

WHEN THE SHADE COMES OVER

Will Davis

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Author Note

This story is based in part on my family homeplace and the stories surrounding it. It is a true haunted house and ghostly experiences run deep in my family. I will leave it up to you the reader to determine which parts of this story belong to the house and which come from my imagination.

PART I

Chapter One

Bare feet whispered on bare wood floors as the girl danced her way around the upstairs library, stopping only to curtsy to the dead woman in the ancient leather chair. She resumed her dance and turned in place, holding the hem of her dress out in one hand, the other arched over her head with delicate fingers pointing.

“I wish I had studied ballet,” she said as she paused in front of the sagging face with the sightless open eyes. “I would have been a beautiful ballerina.”

A Tiffany lamp, glowing dimly from the round table beside the chair, cast pallid shadows across the dead woman’s cheeks and her heavy arms rested limp and lifeless along the chair arms. The wispy white hair falling across the slumped shoulders, and the hairbrush on the floor at the woman’s feet, told of the old woman’s last moments.

The girl knelt and placed her hands on the old woman’s knees. A cardboard cigar box sat in the woman’s lap, its lid open. The girl closed the lid, leaned forward and looked into the vacant sightless eyes. The girl’s vibrant youth clashed with the inanimateness of death.

“I know you’ll thank me the next time we meet,” the girl said. “He needs to come *home*, to find his family once again. He needs to forgive *you*.” The girl paused, her own face now illuminated by the soft glow. She picked up the brush from the floor and stroked it through the strands of dark brown at her breast.

“Your hair was like mine once, long and fine and dark. It’s a shame mine will never be like yours—so soft and white.” The girl touched the dead woman’s hair with a single sad stroke of the brush

and then placed the brush back on the floor. She stood and removed the box from the dead woman's lap.

"Yes, I will bring the box to him when he comes home. I will make sure he gets it, and that he knows it was from you," she said, as if in reply to a request from the dead woman's cracked parted lips.

A car door slammed in the distance and a voice called from outside.

"Time for me to go," the girl said as her glance traveled to the window and back to the woman. She softly patted the old woman's knurled hand with its now sunken veins. "I loved our time together, and I'm glad I was able to bring some peace to your dying days. I'm glad you enjoyed my dancing. Goodbye Granny Blackburn. I'll see you again, real soon."

The girl turned on her feet with a swish of her dress and hurried from the library with the box protected in her grasp. She glided down the stairs and down the hall toward the back door, her feet as silent as the air in the house.

The old woman in the chair sat with her eyes motionless, her lungs still, her heart stopped. As the front door downstairs opened and closed with a bang, and the back door closed without notice, the wrinkled right hand shifted on the arm of the chair. The lifeless fingers relaxed, the hand opened and a small silver object fell from its death clutch to disappear into the folds of the cracked leather chair.

"So there I was, standing up in a great vertical pin, water rushing by, when I realized my bow was stuck. I flipped over and was trapped upside down with the bow of my kayak wedged under a rock and the current pulling me deeper under the water." Bryan Blackburn knocked dried mud from the tread of his boot with the broken half of a wooden kayak paddle. The dirt crumbled to his desk where he sat with his feet up and his chair back.

"I tried to roll to the surface three times but I was stuck fast. I was just about to wet-exit when my paddle struck the bottom, so I pushed off hard and hip-snapped—expertise and grace under pressure—and I rolled right to the top."

Bryan enjoyed telling stories of his adventures. Now, he relayed the events from his latest river trip to his colleagues at *American Adventures* magazine. The magazine, published in D.C., was not as well known in the States but had quite an overseas following. Bryan's monthly column was one of the magazine's most popular due to his extreme challenges and inane writing. He was also one of the most popular writers with the staff thanks to his amicable disposition and quick smile.

Peter Zucker, photojournalist extraordinaire and Bryan's biggest admirer, passed photos to a small gathering of co-workers around Bryan's desk. "Looked more like sheer luck and panic to me," he said. "Does this look like grace to you?" Pete pointed to a particularly unflattering picture of Bryan in a half overturned boat, his eyes wide and mouth gaping open for air like a floundering fish.

Bryan snagged the picture from Pete's hand with a quick grab before it made the circuit. "Okay, so luck had a *little* to do with it—" Bryan smiled letting the others know that luck had everything to do with it. "—but we won't use this picture in the article, will we Pete?" Bryan said with a wink.

Pete snatched the picture back and passed it around anyway. "We'll let the boss decide that, huh partner?" Pete smiled back, knowing he was going to do his best to convince Jerry to include it in the published piece. Pete was ten years younger than Bryan and looked up to Bryan like a big brother, and like a brother, was always looking to tease him at every opportunity. Their constant attempts to outdo each other usually ended in one of them looking foolish.

The phone rang on Bryan's desk as the kidding continued around the group. Bryan jumped to answer it, expecting it to be Pattie asking him to come home because she was ovulating; definitely an opportunity he didn't want to miss. Bryan, however, didn't recognize the phone number displayed on his caller ID and hesitated before answering, but he hit the speakerphone button anyway.

"Bryan Blackburn ... let's hike, bike and boat," he answered in his casual style as he placed his feet back to the floor and brushed the dirt from the desk into a waste basket. His smile faded as the voice from the speakerphone continued after the introduction.

"Mr. Blackburn—I'm sorry to be the one to inform you of your grandmother's passing. Difficult news is always hard to deliver."

The small gathering grew quiet as the somber southern voice from the phone proceeded.

“As you are one of her few living relatives, and her only descendent I might add, she has left a sizeable part of her estate to you—pending completion of a slightly unorthodox—stipulation.”

Bryan leaned toward the phone while several of the group silently drifted away in polite reverence.

“In order to receive your inheritance your grandmother, Mrs. Pearl Blackburn, has requested you attend her funeral and spend a set amount of time in the old homeplace back here in Kentucky. I can’t go into all the details at the moment, that must wait until the reading of the will, but let me say it would be worth your effort to abide by your granny’s last wishes.”

Bryan picked up the handset, still in a daze over the news of the grandmother he had not thought of in years. He had almost put her out of his mind; her and the years of torment she had dealt him. Bryan concentrated as the lawyer on the phone, Danforth Scalf, went over some of the details. Bryan scratched a few notes and thanked the attorney.

After hanging up, Bryan glanced up to see Pete still hovering, concerned and quizzical. Several others with whom he had worked for years eased back around the desk as well; their expressions, once of mockery, now of concern.

“No—not the wicked grandmother and the haunted house?” Pete asked, remembering Bryan’s stories from around many campfires. “I thought you made them up?” Pete’s voice was low as if afraid. Pete’s tone indicated both a statement and a question.

“I wish I had Pete. I wish I had,” Bryan said, still debating in his mind if he was up for a return visit to that horrible place, already upset with the memories the phone call summoned.

Chapter Two

The red Jeep Wrangler struggled to hug the curves as its driver once again became familiar with the snake-like roads of his youth. Years of driving on expressways in bumper-to-bumper traffic erased from his mind, replaced with the older, yet still vivid images of single lane roads, potholes and muddy ditch lines.

Bryan's aching back shouted with the loud voice of an Olympic shot-putter as the hours stretched on and his muscles didn't. He wished he had remembered to remove his wallet from his back pocket sooner than he had. He brushed his hand through his thick brown hair and sighed. On a better note, the ten hour drive from Washington D.C. had started in rain, went through downpour, but looked as if it was going to end in sunshine.

The spring leaves were budding across the Appalachian hills of Eastern Kentucky. The spring colors of red, white and green seemed to be competing with the fall colors of red, orange and brown. Bryan squinted at the sunshine twinkling and bouncing off the wet hood as if in a spring dance.

So much had changed over the last twenty-some years, new businesses, new houses, and yet, it seemed much the same.

"Are you okay, Honey?" his wife of five years asked sleepily from the passenger seat. "You seem quiet, reflective." She brushed back a stray strand of honey-blonde hair from her face as she yawned and stretched herself awake from her short nap. She gazed at her husband's strong cheekbones and two-day stubble. His piercing blue eyes, characteristically bright and sparkling, were today heavy and sad.

Bryan looked over at Pattie, amazed at how she still struck him as beautiful, still tugged at his heart, and how sweet he still found her Canadian accent. "I'm fine. It's been a long time and it's hard to keep up with the memories—" He reached across the seat and put his hand on her knee. She clasped her hand on top of his in return. "—I promise to tell you every one of them in a day or two."

She smiled back at him, her gray eyes still showing concern.

They passed the old high school, and a Dairy Cheer, once the “Home of the Smashburger”; it was now a Sonic. He had really loved their milkshakes, and recalled how he almost choked on a hot dog in the parking lot when he was nine. The memories were flooding back at each new turn. Images popped in and out like random pages pulled from a photo album.

Soon the houses lining the roads became scattered, fewer, the traffic became lighter, the roads became narrower, and the middle stripe disappeared from the road. They met heavy lumbering coal trucks approaching with names like *Cabbage Head* and *Heavy Hauler* painted over the cab; nick names of the drivers or their trucks. The trucks were so massive in the road, and the roads were so narrow, it seemed illogical that they could both exist in the same stretch of asphalt without colliding head-on.

They drove on, crossing over the Eastern Kentucky hills, each one higher and more curvaceous than the previous.

“You weren’t kidding when you told me you were a hillbilly,” Pattie said, her soft smile added levity to the remark. “I should have brought my corn-cob pipe.”

“Twenty-five years ago there was a blind curve just ahead where the dirt and rock had washed out from under the asphalt. I wonder if it’s still like that?” he asked, squeezing his wife’s leg. Her hand on top of his hand squeezed back.

“It looks like they’ve made it safe now!” Bryan laughed, looking at the guardrail hanging over empty space, its support posts dangling like legs on a centipede. The black pavement was broken, jagged and raw where the hillside had recently given way. The rockslide had left a gaping hole six feet wide between the broken pavement and the dangling guardrail, and a one-lane road in a blind curve. The hole reminded him of an alien mouth, with a black jagged lower lip and a top lip with crooked venomous teeth, waiting to gobble the next inattentive passerby.

The Jeep reached the top of the mountainous road and abruptly they changed from going up, to going down. For a moment, all they could see in the windshield in front of them was bright blue sky. Bryan instinctively turned to the right to follow the pavement even though he could not see the road. Pattie jumped and squeezed hard on Bryan’s hand when she felt the vehicle change direction without

benefit of seeing the road. Her grip on Bryan's hand became painful; her laugh became infectious.

"This is more thrilling than a roller coaster!" Pattie touched her beating chest with her right hand; her left brought Bryan's hand to her mouth for a gentle kiss. "No wonder you are such a daredevil behind the wheel," she smiled. Her husband had a reputation back in Washington D.C. for aggressive driving.

"Assertive" Bryan said, reading her mind. "I drive assertively, not aggressively." He brought her hand to his mouth and gave it a gentle kiss in return.

She did not reply; she only smiled with one side of her mouth turned up slightly higher than the other to reveal a few of her flawless white teeth.

Bryan noticed the new homes, the old homes, and the gray barns in various stages of decay. Each mile they passed brought a deeper memory to the surface; people he had not thought of in years reemerged in his mind.

Each emerging memory took them deeper into the Appalachians hills. The sun disappeared, the shadows grew, and the steep hills loomed above them. They reached the bottom of Brushy Mountain and were now officially on the "Creek". Brushy Creek Kentucky was, in Bryan's mind, where the term hillbilly had to have made its first appearance.

They passed a large rock jutting over the road. There was a small cave, more like an indentation, underneath. Bryan thought of Barry, a grade school friend, his best friend. The two of them rode ponies up and down the "Creek". He smiled to himself as he thought of the two of them, screaming like banshees as they galloped their small horses, bareback. He recalled how they would ride to Willard's store and they would each buy a bottle of Pepsi, a bag of salted peanuts, and a Moon Pie. They would ride up to the rock overhang and sit underneath to enjoy their treats. Bryan felt a sudden burst of "home" swell inside him. Pattie gave his hand a sympathetic squeeze after hearing him sigh heavily.

"I have to make a stop," Bryan said, pulling the Jeep to the side of the road next to a small white building with a Pepsi sign painted on one side. The dust rose and settled on the hood as Bryan smirked and stepped out into the moist warm air of his childhood home for the first time in over two decades. He walked into the cool darkness

of the one room storehouse and smelled a combination of soap, dust and tobacco. He gazed around; the place had not changed. The pop cooler was still to the right; the small hand-crank cash register was still in the back. A sallow-faced woman in her mid forties sat behind the counter playing solitaire with a weary deck of cards.

“Ain’t you that Blackburn boy?” she asked looking up briefly before returning to her game. “I heard you might be showing up. Shame about your old granny,” she said with no sincerity. The dust motes swam in the sun’s rays streaming over her shoulder from the window behind the counter.

Bryan thanked her for her concern despite her artificial tone. He put his items on the counter, noticing the bowed wooden shelves, and the scarred countertop. “Where’s Willard?” Bryan asked.

“Dead, at least 15 years,” she replied, not even looking up from her cards. She put a black jack down on a red queen. “If’n I was you, I’d stay away from that spooky old house and its ghosts. Take care of your business as quick as you can and hightail it out of here as fast you can go before those ghosts get at you. Ten on a jack,” she said placing a card down and finally looking up.

“Thanks for the advice,” Bryan said pulling out his credit card. He saw her questioning stare and remembered the antique cash register at her side. He replaced the card and paid with cash. “That’s exactly what I plan to do.” He took the paper bag from the woman and returned to his car with his purchases.

Pattie looked at him, intrigued as he handed her a cold bottle of Pepsi, a bag of salted peanuts, and a Moon Pie. “You take a big drink of Pepsi—” Bryan said demonstrating “—then you pour in some of the peanuts.” He ripped the corner from the plastic bag with his teeth, poured a few of the peanuts into the bottle, and then watched it fizz.

“Cheers, Barry,” Bryan said solemnly. He and Barry had remained pen pals for a few years after Bryan and his mom fled the hills, fleeing the house and the evil grandmother. His Mom had told him his grandmother was sick and they needed to get away from her. His memories were vague now but he firmly agreed with his mom then.

Barry had died from a brain hemorrhage his last year in high school. Bryan tipped his bottle in the air as a toast to his long dead friend, and then clinked it against Pattie’s bottle. He took a slow

drink from his bottle, letting a few of the Pepsi soaked peanuts into his mouth. He looked over at his wife's quizzical expression. She was still holding her bottle out in front of her.

"I'll explain later," he said to Pattie, noticing her eyebrows arched like a question mark. "We have a haunted house to visit."

Chapter Three

Bryan eased the Jeep down over the driveway toward his grandmother's house, the house where his dad had been raised ... and had died; the house he thought he would never see again. He felt the goose bumps raise on his arms and his jaw clenched making a popping noise in the joints. His throat tightened as he tried to swallow but his mouth went dry.

Overgrown vegetation choked the driveway. Weeds grew tall between the tire ruts of gravel and mud. As he approached the house, the tall weeds brushed roughly against the bottom of the Wrangler and the branches from the trees reached out and raked the vehicle, as if the plants were warning them to stop, were conspiring to keep them away, to keep them from what waited ahead.

The two-story white house came into view through the overhanging trees. It was an old southern clapboard with a low porch slung across the front, a dilapidated porch swing dangled from one chain. White pillars supported a sagging second story verandah above. A huge spruce stood in the front yard like a sentry. The tree's branches cast a gloomy yet protective shadow across the rusty tin roof.

The forest was creeping up on the once cleared farmland surrounding the house. The outbuildings stood in ruins, their roofs sagging from heavy snowfalls and little repair; their walls leaning at awkward angles.

They passed an old gray barn sitting to the side of the driveway; its roof collapsed in on itself and its side boards buckled. It had started its return to the soil. The lower half was rotted and decayed. Young saplings and tall weeds jutted through the loose boards and torn tarpaper.

"This place looks spooky," Pattie said from her side of the Jeep as they crossed a rickety looking bridge spanning a small slow moving creek, the water almost invisible under the green growth along its banks.

The house had paint peeling from the constant exposure to the elements, revealing the ancient gray siding underneath. Several broken windows had been boarded over and the verandah dipped perilously in the middle.

“Looks it and is,” Bryan replied, hoping he sounded less scared than he was. The hairs on his neck tingled and a pit developed in his stomach. He parked the Jeep in the grass beside the house, next to a beat up red Chevy truck. As they got out of the Jeep and walked toward the house, the front door opened and an old woman hobbled out wearing a sack-like brown dress with three different aprons. She walked hunched over, one hand on her hip, the other reaching out for the pillar.

“Welcome back, Son,” the old woman croaked, from between a smile of three crooked teeth and a mouthful of gums. “I can’t believe it’s been, what ... twenty-five years, lordy lordy!” She started down the steps in short unsteady steps and reached out to Bryan.

He leaned over and hugged her frail body. “Aunt Ruby you look wonderful!” Bryan said taking the woman’s wrinkled hands in his. She laughed and pulled away, brushing her white hair back out of her face.

“You need your eyes checked too!” she laughed. “I started falling apart when I reached eighty, some eight years ago last May.” She waved her shaking hands in the air outlining his body. “You’ve certainly changed. A little heavier—a little taller—you used to be a scrawny young-un.” She laughed again and took his left hand in hers once more.

“How’s Uncle Jack?” Bryan asked. After the hug his mind had filled with images of the old man in a lime green Lazy Boy. It wasn’t a recliner, but it had a footstool where he could prop his feet and set his box of Cheese-Its while he watched UK basketball. They were memories, but they weren’t *his* memories, they were too recent for that. These memories belonged to Aunt Ruby. The images surprised Bryan. Usually the memory flashes, if he was going to have them, occurred during the first few times he touched someone, and only once. Sometimes they occurred on the first touch, mostly on the second, sometimes never at all. The only definite was he couldn’t control it. He was sure that somewhere down his past he

had hugged Ruby before. Maybe the passing of time had tripped a little switch and reset this *extra sense*.

“He’s fine, just a little ornery is all,” Ruby said. “You’ll see him a little later, he don’t like coming here, don’t like me coming here much either. Too much work I reckon, and he’s too old and lazy to do it.”

Bryan noticed Pattie waiting patiently for an introduction. “Ruby, I’d like to introduce my wife, Pattie,” Bryan said, taking Pattie’s hand in his right, Ruby’s hand still held tight in his left. “Ruby is my great-aunt, my grandmother’s sister.”

“Welcome Honey,” Ruby said. “You sure are a pretty one, as cute as a bug. It’s so sad to meet you under these circumstances.” Ruby’s voice turned sad as she reached out to take Pattie’s hand. She now held Bryan’s left hand and Pattie’s right. Even stooped from age Ruby was a few inches taller than Pattie. At 5’3”, Pattie may well be the shortest person on the creek, Bryan thought.

“Thank you for the lovely compliment,” Pattie said. “I too, am so sorry we had to meet like this.”

“What a lovely accent pretty child, elegant, like that princess that died over in England. Where you from?” Ruby asked, turning back toward the house.

“Canada, Ottawa originally,” Pattie replied, following the old woman arm in arm. “I’m sorry, but I’m not a princess.”

“Don’t matter. You look and sound like one.”

Bryan watched the exchange between his wife and his grandmother’s sister and marveled at the warm and immediate welcome. He wondered at the sudden sense of grief shared between strangers, greater than that shared between blood. Pattie had a way about her though, making friends easily, immediately, and for life.

“Come on into the house and I’ll show you around the place before I have to get on home. I didn’t want you to show up to a cold empty house after you being gone so long and all.” Ruby opened the door for Pattie, and followed her in. “Bryan why don’t you bring your suitcases into the front room. You can pick which room you’ll sleep in after you rest a while.”

Pattie and Ruby disappeared into the dark house, the screen door slammed behind them.

Bryan stood on the porch with the luggage, hesitating to enter. He pictured his grandmother in his mind, just inside the door,

yelling, spittle flying. He remembered the willow switches taken to his backside and the hours spent in the darkness locked away in one room or the other. He shook his head to put the images back and opened the door.

Bryan dropped the suitcases in the front foyer, thankful that Ruby had already disappeared down the hall with Pattie. “Granny is gone and she can’t hurt you anymore”. Those were the words his mom had said to him, over and over, when they had fled from the house so many years ago.

He sighed heavily as he sensed the house. The smells of moldy bread and musty wood, and the unmistakable odor of old death, wafted over him as soon as the air, stirred up by the moving door, settled back into its stagnant place. He noticed the wooden floors had been sanded smooth and varnished. The stairs leading to the second floor were steeper and narrower than he remembered. Each step swayed in the middle, not from bending or warping, but from over a hundred years of heavy work boots wearing them away.

His eyes traveled down the steps to the floor at the bottom of the stairs, a memory from his youth flashed in his mind—

Bryan stood on the top landing looking down at the stairs where his dad had died. The wooden banister felt cold and smooth under his hand. Why did it happen? How did it happen? Even though it had been weeks since his dad died he could still picture the image of his dad’s crumpled body at the bottom of the stairs by the front door. The tears flowed freely from his young eyes and he wiped them off roughly with the back of his shirtsleeve, squeezing his eyes tight against the image. He opened his eyes and the image remained; the lifeless body, the dead sightless eyes open wide, and the mouth open as if screaming in terror. Why did he have to be the one to find him? He closed his eyes again squeezing out the tears. His young body shook with the sobs that he tried to hold back.

As Bryan sobbed he looked down at the small wooden figure he held in his other hand, a man pushing a wheelbarrow. His dad had carved it for him as they rocked in the swing on the front porch, feeling the cool breeze coming down the hollow on the warm summer evenings. He felt the figurine in his hand, could feel the rough gouges created by his dad’s old Barlow pocketknife. As he ran his fingernails over the rough wood, he felt the room grow cold,

blistering cold. He looked up from the walnut carving, his vision still blurry from the tears. The image of his father's crumpled body at the foot of the stairs was gone; however, it was now standing at the top of the stairs!

The figurine dropped from Bryan's quivering hand, fell over the ledge, and broke in two pieces on the floor below. Bryan's eyes did not see it. His eyes were locked on the image that was his dad; the image that was now walking toward him, its face still frozen in the mask of death and terror!

"Go ahead Bryan, jump," he heard a voice say. It was his dad's voice, but it didn't come from the unmoving lips of the approaching image. It just came to his mind.

The image that was his dad walked a few steps closer. "Jump, now!" The voice was commanding, authoritative. Bryan felt mesmerized by the image and the voice. He reached out for the banister and, without knowing exactly why, without really wanting to, but unable to resist, swung one leg over, then the other. His feet slipped through the railings so he was standing on the outer edge holding on to the banister. He stared down at the flight of stairs, at the broken wooden figure below him, and felt a coldness grab at his chest. The dad image walked closer.

"Jump." He heard the voice, but the face of his dad's image remained locked and motionless. Bryan lifted one foot and let it dangle over the empty space, one floor above where his dad had lost his life. He looked back at the image that was still approaching in slow motion; his heart raced and the blood swooshed in his ears.

"No Dad, please ..." Bryan pleaded with the walking image. His muscles were not reacting to his thoughts. He could not hold on anymore. The muscles in his fingers started to relax; his grip on the banister became more tenuous.

The dad image with the open eyes and open mouth leaned over and laughed. This time the face did change! The lips curled back over sharp yellow teeth and the eyes took on a spark of life. Laughter came out of the face loud, and cold, and mean. The face was no longer the face of his father. The face was ugly and maniacal with a crazed look of vengeance in its eyes and black stringy hair falling around his shoulders with a long streak of gray on one side. The image that was no longer his father tilted its head to the ceiling and laughed hysterically.

“Bryan ... Granny ... what are you doing!”

He heard his mother’s frantic yell from beneath him. He turned to look down at his mother, then turned back and saw the image had changed again. It was no longer his father, no longer the laughing man with the gray streak; it was his grandmother! Her hair was piled in a bun on top of her head, her face was strained, but her features ... cheekbones, nose, chin ... resembled those of the laughing maniac.

Bryan once again felt the chill clutch his heart. The image—no, his grandmother—reached her hand out toward him and, from below, his mother screamed. Bryan’s vision turned hazy at the edges, his fingers slipped on the rail, each layer of grain from the wooden rail grated against his fingertips as it vanished from his grasp. He fell over the edge, his fall cushioned by his mother’s outstretched arms.

—but he forced the faded memories of his father’s lifeless body out of his mind. The real world came back into view.

Several antique chests and cane bottomed chairs hugged the walls in the hallway. More memories flooded his mind. He pictured his dad walking through that hall, his skin and clothes coated black from coal dust. He pictured his mother coming from the kitchen, dishtowel in hand. *These* were the memories he wanted, and he let them linger in his mind like warm friends.

Bryan took a deep breath and walked down the hall to the back of the house toward the kitchen. Old pictures in antique frames lined the hall. The wooden frames with intricate scrollwork contained faded black and white portraits of family long dead. One portrait captured his gaze and refused to release it to the next ancient frame. The portrait, a woman; no, a young girl. Not just any young girl, the girl of his pre-adolescent dreams and fantasies. Her stern pose and ancient dress did not mar her perfect features or dull her allure. Bryan back-stepped a few paces, back to the stairs. He took several steps up and turned, sitting on the fourth step. He leaned his head against the rail; the portrait was perfectly in line with his view. The scratches he had made as a young boy were still etched in the railing, scratches made as he pined away for her beauty.

Pattie’s voice from the living room brought him back to the present. His steps echoed in the hall as he passed the antique

portraits. He went through the ancient doorway to join Pattie and Ruby in front of the huge fireplace in the living room. The wooden mantle stretched across the front at eye level. On top were several small antique cast iron knick-knacks; one a match holder, another a cast iron pig, and candleholders with beeswax candles. Rising above the mantle to the ceiling was a wooden panel, contrasting against the white walls on either side. Inscribed on the middle of the panel in burnt branded black was a date, 1860. On either side of the date were the initials BB.

“Your aunt is wonderful,” Pattie said as Bryan entered the room. “She’s been telling me the history of the house, and your family. Such a colorful past, imagine being a descendant of the first person born on *the creek*. Very impressive.” The sparkle in her eyes and the smile on her face told Bryan that she was both sincere and teasing in the same statement.

“Well don’t let it go to your head,” Bryan said putting his arm around his wife’s waist. “Everyone on Brushy is related to the first person born on the creek, in some fashion, either legitimately or illegitimately.”

Ruby flashed a quick crooked smile. “Mostly that’s true young-un. And sometimes you’re related in more ways than one. You may be someone’s first cousin on your momma’s side and second cousin on your daddy’s side.” Ruby wiped some dust from the mantle as she spoke. “The way I hear tell, a Maynard was the first one on the creek back in the 1700s, followed by the Youngs, then the Blackburns.”

“So what do the initials stand for?” Pattie asked, pointing to the dark inscriptions over the mantle.

“The initials stand for Byron Blackburn. He is the one that had this house built.” Ruby paused and wiped her hands on her apron again. “That is Byron, not Bryan, Honey so don’t get confused. Now let me show you the kitchen,” Ruby said leading Pattie through the dining room with its antique china cabinet, large wooden table, and old grandfather clock, through another door into the kitchen. In the center of the kitchen was another big fireplace. “This used to be the wall of the house. They expanded the kitchen, I think in the forties, so the fireplace is now in the middle. It made it a lot roomier in here. Now looky here at this kitchen Honey, if you and Bryan end up coming back here to live you will be spending a lot of time here,”

Ruby said, pointing out the ancient cook stove and its new electric counterpart. “You can cook up enough to feed an army in here.”

Pattie raised her eyebrows at Bryan. He caught the double significance of the gesture. They had never discussed moving back here and he recalled her horrible attempts at cooking after they were first married. Bryan was the cook in the family; he was the one with the brass pots, Ginsu knives and bookshelf full of gourmet cookbooks.

After the kitchen, Ruby took them through the rest of the house. Bryan fought the memories; Pattie admired the antiques. They went through the rest of the ground floor, including the bedroom where his grandmother had slept, then went upstairs. Ruby elected to stay downstairs, complaining about her old knees.

Pattie and Bryan went through the three bedrooms on the second floor, and the library, scouting for the most comfortable sleeping arrangements.

Bryan showed Pattie his old bedroom, now lined wall to wall with metal shelving loaded with salt and pepper shakers. The small twin bed on one wall did not look inviting and the recollections of the room were more than Bryan was willing to absorb each night. They continued their search. The next room belonged to Bryan’s parents. It was loaded with furniture and crammed with boxes, as was the next room. The last bedroom, connected to the library, had been cleared of storage and the bed, although old, still felt as if it had some tension in its springs. The yellow flowered wallpaper was bright and the white lace curtains were thrown back to let in the light. The room had a fireplace that shared a chimney with the fireplace in the library. They would sleep there, they decided.

Bryan brought the suitcases bumping up the narrow stairs and through the library. The warm dark wood of the library felt cozy and the leather couch and chair looked inviting. He almost wished he could sleep there instead, he thought as he entered the bright bedroom.

That night Pattie lay in bed with her head on Bryan’s chest, her hand rubbing the soft hairs on his stomach. “Tough day?” she asked, sensing he was awake and pensive.

“Tough,” he replied. The soft curls of her blonde hair tickled his nose. “But nothing compared to what I’ll face tomorrow; a bunch of people I don’t know, offering trite platitudes and false condolences.”

He stroked her hair with his hand and, as she looked up at him, he kissed the angry scar over her right eye, then kissed her right eyelid, then kissed her softly on the lips.

Pattie accepted the nightly ritual with a great love in her heart, and a deep concern in her soul. He was not telling something. She knew him well enough to know that. She also knew him well enough not to pry. He would tell her; he would confide.

Her touch and gentle caress must have distracted her troubled mate; his mind was no longer on sleeping. Bryan pulled her gently toward him, held her body tight against his and kissed her passionately on the lips.

Later that night, after they had made love in the glow of the fire, Pattie lay awake staring at Bryan as he slept. His eyes were moving under the closed lids. He was probably dreaming she thought. She wondered what he was dreaming about as she watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest. There were so many possibilities, and not many of them would be pleasant.

She watched him sleep and thought about their love. They had a love she had never felt before, a *connection*. A love affair of what she called serendipity and luck, but what Bryan called a *psychic bond*.

Coincidences seemed to follow them in their relationship. Thinking of the same things, answering the phone with the phrase “I was just thinking of calling you”. Bryan claimed it was psychic, another one of his extra senses. She claimed it was coincidence.

Pattie lay awake restless. She was uneasy in the old house and could feel the house’s anxiety at her presence in it, as if she was a marauding stranger or an invading virus. Right then, the grandfather clock sounded in the dining room. The loud *gongs* vibrated through the house as if punctuating her last thought. The clock stopped its gong and the silence of the night settled back in with a rush around the house.

Pattie’s hearing seemed to magnify after the clock stopped its loud voice. As she listened to the strange groans and creaks emanating from parts of the old house she heard someone crying.

She strained her ears against the silence and heard rustling. Something was moving in the house! She heard something rolling across the floor, like a rolling coin or marble, and then she heard the sobbing again, soft like from very far away. She strained her ears to hear it again but the sound did not repeat. Should she wake Bryan? She waited, concerned she would appear spooked by the old house and its stories. She listened late into the night and watched Bryan sleep, and dream.

Bryan stirred, on the brink of falling into the black abyss of deep peaceful sleep. He felt himself falling into the black light but didn't make it all the way. He now stood by a creek next to an overturned wheelbarrow, tears streaming down his face. He knew it was a dream because he was a boy once more. He also recognized it as a memory, one he had repressed many years ago. An elderly woman shouted down at him, her thin pinched lips stretched tight over toothless gums. Her hand held a switch cut from the weeping-willow tree on the bank of the creek. She swatted at his legs with the switch. The pain was sharp but dissipated rapidly. Broken Mason jars were scattered across the grass, seeping their contents of stewed tomatoes onto the green yard like a gutted pig. The switch struck again, leaving a welt on his forearm. The old woman pointed to the storehouse with the angry end of the switch. He froze in fear. NO, not there, not again!

She slashed out with the switch across his back and he ran toward the hated storehouse. The door closed behind him leaving him in the dark musty room with the dirt floor. He heard a bolt being closed, locking him in.

Bryan tossed in his sleep, somehow recognizing he was dreaming a memory. He jerked as his perspective changed. Bryan moaned, still sleeping, still dreaming, and still remembering.

A small boy lies on a twin bed in the back bedroom of the big house. It was the same boy. It was Bryan, once again dreaming a memory. He tossed under the blankets, twisting violently, moaning in low guttural tones. He tossed the covers off exposing his bare legs, which twitched and jerked of their own accord. A raw red welt violently appeared on his leg, then another. The boy turned again, in

obvious pain from the inflictions. His wrists appeared from under the sleeves of his blue pajama top. Red welts popped up from his skin, like hot popcorn.

A door opened into the small room. An elderly woman appeared in the doorway with her silver hair on her head in a bun. She watched mute as the boy twitched and moaned. She eased to the side of the bed and held her hand to his forehead. He wasn't hot. In fact, he was cold. She caught one of his wrists as it flailed and held it tight, and then caught the other. The boy woke and screamed in fright as he realized his hands were being held, then screamed in pain.

A shadow crossed over them and another figure appeared by the side of the bed. It was a woman, his mother. His mom shrieked at the sight of her mother-in-law holding her son's small wrists, him wailing in pain, and the marks on her son's arms and legs.

A blink of a sleeping eye brought another change in perspective. Bryan's subconscious took him on another detour.

Bryan, still dreaming, still remembering, now seeing through the eyes of the boy on the bed, wide-eyed in fear and guilt as he stared at his hysterical mother. He cannot hear her shouts but sensed their tone. His grandmother stood up, letting his small wrists fall back to the bed. Bryan felt the heat in his arms and started to rub them, but stopped from the intense pain. He felt the burning pain on his back and abdomen and knew the marks appeared there as well. His mom yelled accusingly and pointed at the door. His grandmother argued, protesting her innocence even as she left the room.

Bryan cringed and squinted his eyes in his sleep as his memories pour out of his mind, charge at him like a flash from a camera, or a lightning strike.

Bryan is now walking up the stairs, still a young boy, still reliving events from his past. He pauses on the stairs. He hears marbles rolling on the floor above. He takes the steps slower looking back over his shoulder toward the banister above him. A small head comes into view; it is a small boy, only a child. He is sitting, playing marbles with another small boy in the upstairs hall next to the stairs.

Only, he wasn't alive! A bullet hole shone black and red in the middle of his forehead; smoke still curled out from the fresh hole

where the hot bullet had seared the flesh. The back of his head is a mess of gore and matted blood-soaked hair. The dead boy smiled and flicked the marble toward Bryan. It bounced down the stairs—thunk, thunk—loud on the wooden floorboards, and continued to roll. Two drops of blood dripped down on the banister below.

Bryan screamed and fell back, tripping on the stairs. His head hit the edge of one of the stairs and, just before his world turned dark, he saw his grandmother, her silver hair falling down her shoulders, a hairbrush in her hand.

The hairbrush dissolved into a burst of strange white light that floods Bryan's vision, swirls around him, and envelops him in intense whiteness.

He is no longer a boy on the stairs watching a dead child play marbles, no longer remembering.

He is floating over the homeplace! Falling from the sky, the ground rushed at him, branches from the spruce tree grabbed at his clothes. He threw his hands out to catch his balance as he crashed painlessly through the tin roof of the house.

He is now standing in his bedroom, or what was his bedroom as a boy, but there is a young woman in his bed, and she is crying. A man sits on the bed wearing long john underwear and his laughter rocks the bed. He slowly pushed up from the bed and walked toward Bryan. Bryan backed away but not fast enough. The man ran into him, through him! Bryan looked down at his hands. He could see them, the man couldn't. He was in the room, but he wasn't. Bryan looked at the man. He had a mad laughing face with stringy hair. He put his pants on over his long john underwear, then turned toward the girl and laughed again. The laugh echoed, again and again, continuing as the man returned to his task of putting on his pants and pulling the suspenders over his shoulders.

The girl clutched the bed sheets to her naked chest and shoulders. The bed still rocked, now from her sobs.

Bryan saw the white mist enter the room, was sucked away, into the white air, spinning, floating ...

Bryan bolted up in bed and reached out with his hands to catch his balance, to feel the solid firmness of the bed. The dream raced through his mind and his heart raced with it.

Pattie stirred beside him and looked up squinting through sleepy eyes. “What’s wrong Bryan?” she asked as she sat up with him.

Bryan explained the dream in short broken sentences laced with pauses, how it started with his memories, then somehow transported him to images, almost as if he was seeing memories from the house itself. Goose bumps broke out on his arms and his voice cracked as he told Pattie about the memories and then the images of rape and the laughing maniac. His words trailed off, his hands trembled and beads of perspiration formed on his face.

“No wonder you’re shaking—” Pattie exclaimed and repositioned herself on her elbow as Bryan lies back down. “—that was quite a scary dream. Reliving those memories of your grandmother must have been traumatic.”

“Not as bad as the last part. After the white light, it didn’t seem like a dream anymore, and it definitely wasn’t my memory. I really felt like it was coming from the house, like somehow the house *touched* me, and transferred some of its memories.” Bryan paused to get his breath. “It was so real, it was like I was there, living it, with some sort of madman laughing and screaming at the same time, and the girl, crying.”

“Did you hear it too?” Pattie asked raising her eyebrows. “Just before I fell asleep there were sounds, like sobbing from somewhere in the house, and something rolling across the floor. Maybe that is what triggered your dream. Did you hear them too?” Pattie asked again.

Bryan looked at Pattie in the dark. “You heard crying ... and something rolling?”

“No, I didn’t dream it, and I didn’t imagine it, if that is what you are thinking,” Pattie mumbled, turning her back toward Bryan in an invitation to spoon.

“Well it’s easy for the mind to play tricks on you in the dark,” Bryan said as his body melded with Pattie’s under the covers.

“I don’t think the absence of light affected my hearing,” Pattie said.

Bryan silently agreed with her, now straining his ears against the night, listening for the ancient sound of rolling marbles that had haunted his childhood. He brought his hands from under the sheet to stroke her hair and her eyebrow and saw a red welt on the back of

his hand, or he thought he did. Was it starting again? As he stared, the welt disappeared like a water snake sinking under the surface of the creek.