Roberta already out of the driver's side and pulling at the back door. "Hurry," she yelled, her face red with fear. "Jimmy's barely breathing."

"Go inside with Doc," Ed said to her. "We'll get him."

I hadn't seen Jimmy in a few months. The fall from the hayloft had paralyzed him from the waist down and, understandably, he and Roberta made fewer trips into town—mostly just for checkups at the clinic with Dr. Rose, and Sunday church services at The Rockhouse Pentecostal Church. Ellington may only have a few thousand people, but in a four-mile radius, it has eleven churches.

Roberta waited at the end of the hall, her arms lifted skyward as she prayed loudly, her voice echoing off the walls, "Oh, sweet Lord Jesus, my Jimmy's in need of your help right now. I'm not asking for much, Lord. Just a touch of your mighty hand, the tip of your finger, Lord, just the tiniest tip will do."

"In here boys," I motioned toward an exam room. Ed and Donny laid Jimmy on a table and stepped back out of the way. He'd changed a lot since I'd knelt over him by the barn. His jeans hung loosely over now bone-thin legs; gone was his year-round tan from working outdoors, feeding and corralling animals, and chasing Randall. Roberta stayed close and I saw Randall near the door, kicking at the jamb with the toe of his tennis shoe. Jimmy struggled to keep his eyes open, laboring for each breath. I swiped his mouth and checked his throat; it was swollen, almost closed. "Roberta," I said, "did he eat something?"

"Just some soup at lunch," she said, her puffy fingers clasped together, ready for more prayer I supposed.

"I don't have his records here. Does he have any allergies?" I continued my exam but wasn't finding anything unusual.

"No," she said. "Just insects."

"What are you talking about?"

"He's allergic to bees and wasps. But he didn't say anything about getting stung."

I grabbed a pair of scissors and snipped at the hems of Jimmy's jeans. "Ed, help me get these off," I said. We both ripped at the denim where I'd started cutting, splitting the fabric open almost up to Jimmy's front pockets. "There," I said, pointing to three puncture looking marks on his upper right thigh. "I can still see the stingers in two of them."

Jimmy gave me a weak thumbs up before his eyes closed and his head rolled to the side as though he was simply taking a nap, his lips bluing as he lost consciousness. I grabbed an epinephrin pen from the supply cabinet, clutched it tightly in my fist, and punched the injection into Jimmy's left thigh.

"Augh," Donny groaned. I looked up to see his flushing face, his hand reaching toward the wall.

"Ed, get him into a chair," I said.

Ed moved fast, helping his brother onto a rolling stool.

Jimmy sucked in a deep breath as though he'd been drowning and come up for air. He shook his head and opened his eyes.

"Oh, thank you, Jesus," Roberta said, kissing Jimmy all over the face until he finally had to push her away. "You was stung in your leg, Jimmy. You almost died." She reached in and kissed him again, squeezing him tightly around his neck. "Thank you, Jesus."

"I'm fine, Bertie," he said, pushing her away a second time, embarrassed.

He propped himself up on his elbows and surveyed the room, taking note of his ruined pants and wasp-stung leg. "I didn't even know I got stung. Thanks, Doc. Hey, what's wrong with Donny? He ain't looking so good."

"Way to go, Sport," Ed said, punching Donny in the shoulder. "Jimmy gets a little shot and you almost pass out."

Donny shrugged. "It wasn't what I'd call little." We all shared a laugh, mainly of relief.

Randall stepped into the room and took hold of Jimmy's fresh-cut pant legs, pulling at the threads until they started to fringe. "Can we go home now?"

"You hush now, Randall Ray," Roberta said. "Give your daddy a few minutes to rest. We'll run over to Sherell's and get him a pair of pants." She kissed Jimmy again. "Unless you need me."

Jimmy smiled. "The only thing I need right now is a drink."

"A drink?" Roberta said. "Jimmy Ray Fulton, you ought to be ashamed. Son of God just saved your life and you're thinking about a drink?"

"I meant that I'm thirsty," he said sheepishly. "From the not breathing, and the medicine."

"Oh," she said, and kissed him once more before she left. "I'll see what I can do."

Sherell's Five and Ten was five blocks away on Mississippi Avenue. A person could stock a wagon train at Sherell's. It was like a flea market—carrying the oddest assortment of items—a perfectly logical place to find blue jeans and cold beverages in Ellington, Missouri.

“Thanks again, Doc,” Jimmy said. “It'd be good to see you sometime when I wasn't flat on my back, near death.”

I checked his pulse.

“We'll clear out of here now,” Ed said, he and Donny waving as they left the room.

I turned to straighten things on the counter and heard the light padding of footsteps in the hall. Aubrey entered the room followed quickly by Lizzie. “Sorry,” she said.

“Hi,” Aubrey said, raising his hand in the air.

Jimmy leaned over as much as his upper body would allow, welcoming Aubrey's handshake. “Howdy, Partner,” he said, seconds later sucking in a huge gulp of air. He released Aubrey's hand and fell backward against the wall. “Whoa.”

Lizzie and I looked at each other. She scooped Aubrey into her arms and took a step toward the door. “Sorry, Jimmy,” she said. “He's hard to catch sometimes.”

"No, wait!" Jimmy said, reaching his hands out to the boy. "Can I hold him? I haven't held one that size since Randall Ray was little."

Lizzie looked at me but I was just as surprised as her, neither of us able to come up with a reason not to let Jimmy hold the boy. Aubrey decided for himself, leaning toward Jimmy like he was diving from Lizzie arms. "Mr. Jimmy," he said, smiling.

"Help me out, here, would you, Doc?" Jimmy said, pulling at his frayed jeans. We swung his legs over the edge of the table, sitting him up straight. Aubrey nearly jumped from Lizzie's arms to Jimmy's.

"Secret," Aubrey said and leaned forward, whispering into Jimmy's ear. "Feel better," he said.

"Yes," Jimmy said, looking at him him. "I feel better. Doc gave me a shot."

"No, Jimmy feel better," Aubrey said, more determined. He was standing on Jimmy's thighs, his small hands holding Jimmy's cheeks. "Now."

Jimmy cocked his head to the side, curious. He drew in another deep breath, his eyelids fluttered, and his upper body wobbled as though he might faint.

Lizzie reached for her son, just as Jimmy let loose of Aubrey's waist. "We should go," she said turning quickly toward the door. "Good seeing you, Jimmy."

"Wait," he said, recovering from his apparent bit of dizziness.

"We need to get going; the whole family is waiting for us."

Aubrey waved goodbye over his mother's shoulder as they disappeared down the hall out of Jimmy's sightline.

I was glad Lizzie whisked him away before Roberta and Randall came back. No telling what sort of impression Aubrey had made on Jimmy.

June 10, 2001

Aubrey will be a year old tomorrow. It's a beautiful day for a party in Ellington and I am honored to be invited to his birthday celebration; but more than that, to be considered a close friend of the family. Ron and Trent Baines will be there. And Calvin is home for a month, which means Velma will have all of her children together again. I will bring the results from our last set of tests. What sort of present does one get for a child like Aubrey?

The toy shelves at Sherell's Five and Ten were, like everything else in the store, stuffed to overflowing in no particular order. I read each label carefully: Made in China, May Cause Choking, Ages Five and Up, Not for Children Under Two, Flammable Under Direct Flame. That last one made me laugh. On the lowest shelf, tucked under an assortment of dolls that talked when I moved in front of them, was a foot-long train—soft, like a stuffed animal—and it passed the required sticker inspection.

Upon seeing the train, Sherell raised her eyebrows.

I smiled, knowing better than to engage her in conversation. Sherell was an expert in idle chit-chat and I had a party to get to.

She stopped short of ringing my purchase, waiting for an explanation.

For a minute I thought I could wait her out, but she flipped the light off above her cash register and smiled at me, holding the train between us. I always wondered why there was a light over the single checkout counter. Sherell pretended to look for the price tag.

"It's a gift," I said.

"It's nice. Cute." She squeezed the train a couple times and pretended to run it along the small conveyor belt.

"I don't need a bag," I said, handing her two twenties, hoping she'd hit the Total button.

"Okay," she said. "Someone's birthday, Doc?"

"One of the Hickcocks," I finally confessed.

"Oh!" she said. Great joy spread over her face. "Must be that Aubrey's birthday. I heard about him. Pastor Miller says he's the second coming."

"Beg your pardon?"

"The second coming, you know, when Jesus comes back and all that. Said that boy healed Jimmy Fulton."

"Sherell," I said, "I'm sort of in a hurry. Can you . . ." I pointed to the cash in her hand.

“Oh, sure, Doc,” she said, scanning the suddenly found barcode, hitting the button, and gathering my change. “Pastor Miller says there’s gonna come a day when—well, I can’t remember what exactly—but something about that boy being anointed or something.”

I took my change and Aubrey’s train from her hands. “Thanks, Sherell.”

This was not the news I wanted to deliver to the Hickcocks.

When I arrived at Velma’s house, Aubrey was running around the yard, barefoot and laughing. Donny was chasing him, his own bare toes clinching the fresh-cut blades of grass with each step. Calvin, still in a green travel uniform, had brought a girl home, dressed just like him. They were sitting at a picnic table, making eyes at each other. Norene and Trent were at the other end of the table doing the same thing. Ed manned the burgers on the pit, and Lizzie sat nearby in a lawn chair, reading a magazine.

“Thanks for coming, Lawrence,” Velma said. “You ever seen such a happy family?”

“I have not,” I said. Was it possible that she was more beautiful than she was forty years ago?

“We have to protect them,” she said, taking my hands in hers. “You know that, don’t you, Lawrence?”

Before I could speak, Reverend Francis Miller came around the side of the house, followed by the Fultons. Roberta was first, holding a jumping Randall by the hand behind her. Jimmy, following close behind, was on his feet, using a walking stick to steady himself each step of the way.

I'd known Francis since he was a teenager, about the time he got run over by the Holy Ghost in his daddy's church—the church Francis now pastored. His parents both died on Killer Way but not in the usual car-type death. His daddy, Francis One, thought the highway was possessed by the Devil and, after telling his congregation as much, he decided to go lay hands on it. He was trying to pray the Devil out of Highway Ninety-five, his wife, Naomi, standing by giving the proper "Amens" to the situation, when a truck carrying logs from the Beaufort saw mill came around a turn. Sheriff Baines called me and said, "Doc, you don't have to bother coming out to pronounce this one. They're part of the pavement now. Nobody's pulse coming up from that asphalt." Francis—having caught The Spirit just a week before—claimed it was God's will and, at age eighteen, stepped in to lead his daddy's church.

"Good afternoon, Velma," Francis said. He liked projecting his preacher voice and did so across the yard. "And a good afternoon to the rest of the Hickcocks."

"Afternoon, Francis," Velma said, looking right past him. "Why Jimmy Fulton, look at you."

Jimmy was resting after each step but continued to move toward us. "Hi, Velma. Doc. Sorry to interrupt your party. Pastor Miller said we needed to come right away."

Aubrey caught sight of Jimmy across the yard and ran up to him smiling. Jimmy dropped the stick and picked Aubrey up, lifting him into the air above his head until Aubrey laughed. "There's my little miracle man," Jimmy said.

Randall spun around saying, "Daddy, he's not a man. He's just a baby." He tried to pull free from Roberta's hand but she held tight and shushed him.

Francis reached out to touch Aubrey but Ed was suddenly between him and the boy. "Pastor, can I help you?"

"Well, Ed, I think you know why we're here. It appears that your boy has healed Jimmy's spine."

Donny put his hands out to Aubrey, taking him gently from Jimmy's hands. Calvin strolled over and stood about ten feet from the pastor's back, quietly observing the situation.

Lizzie put down her magazine and joined Donny, taking Aubrey into her arms.

I felt Velma's hand on my arm, squeezing. "Now, Francis," I said. "I was there after Jimmy fell, with Roberta in the hospital, and there just a month ago when he almost died of anaphylactic shock. I can tell you that Aubrey was not

even there when Jimmy came out of it.”

“I know what happened,” Francis said, “and I wasn’t talking to you, Doc. I was talking to Ed. You know your boy’s received a special blessing from the Lord, don’t you? Look at them,” he said, pointing toward Jimmy and Roberta. “They seen evidence with their own eyes—and they had to let people know. You should be doing the same. It’s not right to hoard the Lord’s blessings.”

Ed looked at Lizzie and tilted his head toward the house. Calvin’s girlfriend, whose name I hadn’t even had a chance to learn, touched Lizzie’s back and nudged her toward the back door. Norene joined them and the three young women took Aubrey inside. “Pastor,” Ed said, “I think you need to be going.”

“You can’t stop what the Lord has put in motion,” Francis said. “You and Lizzie have an obligation to nurture the boy’s gifts so that he can share them with the world.”

Ed looked at Calvin and Donny who all looked at me. “Now, Francis, I believe these kind folks have asked you to leave. This is not the time or place for this discussion.”

Roberta spoke, “We’re sorry for the interruption. We were just so excited.”

“Of course,” I said. “Jimmy, I’d be happy to meet with you at the office.”

“Sure, Doc,” he said. “I already called Dr. Rose and told her, though I think she thought I was drunk.”

Sheriff Baines arrived just as Roberta and Jimmy turned to leave. "Well, hey there, Jimmy," he said. "I heard you was up and about."

"I am that," Jimmy said. "Randall Ray, pick up the walking stick for me. We'll be going now."

Roberta let hold of Randall's hand and the boy nearly fell running to the stick. He picked it up and used it like a pole vault, planting it into the ground and swinging himself forward, then wildly swinging it around until he almost smacked his daddy in the legs. Jimmy took hold of the stick and shoed Randall away. It didn't seem to phase the boy. He simply started running in circles around the yard. "Come on, Randall," Jimmy said. "Let's go put that energy to good use. There's plenty of chores to do at home."

Francis did not appear to like this new direction of things. He pulled a small Bible from his jacket pocket, dropped to his knees on the grass, raised his hands into the air, and clamped his eyes shut. "Lord Jesus," he shouted, "we're here before you now and we can sense that the enemy is trying to thwart your will. Sweet, sweet Lord, do not let that happen. Do not let Satan get a foothold in this place. Build a hedge of protection around the Hickcocks and especially around your servant Aubrey."

Ed was not pleased. He started to grab Francis by the collar but Sheriff Baines interceded. "It's late now, Francis," he said. "And this is not the proper time. Now, I'll see you and the Fultons out to your cars."

Francis waited a moment and then peeked out of one eye. Seeing Sheriff Baines standing over him with his arms crossed, Francis reluctantly got to his feet. "He's not yours anymore, Ed. He's the Lord's."

Trent, who'd stayed back until then, stepped in beside his father. "Dad, you need some help?"

"I think we're alright," he said, looking directly at Francis. "Pastor Miller was just leaving, weren't you Francis?" Father and son Baines walked the pastor and the Fultons out of the yard.

"You boys go on in the house and check on Aubrey and the girls," Velma said to her sons.

She was still holding onto my arm. I'd never seen fear on Velma's face before. I didn't like it. "We'll figure this out," I said, but as the words came out of my mouth, it felt like I was lying. It was my fault Jimmy and Francis showed up. If I hadn't told Sherell about the party, there would have been no incident.

June 16, 2001

After the commotion at the party, I realized that I'd never told the Hickcocks about their test results. I decided to wait until today, at their regular Saturday appointment, to share my findings.

I opened the waiting room windows. It was a humid morning, unusual for Ellington as we run drier and about ten degrees cooler than surrounding areas. We're set pretty far down, low in a flat-bottomed hole on the far Southern edge of Perry County. Beaufort butts up against us, to the North where it sits on a hill. Ed says that, when he's at work, he can see the quarry from the saw mill. "Ellington is surrounded by pine trees and rocks, like a storybook drawing," he once told me, "It's like something I'd read to Aubrey. A little city far away with a lonely giant or something."

I met the Hickcocks on the porch, ushering them in. Calvin was still in town, and so was his girlfriend. They were no longer in uniform and I was glad to see them looking more relaxed.

"Doc, you've met Rita," Calvin said, stopping in the doorway with his girl. "Mom's given her blessing so I can tell you now that we're engaged."

Rita smiled and stuck her hand out as girls do on such occasions. I looked at the ring and smiled. "My congratulations to you both."

The last of the Hickcocks, Lizzie and Aubrey, entered the office, Aubrey waving and offering his hand. "Good morning, Mr. Doc."

As I closed the door, I noticed a black car about a block down on Pancake Avenue. "If you'll all excuse me for a minute," I said to them, "I'll just go get your file."

The rear door of the house squeaked loudly as I snuck out the back. I was maybe twenty feet into the yard when I heard the door again. Calvin was on my heels in seconds. "You saw the Chevy?" he said.

Cutting through back yards, over fences, and around garages, we moved like men on a mission. Running beside Calvin, I suddenly felt twenty years younger and found myself smiling. "Hey, Doc," Calvin whispered. "Ever wonder why they named this street Pancake? Couldn't they have just called it Softshell?"

I wanted to tell him that, before he was born, there used to be a diner on the corner—owned by the original mayor—and it was known for six inch high stacks of pancakes. When it came time to name the streets, the mayor pushed through the local turtle name just so he could write "Get Your Pancakes on Pancake" in the diner window. Too long a story for now, I thought, as we approached the street.

From our vantage point, a block behind the car, it looked as though there

were two occupants. "Doc," Calvin said. "I know this is your mission, but you need to let me take point."

The boy with the extra pinky and the roaming eye, the one I'd always thought of as quiet and reserved, wasn't asking; he was politely telling and, it appeared to me, he was used to doing exactly that. This is why he couldn't talk about his job anymore, I thought. Calvin must be a special forces guy or something. Looking at the black car before us, I envisioned Calvin as a sort of military James Bond, or better, a Jason Bourne, a killing machine. Oh, Velma would be upset about that.

"Doc," Calvin said again. "You with me?"

I acknowledged, following him past a row of houses and then slowing our pace as we stepped quietly alongside a building on the opposite side of the street as the car, our bodies hugging the concrete wall. About twenty feet from the rear bumper, we ran bent at our waists, stopping behind the trunk. With two fingers he motioned that he would be going to the driver side and I should wait. Then he reached to his ankle. My heart skipped and I suddenly realized this could be bad. But Calvin simply pulled his sock up and winked at me before disappearing around the car.

"Excuse me," I heard him say.

"Oh, Lord! You scared the livin' daylights," came the voice in the car.

“Ha,” Calvin laughed. “You’re the preacher from the party.”

“I beg your pardon,” came the voice again.

It was Francis. Watching my office. Watching the Hickcocks. Forgetting Calvin’s directions to stay put, I rose to my feet. Francis’ head jerked as he looked in his rear view mirror. “Doc, is that you?”

“Look,” Calvin said, leaning into the window. “I don’t know what you’re doing and I don’t care, but you will leave my family alone.”

“My daddy’s not doing anything,” came a voice from the passenger side. I walked around and leaned in, mimicking Calvin. It was Frankie Miller, Francis’ son.

“Frankie, you need to hush now,” I said.

“I don’t have to hush,” he said. “Daddy, tell him I can say whatever I want.”

Calvin put his hand over Francis’ shoulder. I could see his knuckles changing to white as Francis gritted his teeth, his face turning red. Calvin smiled at Frankie. “Now, that’s no way to talk to your elders, young man. Your daddy and I are just talking.”

“But—” Frankie started to protest.

“Hush, boy,” Francis said.

“You’ll be leaving now?” Calvin said, continuing to smile at Frankie.

Tears formed in the corner of Francis' eyes and he nodded quickly. "Yes, yes. We were just going."

Calvin released his hold.

Francis started the engine and I leaned in a little more. "Francis, leave the family in peace. They aren't hurting anyone."

Calvin and I each took a step backward and Francis sped off.

"I guess we better double-time it," Calvin said, throwing a mischievous smirk my way before jogging off back down the street.

"Sorry that took so long," I said. "My office is a mess. The good news is that all the testing is done. I've screened for everything I can possibly think of and the only thing of any note at all is a slightly elevated level of iron in your blood."

"Iron?" Lizzie said. "He's got too much iron?"

"Not at all," I said. "It's consistent in all of you, and me. I even tested Sheriff Baines and Trent just to be sure. Seems it's normal for the folks in Ellington to have higher concentrations of iron in their blood."

"Probably living so close to the quarry," Donny said, smiling.

Norene looked at him and rolled her eyes. "So, Doc, that's it? We're all done with the tests? There's nothing, you know, wrong with us?"

“With any of us?” Ed said, standing so that Aubrey couldn’t see that Ed was really asking about his son.

“I didn’t find a thing,” I said. “You’re all perfectly normal.”

I suppose the Hickcocks didn’t know what to say about that. They sat in that room shaking their heads for the longest time until, finally, Aubrey piped up, “Can we see the trains now?”

“Sure. Let’s go see the trains,” Ed said. “We need to do something with our Saturday mornings.”

“May as well be trains,” Donny said.

I held the door as they left, each one shaking my hand in a proper goodbye.

July 4, 2001

Calvin's visit is over. He has received new orders. I regret not being able to spend more time with him. Goodbyes can be difficult.

Calvin and Rita decided to take the early train to St. Louis and then catch a flight to their next undisclosed location. After they left, the family would go to the annual parade. Sheriff Baines and I met the Hickcocks at the quarry station to say goodbye.

I was holding Aubrey's hand, looking down the tracks. He was excited, especially knowing that his uncle would be riding the train. "Is it coming?" he asked again and again.

I checked my watch. "Ten more minutes."

"A lot of people are riding the train," he said. He must have thought they were all going on a trip.

"Not today," I said. "Just Uncle Calvin and Rita."

"What about them?" he said, pointing behind me.

A crowd of maybe twenty people were walking toward us. Sheriff Baines

looked at Calvin. "Lizzie," Calvin said. "Get Aubrey."

Calvin stood next to the sheriff, Ed and Donny on his other side. I gathered the women and Aubrey together behind them as the crowd approached, suddenly feeling like we were in some sort of Western, a showdown at the train station.

"I might have known," Sheriff Baines said. "You can stop right there, Francis."

He kept coming but pulled up quick when Calvin took a step forward. "We don't want any trouble," Francis said. "We just want to talk to Ed and Lizzie."

"You need to be leaving them alone, Francis," Sheriff Baines said, more firmly. "And who's we? Who are all these people?"

"You know me, Sheriff," Sherell said, moving out of the crowd until she was by Francis' side. "We're from the Rockhouse church and this here's our Pastor."

"I do know you, Sherell," he said shifting his weight, scanning the faces. "And I know Jimmy and Roberta and, heck, I know most every one of you. I meant what are y'all doing together, right now, here at the station. Are you catching a train?"

"We're here to see the boy," Francis said. "We just want to speak with his parents. Ed and Lizzie, I don't know why but the Lord has bestowed a special gift on you. I have prayed and fasted about this for weeks and He told me that your

boy is The Anointed One.”

Calvin took a deep breath in and exhaled, then moved his head from side to side as though loosening his neck muscles. Sheriff Baines reached over and touched Calvin’s forearm whispering, “Let him finish, Cal.”

“Did you hear what I said?” Francis continued. “That boy was sent here for a purpose. He’s come to save the wounded and the lost. Ed and Lizzie, your boy is a messenger of The Almighty.”

Ed looked back at Lizzie who was holding Aubrey tight in her arms, holding his head so he couldn’t see the crowd.

“I appreciate your coming to tell us that, Pastor Miller,” Ed said in the calmest, most encouraging way. “Lizzie and I both appreciate it. We do. But, if it’s all the same to you, we’d like our boy to just be a little boy.”

“But you can’t do that,” Francis said, looking around at his congregation. “You have a responsibility. You must be good stewards. You have to sow your seeds and water your crops and you have to share your talents.” He stretched out his arms, taking steps toward Ed. “I can help you, Son,” Francis smiled. “The church is here for you.” The crowd inched forward behind him.

“Alright,” Sheriff Baines said, holding his palm up, halting them. “Now, that’s enough of this. Francis, I’m telling you right now to turn around and go home.”

Jimmy Fulton's hand reached forward from the crowd and touched Francis' shoulder. "Pastor," Jimmy said. "It looks to me that they do not agree with you."

"There's no arguing with the Lord," Francis said.

Jimmy moved in closer, his mouth behind Francis' ear. "But we need to respect Caesar, Pastor. We have laws."

Francis looked at the sheriff's hand which was now on his holster.

"It's time to break this up, folks," the sheriff said. "I'm ordering all of you to go on, now. Go on about your day. Enjoy the parade. And I don't want to hear any more about this."

The crowd mumbled a bit but quickly dispersed, leaving Francis and the Fultons. Jimmy spoke again. "Pastor, you said your peace, now it's time to go."

"You have not heard the last of me," Francis said. Jimmy pulled at Francis' arms, walking him away. "The Lord's will will not be thwarted," Francis yelled over his shoulder.

Roberta took a few steps toward us and out of Francis' hearing said, "I'm so sorry. I'm a God-fearing woman but . . . I don't know how to stop this." She turned to leave but once again mouthed "I'm sorry," her face blushed with embarrassment.

The train whistled down the tracks. "Here it comes," Aubrey yelled with joy, breaking the tension. "Here comes the train."

"You need to file a restraining order," Calvin said to Ed and Lizzie.

"He's a pastor," Lizzie said.

"I'm not pulling out of here until you promise," Calvin insisted.

"It's a good idea," Sheriff Baines said, "At least until he settles down. It'll put some yardage between him and the family."

"We'll do it," Ed said, shaking his brother's hand. "Thanks."

Aubrey wiggled from Lizzie's arms and ran to Calvin, hugging him tightly around the neck. He waved goodbye to the train, watching until it disappeared into the pines. The Hickcocks decided it best to avoid the parade that day.

July 4, 2003

Things have been quiet for some time. Since the restraining order, the Hickcocks have stayed pretty much secluded from many of the Ellington folk. Norene and Trent married a year ago and are expecting their first child in a few months. They bought old Frank Watson's Texaco station which, everyone knows, is the place to go for gossip. Sherell's Five and Ten is good, too, but not known for accuracy. There's a group of men that loiter at the station—their second home—and they spend a good portion of every evening setting people straight on the town news. Today, they will not be at the station. They will be front and center at the Stinkpot Parade.

Once a year the citizens of Ellington and Beaufort get together for a parade. Individually, our towns are not large enough to bother but, together, we can draw enough people to both ride in a small procession as well as line at least one side of the road, waving, hoping in earnest to be pelted with small candies. In July, we celebrate our independence, our crops, our school year being over, our school year starting, our Irish of which we have maybe three, our Thanksgiving and Christmas, and we honor our veterans. That means that about twenty men,

including those from the Texaco station, don their stiffly pressed uniforms and ride down Main Street on the trunks of previously-owned but newly-waxed convertibles on loan from Big Tiny's Auto Yard. The Texaco men include Don "Pops" Franklin, retired grocer and feed store operator; Phil Barnett, Ellington tow truck driver; Jip Saunders, farmer; Deaf Andy, saw mill retiree; Ripe Andy, part-time bait shop worker; and Trent Baines, owner and operator of the Texaco station. Trent is at least thirty years younger than the rest of the veterans, but given he owns their gathering place, they count him in. Also, Trent was a veteran of Iraq, so not only did they welcome him into their group, they had him ride in the first car along with Willie Farmer, another Iraq veteran who now lived in Beaufort. Willie and Trent had been best friends since Kindergarten.

When folks from big cities are beginning their vacation season, we focus our attention on the Stinkpot Parade, named after the Stinkpot turtle, a very small reptile with a very large smell. A good number of years ago, an ecologist fellow from the University of Columbia was researching our creeks and found the largest concentration of Stinkpots in the state. Phil Barnett had just returned from Vietnam and suggested we hold a Stinkpot Parade. At the time, Phil was trying to kick a heroin habit but, still, it seemed like a good idea. Thirty years later, Phil's long been off the needle, but the parade lingers on. For some, it lingers on all day. After the parade, there are rides and food, and all sorts of carnival games. There's a big pie-baking contest that people from as far as Kansas City and St. Louis have been known to enter. And the Perry County Volunteer Fire Department puts on a

nice fireworks display. For some, the Stinkpot celebration lasts into Sunday.

I don't know where I mustered the nerve, but the week before the parade, I knocked on Velma's door and asked her to join me at the Stinkpot festivities.

"You mean, you want me to ride in a car or something?" she said.

We were on her front porch at the time. Aubrey was running circles around Velma's skirt, saying, "Hi, Doc. We're making cookies. You want to help?" He'd grown a foot taller and more sure-footed now that he was beyond the toddler stage. And at three years old, he knew what was up. "Grandma," he said, tugging at her hand, "Doc's asking you for a date."

Velma turned all sorts of red. "You skedaddle on inside," she said to Aubrey. "Is that true, Lawrence? Are you asking me on a date?"

I looked down at my shoes like a school boy, wondering why I hadn't considered what to do if she declined. "I suppose it is true."

"You're not sure?" she said.

"I'm sure," I said. "I'm asking you for a date, Velma Hickcock."

"To the Stinkpot Parade?"

I looked up. She was smiling, enjoying my nervousness. "I like to impress the ladies on the first date."

Aubrey was just inside the screen door. "I want to go to the parade. Can I

go, Grandma?"

When I went to retrieve Velma, a whole convoy of crepe paper decorated Hickcock vehicles was lined up in front of her house, waiting. Aubrey convinced his parents that, since he was nearly three years old, he ought to attend a parade. I'd never met a child his age—or three times his age—who could argue a point so convincingly.

Ed was the first to greet me. "Nice car," he said.

Big Tiny insisted that I drive his 1953 Cadillac Convertible in the parade, a thank you for setting his broken finger a few weeks earlier. It was the third time in a year he'd snapped it—tripping over Teeny Tiny, his little yappy dog that was always underfoot. I hadn't intended to ride in the parade but, looking at the deep blue paint and shiny chrome on that car, I couldn't resist.

"You think Velma will go for it?" I said.

"If she won't, I will," Donny said, running his hands along the curve of the quarter panel.

"You planning on having mom home at a decent hour?" Ed said, trying hard to act serious.

"I hope so, given it's eight in the morning," I said.

Aubrey ran up beside his daddy. "I like your car, Doc. Can I ride with you and Grandma?"

"Let's give them some privacy," Ed said, picking him up, tossing him high into the air.

"Higher, higher," Aubrey laughed while being tossed and caught. "Please, please can I ride with Doc and Grandma?"

"I don't mind," I said. "I've got some drinks and snacks in the back seat. Plenty for everyone, if you and Lizzie want to ride with us, too."

Velma came out of the house wearing a pink dress and a straw hat with a wide brim, just right for a Saturday morning parade. She eyeballed the car and then me. "I take it we're more than spectators."

"I get to ride with you and Doc," Aubrey said, wiggling from Ed's arms.

"That okay?" I said.

"Probably a good idea. It'll keep some space between him and the crowd," she said. This would be the first major public outing for the Hickcocks since the train station incident—since the order had been filed against Francis. Aubrey was so happy he didn't know what to say so he just stayed put, jumping up and down in the same spot until we were ready to leave.

Big Tiny outdid himself. The lineup of classic cars beat all previous years. Trent and the Texaco men led the way, followed by a group of Sunday School kids from the Methodist church. They were dressed like turtles, only they carried plastic swords, and other assorted weaponry. Aubrey noted that they were ninja turtles who knew how to fight bad guys.

Next in line was the Ellington High School Marching Band which consisted of two-dozen youngsters in fuzzy, green hats and four baton-twirling girls wearing shiny orange, sequined dresses. After them came Sherell driving a horse drawn hay wagon with long banners on its sides that read:

Sherell's Five and Ten

and the

Rockhouse Pentecostal Church

Official Sponsors of the Stinkpot Parade

Jimmy and Roberta Fulton rode in the back of the wagon, as did Pastor Miller and his son Frankie, who was about the same age as Randall, closing in on eleven by then. His mother, a nice enough gal by the name of Dorothy, married Francis after he took over in the pulpit, both of them still teenagers. Shortly after Frankie was born, after a year of marriage to Francis, Dorothy left Ellington with another girl from the Rockhouse congregation. Took her cat, but left her baby and husband in the middle of the night. Those are the facts as told and maintained by the Texaco men.

Velma, Aubrey, Ed, Lizzie, and I followed Sherell's hayride—Velma and I in the front, Lizzie, Ed, and Aubrey sitting atop the rear seat, their legs dangling on the seatbacks. We kept our distance, moving slowly, maneuvering the Cadillac's spit-polished wheels around fresh horse manure. Aubrey waved to the onlookers and Lizzie and Ed helped him throw candy at their feet.

We saw Donny and Norene waving with other spectators as we passed Mississippi and Mud. As we came up on Cooter Avenue, Randall Fulton pushed through the crowd, running toward the hayride.

"I got 'em, I got 'em," he said to Frankie, jumping up on the back of the open wagon. We couldn't see what the boys were doing but we knew them well enough to keep our eyes open. They shielded themselves from their parents' view, Randall showing Frankie something rolled up in the bottom of his shirt.

Next thing we knew, a trail of smoke flew from Randall's hands and landed in front of the Cadillac. Loud popping commenced and I stopped the car. They'd lit a package of firecrackers, scaring the crowd into short screams until they figured it out. The procession stopped. Randall and Frankie held their stomachs, laughing as a hush fell over the onlookers.

Trent and Willie jumped from the lead car and ran back to us.

"You okay?" Willie said leaning over our windshield.

"We're fine," I said. I looked back at Lizzie who'd pulled Aubrey onto her

lap. He didn't seem at all shaken by the incident.

Trent stood at the back of the wagon, his hand out in front of the laughing boys.

"Randall Ray," Jimmy said, "you hand them firecrackers over right now."

"Here." Randall slapped a packet of firecrackers into Trent's hand and crossed his arms, pouting.

Trent rubbed Randall's head. "You boys know better," he said, before heading back to his car.

"You folks mind if I ride with you?" Willie said. "I've heard enough Texaco stories for one morning."

The back seat of the Cadillac was huge. "Hop in," Lizzie said. Aubrey stuck his hand out for a good military handshake.

Alligator Avenue was the last cross street on Main. Trent's car and the marching band rounded the corner and suddenly there was another flash of light from the hayride. It was followed by two or three more, then a round of shots. Sparks and smoke and high-pitched whistles streamed from the hay.

"Roman candles," Willie said, "and bottle rockets," right before one struck him in the side of the neck. I put the car in park and spun around to check on him. "Not even a flesh wound," he said. Willie would know. He was a medic in the military and now worked in the Perry County Hospital Air Evac Unit. He spent a

few days a year airlifting people off of Killer Way. "Damn," he said, looking past me, hopping from the car.

The hay in Sherell's wagon was on fire. Roberta screamed, watching flames tear up Jimmy and Pastor Miller's pant legs. I followed Willie out of the car. He'd already taken off his coat and was jumping onto the wagon. Randall and Frankie jumped off and froze, watching their fathers beat at their legs.

"I got you," Willie yelled over Roberta's screams. She was up front by then, with Sherell, trying desperately to see what was happening with her husband, but helping Sherell hold onto the frightened horse's reins.

Willie covered Francis' legs, quickly patting out the flames and, by the time I'd gotten there and stomped out smaller fires that were threatening throughout the wagon, he'd already turned to Jimmy, smothering his legs with his coat, telling him to "lie still, or you'll make it worse." Jimmy did his best to fight back tears but he couldn't help himself; he cried out in pain.

Willie pulled his charred uniform away. Jimmy had taken the worst of it.

"Let's get him down to the ground," I said. Willie didn't need my help. He scooped Jimmy up in one move and had him laying flat before my feet hit the street. He took a small knife from his pocket and cut away what he could of Jimmy's lower pant legs.

His shins were smudged with black, and blistering; the smell of his burnt

flesh filled our noses. "Bring the water bottles from the cooler," I called to Velma.

"The boy!" Francis yelled, pointing toward the Cadillac. "Get the boy!"

I waved to Ed, telling him to go—get out of there.

Ed jumped from the car and scooped Aubrey from Lizzie's arms. The three of them walking quickly in the opposite direction, weaving through the spectator-lined street. Francis yelled after them but was unable to move with his injured legs.

Velma brought two water bottles and knelt at my side. "Here," I said, lifting Jimmy's head. "Drink this."

I gave the other bottle to Willie who slowly poured the water over Jimmy's legs.

"The fire department will be here in a minute, Jimmy," Velma said, smoothing her palm over his forehead. "They're at the end of the parade. Trent's gone after them."

Roberta plopped onto the ground next to her husband. "Jimmy," she said, out of breath from wrestling with the horse reigns, "you're going to be fine. Just fine."

Willie and I looked at Jimmy's legs. He was not going to be fine for quite awhile.

May 7, 2004

Norene and Trent were married at the First Baptist Church of Ellington by a one-armed preacher named Otto Lutz. He came from over in Beaufort to replace Thurman Pike who'd slid on a patch of black ice and died on Killer Way. Otto enjoyed walking. He could walk for miles at a time, never knowing where he'd end up.

Even after the Stinkpot fiasco that was our first date, Velma and I continued to see each other. There was never much to do on a date in Ellington. We could see a movie at The Filmstrip—Ellington's original one-room schoolhouse that shows movies we could watch on satellite television. We could get a sundae at Phannie's Pharmacy and Ice Creamery, or we could paddle around Pike's Peak Lake. We did those things for most of the summer and fall so, when spring came, we mostly just went for walks.

Once, we took Aubrey with us and, naturally, we went by the quarry. It was a pleasant day and we'd been gone for at least an hour. The boy had energy, matching our pace the whole way as we strayed into the pines along a hiking path. The smell of the needles surrounded us, sticking on our clothes and in our hair.

The sky—when it peeked though the pine ceiling—was clear, just a smattering of white clouds high in the atmosphere, light and floating. Sometimes we'd hear a rustling in the woods, maybe a squirrel, or even a deer. Aubrey spotted four box turtles along the path and was equally fascinated by them all, as though each one was brand new. A good walk will make a person feel small to the big world around them, and grateful. I was grateful to still have hair, pine-scented as it was, grateful to have Velma at my side, to be able to offer her a steadying hand when we encountered a rocky drop or a cobbled creek bed. I was grateful to have met Aubrey, and been a part of his life from the beginning.

“Look, Doc,” he said, running toward me with another turtle. “It’s a baby, and he lost some of his toes.” He held the shell securely in both hands, the turtle’s head toward Aubrey, its back legs squirming at us.

“No, Sweetie,” Velma said, “that’s a three-toed turtle. That’s the way he comes.”

“Oh,” Aubrey said. He took a minute, contemplating, eyeing the turtle’s feet more closely. “A three-toed turtle. That’s the way he comes.”

“Yep,” I said. “He’s supposed to be that way.”

Aubrey considered this, lifting the shell higher, smiling at the turtle’s face. Then he set it on the edge of the path and scooted it along, watching it fade into the underbrush. “My Uncle Donny came with funny toes, like a duck.”

“Yes, he did,” I said. Aubrey was a baby when Donny’s webbing disappeared. Donny must have told him about it.

“That’s the way he came?” Aubrey said.

Velma looked at me and I could see she did not like where the conversation was heading. “We should go,” I said. “Your mom will be wanting you home for dinner soon.”

We walked along the outer edge of the quarry, down beyond the lake and into a strip of pasture where the trains rolled through—the same area that could be seen from Lizzie and Ed’s clearing. Aubrey held our hands, swinging his legs into the air every few steps, laughing, and wearing us out. Off in the distance, I noticed a shadow, maybe a deer coming toward us. It was on the tracks, moving slowly, growing larger. A minute later, it was not a deer, I decided but, rather, a man, a very tall man, and he looked a little unbalanced.

“It’s Mr. Lutz,” Aubrey said, swinging higher and more often now, pulling Velma and I off balance on the lumpy field beneath us.

After another hundred or so feet, I realized Aubrey was right. It was indeed Pastor Lutz, the unevenness I saw being his missing left arm. Aubrey broke free from our hands and ran toward him, a long distance for his small legs.

Otto must not have been paying any attention at all. The train came humming around a patch of pines, screaming down the tracks behind him. The

conductor blasted the whistle over and over but it was no help. In Ellington, there's only one reason a whistle blows like that.

I couldn't tell if, at the last second, Otto jumped or if he was thrown sideways by the force of the train. Either way, he'd landed some fifteen feet from the track. My heart rate jumped as I raced toward him, angry that I didn't at least have my bag.

Velma screamed at the sight of Otto flying through the air. She screamed again for her grandson who was nearly upon him. "Aubrey, stop!"

But Aubrey kept going. When he reached him, he stopped abruptly and fell to his knees. I was maybe ten seconds behind him, breathing hard.

"Look, Doc," Aubrey said. "Mr. Lutz has lost a foot."

Otto was flat on his back laying on a slight incline, fully conscious. "Hey, Doc," he said. "I didn't even hear it."

"Mr. Lutz lost a foot," Aubrey said again. "He didn't come this way."

Otto laughed. Shock, I thought, slipping my belt off to make a tourniquet. I knelt beside Aubrey and saw that his hand was resting on Otto's lower leg. I could see mangled tissue and a clean-sliced bone at the ankle. Sliding the leather strap under his leg I realized that Otto wasn't losing blood at all.

Down the tracks I saw the train stopped, the conductor now running toward us.

Velma came up behind Aubrey and, upon seeing Otto's condition, clamped her hand over Aubrey's eyes and pulled him away.

Otto cried out in pain, blood shooting from the wound. I cinched the belt as tight as I could. Aubrey kicked in the air, fighting Velma's grasp. "Grandma, let me down, let me down."

Otto's eyes rolled up and back. "I don't feel so good, Doc."

"Velma," I said. "It's okay, he's already seen it."

She shook her head no but Aubrey pleaded again, "Grandma, please," until she set him back on the ground.

Aubrey sat beside Otto, his hand once again on the injured leg. I loosened the belt, watching the blood coagulate.

Hubert Potts, the conductor whom I'd known for several years, was praying as he ran. "Please God, please, let him be okay. Please."

"He's alright," I said as Hubert approached. When he saw Otto's leg, I thought for a minute that Hubert would be the second casualty. "Sit down over there," I said. "Put your head between your knees and take deep breaths."

"I called for an ambulance," he said between breaths.

We sat with Otto for a good twenty minutes, smiling when we heard a helicopter overhead. Aubrey was excited, waving at it with his unoccupied hand.

The pasture was just big enough to land in. The wind from the helicopter was so strong that Velma sat behind Aubrey and held onto his shoulders to keep him from blowing over and losing his grip on Otto's leg.

Willie Farmer slid open the chopper door and ran toward us with a medic's bag. "Hey, Otto," he said, assessing the situation, pulling a bag of saline from the satchel and handing it to me as he went about his work. He waved back to the chopper and another paramedic came running with a stretcher. "You know, in a man versus train collision, the train usually wins. You are one tough preacher."

Otto smiled.

Willie flashed a light over Otto's eyes. "Looking good."

They boarded him in under five minutes. His foot, though searched for by many young boys in the coming months, was never recovered.

August 10, 2005

Dr. Rose called. She was at the clinic with Sheriff Baines, Aubrey Hickcock, and a social worker from the Perry County DCFS.

The caseworker's name was Marla Dickinson. She was standing outside an exam room when I arrived, waiting. "You're Dr. Bass?" she said, extending her hand.

"I am. What happened? Where's Aubrey?"

"He's fine," she said. "Sheriff Baines is with him, waiting for you."

Dr. Rose stepped from her office into the hall. "Lawrence, so glad you answered. Aubrey is really your patient. The situation is frightening enough for a child. I thought it'd be best if you examined him."

"May I?" I said to Ms. Dickinson.

She opened the exam room door and closed it behind me. Aubrey was sitting on the table, laughing, playing a hand-slap game with Sheriff Baines.

"Ron," I said, "What's going on?"

“Here, Aubrey,” he said, taking an ink pen from his pocket and rolling it over the paper table covering. “Can you draw me a picture of a train?”

Aubrey obliged, swooping his legs up and curling them beneath his torso so he could lean into his project with concentration.

“Someone’s called DCFS and made accusations,” he said, stepping away from the table with his back to Aubrey to prevent him from overhearing. “They said the boy isn’t registered for school, that he’s being held in a basement, and abused.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said. “First of all, we both know the Hickcocks and their boy. If something was going on, I think we’d know it—and if not us, then Trent. And second of all, do Ed and Lizzie even have a basement?” I was furious. “Who was it? Was it Francis Miller?”

“Now, Doc, you know I can’t say, even if I knew, which I don’t. They didn’t call me; they called Perry County. I don’t have a choice in the matter. The caseworker is good. She let me bring him here. She said if he passed a physical exam, she’d let him go back home and she’d look into the educational charges later.”

“So all I need to do is examine him?”

“That’s it.”

I turned to Aubrey. “Look,” he said, rising to his knees and pointing at his

drawing. "It's a passenger car." He'd drawn a railroad car with a dozen windows, each containing a smiling face. "See. There's Grandma, and Mom and Dad, and Uncle Donny, and Aunt Norene. That's Uncle Trent there. And this one is Calvin. And that's Rita. She has long hair but you can't see it 'cuz she pulls it back in a ball. This one is you, Doc. And this one is you, Sheriff, 'cuz he has a hat." We were dumbfounded. It wasn't just that the whole train car was well-drawn, or that the sheriff had a hat; each person had an identifying feature. Curly hair, center part, a crew-cut, a uniform, a stethoscope. It was an amazing thing—this five year old's drawing—but something struck me as off.

"Aubrey," I said after a minute, "where are you in the picture?"

He laughed. "I'm not in there," he said. "I'm driving the engine. I even have a hat. You want me to draw the engine?"

"Sure," I said. Then, under my breath to Ron, I said, "He looks pretty well adjusted to me."

"I'd say," Ron said. "But, for the sake of the law, would you mind just looking in his ears or something?"

I did just that. Looked in Aubrey's ears, checked his eyes, nose, felt his glands—everything for a simple pre-Kindergarten exam. We walked him into the hall together and I had Aubrey hop onto the scale for height and weight.

"Doc says he's fine to go to school," Sheriff Baines told Ms. Dickinson.

“And he’s fine everywhere else, too.”

“Thank you, both,” she said. “I will leave him with you, then? He’s fine to go back home.”

Later, at the Hickcocks house, Ed paced around the kitchen table. “Was it Pastor Miller? I knew we should have extended that order.”

“No one knows for sure, but the social worker said it was a female who called,” said Sheriff Baines. “Could have been anyone, Ed. The main thing is, you have to get Aubrey into school next week.”

“We can’t put him in school. What if something happens?” Lizzie poured coffee and bit at her lip. “We can’t take that chance.”

Ed paced some more, slapping his fist into his palm. He’d been at the sawmill when the worker came. Lizzie called him in a panic saying they’d taken Aubrey and wouldn’t tell her where. Ed left work, speeding home, and nearly rolled his car on Killer Way. He’d passed right by the clinic, not knowing his son was inside drawing pictures of trains and getting his ears checked by me, not knowing if he’d been taken away and placed with strangers.

“Until Francis does something, there’s nothing you can do about it. He hasn’t bothered you since the order. Maybe it wasn’t him,” Sheriff Baines said, trying like heck to be reassuring.

"Doc," Ed said. "What do you think?"

"I think Aubrey would like school," I said, and I meant it. "It'd be good for him to be around other children. He needs to socialize with kids his own age. And schools are good about protecting children."

Sheriff Baines squeezed Lizzie's hand. "I can talk with the principal over there. She's a good woman. I'll make sure she knows the situation without telling her all the details."

"You really think it's best?" Lizzie said. Ed put his hand on her shoulder and they looked at the two of us.

"People are afraid of what they don't know," I said. "Let some kids meet him, see that Aubrey's a sweet kid."

Velma cleared her throat, scaring us all to pieces. She'd come in while we were talking and not said a word. "Doc's right," she said. "He's growing up. We can't protect him from everything."

Aubrey, who'd been napping, came strolling into the kitchen and hugged Velma around the waist. The decision was made.

March 15, 2006

Caroline Pike is the school nurse. I've known Caroline my entire life. She's a good woman—good heart to the core—married to Bill Pike. She asked me to come by the school today, said she had something to show me.

“What do you make of this?” Caroline said, pointing to her log book. We were in her office, an oversized closet with a desk, two chairs, a locked medicine cabinet, and a narrow cot pushed against the wall.

“There's nothing there,” I said.

“I know, Doc. That's why I called you. We've been in school for seven months and I've seen exactly zero students. No cuts, no scrapes, no bumps or bruises. Not so much as a cold or fever. What's going on?”

“Caroline,” I said, looking out a small window onto the playground, “I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Lawrence Bass, you are the worst liar I've ever known.”

Aubrey was hanging upside down, swinging from his knees on a jungle gym. A number of other children stood in a semi-circle around him. He was

laughing, talking and waving his arms as though he was telling a whopper of a story. The children were laughing and smiling back.

“What do you want me to say, Caroline?”

“I don’t know. Okay, listen, this is going to sound crazy but I think it’s the Hickcock boy. You know who I’m talking about?”

Aubrey flipped his legs over the bar and dropped, landing on his feet, his arms stretched above his head like a gymnast finishing a routine. The children clapped.

“I think I know the boy,” I said. “But I don’t understand the correlation between a healthy group of kids and one child. It usually works the other way—a sick child passes germs. I can’t say I’ve heard of a healthy child passing good health.”

“You’re making fun of me,” she said, closing her log book. “Just forget it. Forget I brought it up. I should just be happy our kids are so healthy.”

Aubrey started running around the playground, his arms out like an airplane. Every child outside followed him—a winding, dipping, circling line of airplane children—all smiling and laughing.

“ I’m glad you called, Caroline.” I said, turning from the window.

She walked me to the front of the school. “Did I mention we had perfect

attendance, too?"

"It was good seeing you," I said.

I watched the playground from my car. Was there a proper choice here, a medical or ethical, or even a moral decision that needed to be made? Everyone wants healthy children. Seeing a child thrive is one of the perks of being a physician. Could I knowingly expose the Ellington Elementary children to illness if I could prevent it by simply remaining silent? And what about Aubrey? His obvious joy on the playground had to count for something. If I told the Hickcocks what was happening, they'd pull him out of school.

A large blue van pulled up beside me, its side panel covered with a Channel Eight logo. The driver hopped out and motioned toward the playground. A woman with a microphone came from the far side of the van, followed by a man holding a camera. I rolled down my window to hear. Channel Eight covered Perry County news but, seldom, if ever came as far as Ellington. About the closest they came was when reporting "more tragic news from Killer Way."

The reporter smoothed her hair, tugged at her coat, and waited for the cameraman to signal. "We're standing in front of Ellington Elementary, home of the Fighting Turtles, where it seems the students have really been cracking the books. That's right, after nationwide testing, the Fighting Turtles have surpassed all other elementary schools in academics. And it wasn't just a few students raising the bar; it seems the entire student body is responsible. The scores are up

in every grade. We have to ask, 'What's in the water?'"

I looked back at the playground; the children had been ushered inside. There was no more deliberating. I would tell the Hickcocks.

March 16, 2006

Aubrey, at nearly six years old, is quite the debater. Against their better judgement, Ed and Lizzie agreed to let him finish the week at school. He even talked them into letting him ride the bus home with Jake Miner, his best friend. It was Jake's birthday and he'd invited Aubrey to his party. Velma and I planned to go with Ed and Lizzie and pick him up afterwards. From there, we will surprise him with a trip to the quarry station. Calvin and Rita are coming home for a visit.

The Miner's lived a few blocks from my office. They were good people. And Jake was a fine boy. He'd been one of my patients since reopening my practice. Ed, Lizzie, Velma, and I approached the front porch of the Miner house. Ed squeezed Lizzie's hand as they reached the door. It's interesting, how parents get so nervous about their children growing up, reaching their next stage of independence. No one answered their knocking.

We walked around to the back of the house. The back yard was decorated for a party but no one was there. Two picnic tables were covered with plastic tablecloths held down with cans of soda and centerpieces made of buckets of

baseballs. Red and blue crepe paper stretched from tree to tree to the corners of the house. Balloons tied to chair backs fought against a cool breeze that was quickly building momentum. A card table off to one side was piled high with wrapped presents, all in similar sports paper likely purchased at Sherell's Five & Ten.

Ed reached the barbecue pit and lifted the lid. Smoke billowed out, stinging his eyes. Rows of shrunken hot dogs and charred burgers lined the grill. Further out in the yard, beyond a wooden jungle gym, was a tall row of hedges.

"Did you hear that?" Ed said, staring beyond the green wall.

We listened, but heard nothing. Ed took Lizzie's hand in his and pulled her behind him. Lizzie planted her feet. "I didn't hear anything," she said. "They're probably inside."

"Come on," he said, pulling her toward the hedge.

Velma squeezed my arm, her fingernails digging into the skin. "Lawrence," she whispered.

Sheriff Baines warned us before we advanced. Aubrey was lying at the bottom of a rock pile. The kids at the party had been playing hide and seek and lost track of him. He'd wandered through the hedges and over to the quarry where he stumbled upon Randall Fulton and one of his friends, Reverend Miller's son.

The Miller boy was in the back seat of Sheriff Baines' car, staring out at the other children from the party. About a dozen people had gathered. Randall was handcuffed, standing next to the hood of the patrol car. A deputy stood beside him shaking his head.

"He's a freak!" Randall screamed when he saw Lizzie and Ed. "A freak!"

Aubrey's curly brown hair was matted with gray silt. A streak of thick blood creased the top of his swollen right eyelid and pooled around his earlobe on the same side. His lips were pursed as though kissing the air. Lizzie fell to the ground, trying to pick Aubrey up but his body was limp, his bones broken in multiple places. "I'm here, baby," she said. "I'm here. You can wake up now."

The boys had thrown stones at him for nearly twenty minutes, and when Aubrey had stopped running they used cinder blocks, dragging them up the rock pile and rolling them down on top of him. Lizzie cradled Aubrey's frail upper body in her arms, rocking him, her tears raining on his face. She spoke to him, her voice breaking: "It's okay, baby. You can wake up now. It's okay."

Despite Ed's encouragement, Lizzie refused to let go of their son. He resigned himself to a nearby fence, gripping the chain links for support. The crowd of onlookers continued to grow. Sheriff Baines managed to disperse a lot of them, especially the children whose parents had come to retrieve them from the party. He'd obviously called for an ambulance as one arrived without sirens.

“My sweet, sweet girl,” Velma said, sitting beside Lizzie in the gravel. She put her arm around Lizzie’s shoulder and squeezed. “How your heart must be breaking.” She sat with Lizzie for forty-five minutes, way beyond the point her legs must have fallen asleep. I watched her try to shift her weight but Lizzie’s shoulders tightened so she stopped moving. “Don’t worry,” Velma whispered, “we can stay here as long as you want.”

The train whistled loudly at the far end of the quarry. Shortly after, Trent and Norene showed up with Calvin and Rita. Velma waved them over toward Ed.

Another twenty minutes passed. The sun was setting. I bent to one knee beside Lizzie and stroked her hair. “Lizzie,” I said, “I’ll take good care of him.”

Donny, coming from Beaufort, came running onto the scene. He found Calvin immediately and the two of them helped their mother from the ground. Ed sat down behind Lizzie and they cradled their son for a few more minutes until Ed finally looked at me and okayed my taking him. I pulled him gently from Lizzie’s arms and carried him to the back of the ambulance while Lizzie cried into Ed’s chest.

March 18, 2006

Aubrey was buried today.

The quarry workers donated a granite marker. Aubrey was wrapped in the Hickcock family blanket and laid to rest beneath a dogwood tree in the First Baptist Church of Ellington cemetery.

People came from all over Perry County, lying down on his grave and weeping, holding prayer meetings, tying ribbons with healing requests around the tree until it nearly choked. One night, a small band of people from the Rockhouse church carried candles and marched through town, continuing down the dirt road until they reached Lizzie and Ed's mailbox. They sang hymns and started shouting. "Rise up, God child," they roared. "Rise up and heal your people." Francis Miller was not with them.

June 11, 2006

This would have been Aubrey's sixth birthday.

All Ed and Lizzie wanted was to visit their son's grave in peace, but people kept coming. Some started praying for a resurrection. They waited at the cemetery and on the road outside Lizzie and Ed's house. Crowds of people waited for weeks, some of them camping out in tents and sleeping in their cars for fear that they'd miss the miracle. On two separate occasions, ambulances were called because people had fallen ill from fasting in hopes of speeding the rise of the anointed one.

Sheriff Baines and Trent moved Aubrey's body in the middle of the night.

He rests now on the Hickcock property, under a tree in the clearing that looks out over the train tracks. His grave is unmarked.

June 11, 2009

Everything changes over time. Pastor Miller is gone off with Frankie who served about six months in jail. They are somewhere in Texas where there's a big revival and a man who smacks people in the head to release them from demons. I wonder if he will smack Francis or Frankie. Roberta and Jimmy are raising llamas now. Jimmy needs a walker to get around but he says it beats a wheelchair. Randall is in Crystal Lakes serving the third year of his nine year sentence. He will be unleashed on the world when he turns twenty-one.

Lizzie and Ed recently found out they are pregnant and are expecting a girl. Norene and Trent have a houseful of little ones, their oldest two have already lost a good number of their baby teeth. Donny met a girl over in Beaufort and got a job at the saw mill where Ed works so he could be close to her. I received a postcard from Calvin last month, postmarked from somewhere in Germany. He and Rita will be visiting over the summer but they can't say when.

Velma now helps me at the office, keeping records and making appointments. The best news is that she has accepted my marriage proposal. I wonder if she will tire of me. I may need to close the office before too long; my hands have begun to ache. Every day the pain gets a little worse, and my fingertips are twisting at opposing angles. I can hear the train whistling, pulling

into the quarry.
