

A misty forest scene at dawn or dusk. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a golden glow that filters through the mist and illuminates the tall, thin trees. A dirt road winds through the forest, leading the eye into the distance. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

The Hunter

A Short Story

By

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Caleb Grenier couldn't remember a time when he wasn't looking forward to his twelfth birthday. He'd had the crossbow since he was ten. His grandpa Hank had crafted it for him by hand after Caleb had taken such a liking to '*Bighorn*', his grandpa's handmade crossbow that sat displayed high above the stone fireplace in the tiny mountain cabin outside of *Salmon*, Idaho. His grandpa had taken up permanent residence less than one year after Caleb's grandma Sofia had died, four-years prior. The wooden crossbow was made mostly from ash and maple just like his grandpa's but his grandpa's was larger and had the name '*Bighorn*' burned carefully if not elegantly right into the side. His grandpa took to rubbing it with neatsfoot oil, which came from the shin bones of cattle and gave the wood both protection from warping and a soft glow, especially during dry times of July and August where he did so on a weekly basis. Caleb spent many nights looking out his window and dreaming of one day naming his crossbow "*GrayWolf*" or "*Skunk Bear*", a name ascribed to wolverines, or another like-carnivore but his grandpa said it wasn't right just to attach an arbitrary name, that Caleb needed to be patient, and that if he was patient one day a suitable name would come, although it wasn't a necessary thing to name a crossbow to begin with.

"You'll know soon enough," his grandpa said. "Boy shouldn't hunt before he's twelve." Caleb accepted this but he never knew his grandpa's reasoning. Some of the other boys and even a few girls he knew were allowed to hunt sooner, nine even, some with rifles no less. Of late, Hank considered hunting with a rifle to be unsportsmanlike; the matter was closed.

Caleb was torn; he loved the old hunting cabin but his grandpa Hank moving the near-thirty miles west from *Salmon* meant that Caleb could no long walk by his house after school, for a cold glass of lemonade and cookies from his grandma before she passed away, and always seemingly endless stories from his grandpa; about things like the great world wars, including the second, *WWII*, which had just ended; the advent of radio and then television; but mostly tales of hunting, including the

bighorn sheep his grandpa had taken when he was a boy that stood to the day as the largest ever taken in the state of Idaho. Unfortunately, the mount itself had long since deteriorated.

“Had a photograph of it, once. The mount. Lost it in the fire. Logged in the county record though, if anyone cares to see it.”

Caleb had heard about the fire also, too many times to count; how it had burned his great-grandfather’s homestead cabin to the ground in 1903 (Hank pronounced the date as: *‘aught-three’*); about his great-grandmother and three great-uncles that had perished in the blaze. A tragedy beyond comprehension. His great-grandfather had been away for a night and was spared but then died himself shortly thereafter. Caleb’s ma said he died from heartbreak, she assumed.

“Back then we didn’t have no ‘lectricity.” Hank often droned. “Wind must’ve kicked up, come down the stove pipe and blew the damn door open. All it takes is a couple of sparks, boy. A couple of sparks.

“They’s a lot tougher back then. Today, we’s all spoilt. ‘Lectric this, ‘lectric that. Heck, one ‘a these days I reckon we’ll even be seein’ a ‘lectric motorcar.”

Caleb couldn’t imagine how that could be practical since he knew everything electric had to be connected into the little funny thing in the wall. He lived with his ma in a small house down the street from where his grandpa used to live and they had two electric lights but he had friends who had bigger houses and they had electric lights in every room and some even had electric boxes to wash clothes and electric fans for hot summer days. In fact, his friend *James Mack*, who he went to school with, lived in the biggest house in *Salmon*, which meant it was the biggest house that eleven-year old Caleb had ever seen. Like his father before him James’s pa owned the lumber mill where most of the men in town worked. Caleb’s ma was one of three teachers at school, forced to work after Caleb’s own pa had run off, before Caleb could remember when.

“Don’t talk none about your Pa,” Ma had told him once when he’d been asking questions. “Real man don’t run out on his family.” Her tone was rarely used and reinforced the intention that Caleb shouldn’t pursue the matter further. He knew

that despite the rhetoric she missed his pa, sometimes a lot, especially at night or when she slept and Caleb heard her murmur his name, but she would never come out and say so. She did continue to use his pa's Christian name and refused to remarry, until: *'they either find the scoundrel's body, probably in some gully'* -or he returned to *Salmon* and filed for a proper divorce.

Caleb didn't know any of his relatives on his pa's side. His ma and grandpa Hank got along okay. Ma had two sisters who lived over to the east, in Montana, and they rarely saw one another. Since his grandpa Hank had moved into the mountain cabin full-time after Caleb's grandmother died, Caleb only got to see him regular at church and that wasn't all that regular as Hank had a tendency to skip for any number of reasons. Caleb was stuck doing all of the chores at home including most of the fixing of things when needed. Hank was somewhere north of seventy-years old. He claimed that he didn't know his exact age as he'd been born in the back of a wagon. The old man was often pulling Caleb's leg so the boy wasn't exactly sure if this was true. Hank taught him how to fix most everything that needed fixing around the place, or painting the house, the garage or the fences. Increasingly, the old man would sit and drink cold lemonade in summertime or hot tea in the winter and wave his thick hand with instructions while Caleb did all of the laboring. There was firewood to be cut and split every month of the year.

Caleb was a well-mannered boy just biding his time until his twelfth birthday when Hank said he could use the crossbow he'd made for him, to hunt. From time-to-time Caleb accompanied Hank on his hunting trips, but mostly Hank liked to go alone. Caleb was becoming uneasy with the prospect that maybe Hank couldn't be the one to take him after his birthday. His grandpa went less and less himself as he got older, and Caleb had been quietly probing some of the boys at school as to whether maybe he could tag along with one of them and their pa when the time came. Or, he was thusly determined, if need be he would go by himself. Meanwhile, when his ma took him to the mountain cabin as she did every other week or so to clean the place up and check in on Hank, Caleb was allowed to take the crossbow

out back under his grandpa's supervision to practice drawing and shooting at tin cans and tree stumps. Caleb was thin as were most boys his age but he was starting to see muscle develop in his arms which Hank told him was one of the benefits of hard work, and Caleb's fingers had gotten calluses from drawing back the heavy bow with a piece of wood that his grandpa called a '*jackbow*', used for leverage to pull back tightly on the bowstring. The bowstring was made from twine, mixed with horsehair and wires off of an old '*Model A*' *Ford* that was permanently out in the woods near the cabin. Caleb almost always went exploring there on the occasions when he brought a friend, usually his friend James Mack or his best friend *Orin*, a boy with mixed Native-American blood whose skin was dark enough that he could pass for Mexican and was often forced to get into fights because of it, that and his diminutive size. The three of them got along well but James' ma didn't much care for James' 'fraternizing' as she called it, because Orin's family was dirt-poor. Caleb didn't have much either but his ma always managed food and clothing and he had his own bed in their bedroom. Orin often had neither food nor adequate clothing and slept with two brothers in the same bed; he gratefully accepted old shoes when Caleb had outgrown them. Orin was often a fixture at their breakfast or supper table but Caleb had never inquired of him why he didn't eat at home more because previously Caleb's ma had explained that it might shame the boy and it wasn't his fault that his family had so many mouths to feed. Also, it was the proper, Christian thing to do. Caleb's grandpa Hank admonished them not to play around the old '*Model A*' *Ford* or other abandoned cars and junk, what he referred to as the '*old dump*', as it was near one of numerous abandoned mineshafts, gaping holes left when the silver dried up that Hank much more sternly warned them never to climb around, even a little way into any of the horizontal shafts as those could collapse at any time. The boys were wary of the mines anyway as several of the vertical holes were so deep they couldn't hear dropped rocks ever hit bottom, and not one of them wanted to fall that far themselves under any circumstances. Playing in and around the several old car wrecks, and various household trash, from fifty years prior or

more, risked a good cut or two but not a deadly, crushing cave-in, or fall down into forever.

One Sunday after church, the boys climbed into the back of Hank's *Chevrolet* farm truck and took the hour-long drive up to the mountain cabin, having nothing else to do. Ma followed behind on the dust-kicking, rock-strewn, *twisty-turny* roads in the old *Packard*, alone, (the boy's liked to ride in the truck bed) to do her cleaning and drive the boys home later, which meant that they had about two hours to themselves. That was, unless Hank found something for them to do, which he often did.

But not on this day.

The boys hiked single-file up through thin groves of aspen trees and taller, darker woods of *ponderosa* and *lodgepole* pines, to a small, high-grass clearing on the first rise up the mountain. James was leading the way with Caleb right behind, Caleb yammering away as he always did, the quiet, slightly-built Orin taking up the rear, and not offering much to the dialogue which generally centered around sports, girls and weapons, guns, specifically, but also tanks and bombers and all of the tools of war.

James's pa had been in *WWII*, and according to James was a bonafide war hero, although Caleb's grandpa Hank rather disputed this notion, telling Caleb one time when they were alone: "That blow-hard made Colonel on account 'a his daddy, who fought with me in the big one, *WWI*, and was a 'holy terror', let me tell you. Earned him a bronze, and two silver stars I believe, for bravery. That Cole Mack (James' grandpa) was one tough *sonofagun*, but his seed rode hard on the family name and not much else. Pretty sure Cole Mack would've made General if he hadn't got his arm all shot up. That William (James' pa) was in 'requisitions' I believe. Near to the front, I'll grant you as much, but I doubt most seriously if the man ever kilt any *Krauts*. I'd surely bet you on that point."

James and Caleb in particular were fascinated by the war footage they saw from time-to-time before the picture shows downtown, as the *Korean War* was still

raging and there were often reports glorifying the tanks and bombers and fighter squadrons, always showing the Americans in the best possible light. James, for one, hoped that the war would go on for at least another seven-years so he could join when he was eighteen, or, as he'd said more than once: "Seventeen maybe, if I lie." Caleb wasn't too fond of the idea of getting shot, or killed, or bombed upon...or necessarily having to shoot someone, even if they were a '*slant-eyed*' enemy or some other derogatory term for foreigners he'd heard used in conversation. Particularly, Caleb was in awe of the tanks; machines so massive and devastating that in the films they hardly slowed for automobiles and often ran right over them. And, with enough of a barrage, from guns so powerful that the tanks were literally lifted off the ground and thrown backwards when fired, they could level an entire town of buildings made from stone and concrete.

The '*old dump*' featured a few cars and an old farm truck, all rusted, dented and picked apart, and slowly being swallowed up by nature. Picked clean of anything usable years before the boys were even born, undoubtedly by other boys but that never stopped them from poking around any new spots they could imagine to look especially after one time James did find an extremely dirty quarter wedged behind some springs in what used to be a car seat. The boys had all clamored to see and took turns inspecting it. Then, Caleb became somewhat disappointed when James merely slid the find into the pocket of his britches. So when he got James out of earshot, Caleb reminded him how little Orin particularly had, sharing such a small home with all those brothers and sisters, where James not only had his own bed and room but it was always freshly painted and full of nice things.

"Either we should all have it or maybe you ought give that to Orin to keep. He could buy some things he probably needs," Caleb told him and James acquiesced without much disagreement but then Orin shook his head and said that they should all share in it when James brought it to him. This struck Caleb as odd. So when James was otherwise preoccupied, digging in hard-packed dirt with a thick stick under a '*Model T Ford*' that was half-overgrown and filled with brush, Caleb asked the boy why.

He said: "You oughta keep that quarter, Orin. Buy some things for your ma, maybe."

"Nah, that ain't right, Caleb. James, he found it." Then, a rarity, Orin opined: "If I'd 'a found it I'd 'a shared with you though. Both of you."

When Caleb asked his ma about this later she told him that friends were the most important thing in your life, after family, and that because Orin was often in need and others provided it was likely important to him that if he had the chance, some day he would like to be on the providing side. Caleb resolved that if in the future Orin ever did find another quarter himself he'd let his best friend take them to the candy store for sweets. Maybe three cold '*Grape Nehis*', too.

The boys searched for a little while but mostly just lolled around; sitting behind a steering wheel as if out for a drive; tossing rocks at various tin cans and empty paint buckets, the conversation changing back to school, mostly the girls, or things other boys were doing, but also baseball which they played whenever they could. They loved to listen to professional games on the radio, often with their mitts on and light-tossing a ball from chair to chair, this quite often to the chagrin of whomever's home they in when it inevitably got away from one of them. Caleb fondly recalled sitting on his grandpa Hank's lap while the tall man hollered and then often jumped around so much that one time Caleb actually fell onto the floor. Hank was mostly a *Chicago Cubs* fan but back when he lived in town would listen to any games that were on if he wasn't working or busy at something. James now had the newest invention, television, and the other boys were always in a quandary as everyone talked about the 'new-fangled television' as Hank referred to it, and watching the games on it really was about the best thing ever, much better than radio, but again James' ma didn't take very kindly to Orin, and this made Caleb uncomfortable too. So the only times Caleb ever saw much television was when Orin was otherwise occupied and he could sneak over to James' alone, or when he and Orin stood outside the electronics storefront and watched until they got shooed away.

“Say, why didn’t you bring that crossbow? We could’ve done some target shooting. Or maybe got a squirrel, or a ‘coon if we seen one.” James said. Both Caleb and Orin knew that James had his own rifle, a brand new *Winchester*, and a store-bought crossbow that he’d used for hunting since before his tenth birthday, and they were both plenty envious. James used a lot of opening comments as means to bring up this point.

“Well, my grandpa made it for me so it’s his rules about it.” Caleb only repeated information James was already well aware of. “We can go shoot it behind his cabin if we want. I do that all the time.”

“Ah, your ma’s down there,” James tossed a pebble toward the gaping vertical mineshaft that was maybe thirty-feet from the old dump; watched it bounce twice, and then disappear. There were a couple of pieces of derelict mine equipment, including a massive, old, steam-boiler. The boiler once ran a cable-car system that had been dismantled years back but apparently the boiler was too heavy to haul back down the mountain so when the mine ran dry it was simply left behind. The boys had inspected it thoroughly the very first time they’d come up, and went home with grease and dirt pressed into their clothing, a fact that was not well received, so since then they’d paid the black, cast-iron behemoth little mind. It was cylindrical; a good thirty-feet long and eight feet in diameter, with thick, heavy, iron rivets pounded into the seams. One cable wheel remained and it was lying on the ground beside it. The boys had tried a couple of times to move the wheel over to the mineshaft so they could throw it in, but it was so heavy that even with the use of a pieces of piping for leverage they never got it moved more than a few feet and then quickly lost interest in it as well. The only time further mention was made of the cable wheel centered around the debate as to whether it would have actually fit all the way down the shaft, into forever, as rocks often did, because the wheel itself was a good ten feet across.

“I think this year I’ll pro’ly get me a good-sized buck. Maybe an elk too,” James bragged.

Here, the two other boys were uncertain; James was a right-good shot with his *Winchester* when hitting cans from maybe eighty feet; this was all the space he had next to his house in town where it was safe to shoot and his pa allowed. Most townsfolk had seen plenty of deer and elk in the back of William Mack's pick-up truck, many commented on fact that William Mack always drove brand new trucks hunting which didn't make much sense having blood and fur and all leaking out the back. William Mack also owned a slew of fancy rifles that were the envy of every man in town, including grandpa Hank. Caleb and Orin often wondered if any of the animals seen were, in actuality, felled by their friend; but it was impertinent to inquire directly of Mr. Mack as to the veracity of James' boastful claims.

"Can you get me a quarter-hind maybe, you think?" Orin asked. After moose meat, venison was the preferred choice for meat in the area.

"Pro'lly. Ma don't care much for anything but the back-straps. My Pa usually takes some to my uncle if he didn't get his own, or sometimes he takes some over to the *Veterans Lodge* for the old soldiers to have."

"Too bad you couldn't get another moose," Orin lamented, acting almost chatty with the talk of fresh meat. Mr. Mack had come home with a moose a couple of years ago, a big bull that only fit in the truck after they quartered it in the field, but the front of that particular brand-new *Chevrolet* pick-up truck showed signs of having hit an animal on the roadway, and the butcher told grandpa Hank that he didn't find any 'lead' or 'holes' in the carcass, but this talk stayed as murmur and quiet innuendo as William Mack was the current boss at the wood mill so if it was implied that he dropped the beast with a rifle shot and he did nothing to quash this assumption, then that's how it was to be. He picked up a new truck the very next morning and the matter was shelved. Mr. Mack had a sitting room that featured beautiful mounts of the moose as well as deer, elk, bear, and even several African animals from a safari he'd gone on including a lioness which was at least twice the size of any mountain lion Caleb had ever seen or heard about but Caleb's grandpa had diminished this feat as well telling Caleb and Orin that bushmen likely chased

the lioness from the high grasses and Mr. Mack had probably kilt it from safely inside a safari truck.

“My Grandpa says you should always hunt with a bow,” Caleb was getting a little sore of James’ bravado.

James scoffed. “Nobody could kill a moose with no arrow. Not a bull moose.”

“My uncle could,” Orin noted matter-of-factly. Orin had an uncle who was a full-blooded *Kiowa* Indian named *Running Cloud* (he usually went by the name ‘*John Cloud*’) who Caleb’s grandpa commented probably did everything he was reputed to have done including kill a buffalo with several lances from the back of a bareback horse, a feat both Caleb and James would have thought to be impossible. Also, *John Cloud* was a very big man, and they’d never even seen him once on horseback, only drunk quite often and getting roused by the sheriff from the ‘*Pioneer Saloon*’ where he was usually drinking and occasionally fist-fighting, another area where it generally took several men to subdue him or tire him out.

“Could drop one with my rifle, I’d bet.” James went on.

“Maybe. If you was riding on top of it,” Caleb joshed and punched James in the shoulder.

“Let’s go up the cave. Race ya.”

The boys took off up the hill.

Shoshone Mountain, the mountain where grandpa Hank lived, from the level of the dump was about a two-thousand foot vertical climb to the top and a height of roughly eight- thousand feet. The boys hiked up a steep and extremely craggy old mining road, one that could punch a painful, or bloody hole, right through your shoe, to a horizontal mineshaft about six-feet high and four wide at its widest opening. Turning from this vantage you could see the entire valley, if it was a clear day, which today was, and they could see the rooftop of Hank’s cabin as a small, square discoloration through the spotty-thick canopy of dark fir-green. It took them a solid twenty-minutes to climb up, moving at a competitive pace, and they were damp with sweat when they came upon the horizontal mineshaft known as ‘*The*

Cave in the same order that they generally moved around: James, Caleb, and then Orin taking up the rear.

“Willie Mays’ gonna be the greatest baseball player ever lived,” Caleb said between heavy breaths.

“Uh-uh. No way, Babe Ruth, that’s who. Or Ty Cobb, for hits.” James opined, also sucking air. “Blacks ain’t been playin’ that long,” he added.

“They been playin’,” Orin chimed in. “Jackie Robinson been playing for maybe five years.”

“But Ruth, he played in the big leagues like twenty years.” Babe Ruth was James’ hero; really, all three of the boys. Caleb was just parroting something he heard his grandpa say, when Hank was arguing a similar point with Mr. Barclay down at the diner.

Nearly-cold air puffed out gently from the horizontal mineshaft. Kids had been coming here long ago, before when even Caleb’s grandfather Hank was a boy. Ritual dictated that you signed your initials on a wall or the ceiling, generally with the sooty end of a burned stick, or scratched in with a rock, denoting how far into the mine you traversed before thinking better of it, also known as *‘chickening out’*. Orin was tops on record from their trio but James always complained that since Orin was shorter it made it unfair for comparison as he wouldn’t feel as claustrophobic. This was their first trip up to the cave this season. They were so high up the mountain that they were within another twenty minutes climb of a permanent snowfield that occupied a space between two peaks, mostly free from the sun, both a novelty and sometimes a real pleasure on hotter days, even when Hank sent Caleb for ice for his icebox and Caleb had to haul it all the way back down. Then, the icy-cold water would drip from the rucksack and Caleb would joyously let it trickle in thin streams down his back.

“I’m goin’ in past *‘Peters’*,” James announced boastfully, as the boys took a moment to catch their breath in the very cool air that seemed to almost have a pulse, up and then out, but just barely, from somewhere deep within the craggy opening. *‘Peters’* was the furthest name anyone in town had ever claimed to have

heard was drawn on the wall; none of the three boys had made it nearly that far themselves relying instead on local lore which held that the great-grandpa of a girl named '*Penelope Peters*' from school, possibly drunk, had once gone far, possibly all the way to the end, wherever that was, past two different known cave-in rockslides and who knew how many since. This was basically all of the boys' boasts; that they would top '*Peters*' until one by one they re-emerged, often with soot-coated faces from the homemade torches they carried, feigning a lack of light or air, or cramps in their neck or back as the shaft did become slightly narrower with every twenty feet passed. The first rockslide could be seen after about forty-feet in, and along the way the ceiling and walls were riddled with names, including their three. No one the boys knew who was still alive to claim it ever said they'd gone past the second slide which was only slightly visible down the dark tunnel for about five minutes during mid-August when the sun shone directly on the mineshaft opening and cast the rocks in the slide in an eerie, dim and dusty, brown-grey. It was incredibly claustrophobic near the first slide and Caleb had never owned up to it in front of James (he'd told Orin) but one time two-years prior at that point he'd almost fallen faint. Caleb's saving grace that day was receiving a nasty cut above his eye which bled enough that it dominated the conversation when he re-emerged nearly breathless.

"Got this for Christmas. Been waiting to try it out." James produced a small, brand-new flashlight. Immediately, both Caleb and Orin felt envious.

"Lemme see," Caleb reached out but James wasn't through showing off.

"Got a strap so I can wear it on the side of my head, to see forward and still use both my hands." They stepped out of the sun and into the front of the opening where there were a couple of peach crates for sitting, and remnants of candles and old refuse, mostly food cans and old wrappers all blanched by the sun. James pushed the button and shined the light inward onto the mine wall.

"Wow," Orin exclaimed, and Caleb grudgingly agreed, though he kept this to himself. The light was bright, much brighter than any candle or make-shift torch they'd ever used in the past. One problem had always been that any stick burning

consistently enough not to go out quickly made quite a bit of light but also quite a bit of thick, black smoke, smoke which only vented tolerably on days where strong, westerly winds drew across the front of the shaft and created enough of a vacuum to somehow get most of the tendrils to flow outward.

“How long will it stay lit?” Caleb asked, wanting badly to reach out and grab the flashlight and then be the first one to head in with it.

“Pro’lly all day,” James bragged, but really he had no idea and began to get a bit of nerves that he might have boasted himself into being caught in the pitch-black alone after he went in first, only to find the batteries actually good for just a few minutes time.

“If it’s still stayin’ lit after you go in, can we try it out?” Orin asked.

James licked his lips, now suddenly becoming even more fearful of the possible repercussions from his boasting.

Caleb sensed this and offered: “Maybe we should all three go.”

“Then the names won’t count,” Orin pointed out.

“Well, I know that. But we don’t even got candles or matches so what if the battery stops and he gets stuck inside? Then we’d have to go ‘n get my grandpa. I’d get whipped for sure. He doesn’t like climbing all the way up to the cave no more. Why he always sends me for ice.” They knew that tough as he was Hank had himself probably been to the cave many times as a youth but where his name was they hadn’t seen and the old man wouldn’t tell, always admonishing sternly to stay clear of the place altogether if the topic was brought up.

“I don’t know, Caleb,” now Orin was fretting too.

“Come on. You go in front with the light and I’ll watch behind us. We’ll stop when I cain’t no longer see back to the end and then decide from there.”

“That’s past the first slide,” Orin complained. “Sun’s awful bright right now. Might-could even see the second slide without it. James can go.”

“Nah, you know the sun don’t hit it right, not ‘til August,” James scoffed and too readily handed the flashlight to Orin who was now stuck as their lead which was not really Caleb’s intention. Nevertheless, Orin flicked on the beam.

They stood for a moment, and then slowly they moved in.

The air got decidedly cooler, or perhaps they imagined it. Caleb shivered. They walked cautiously, allowing for their eyes to adjust as the light was dimming all around except for the bright spot from James' flashlight, which soon too got nearly swallowed up in the mountain's denseness. The cave seemed angry to Caleb; like they were crawling silently under a high fence where a row of impossibly large bullies sat on top, threatening with their sheer weight alone to cause great pain, despite their fists. Caleb began to feel a little lightheaded but kept vigil of looking back over his shoulder as they'd agreed, the mine opening now appearing less than half of its actual size. Their pace slowing with each step, none of the boys had never been in much farther, and as they came upon and stepped carefully up to the first rockslide Caleb's breathing was very shallow and fairly rapid.

"Here's you," James pointed to the wall and '*Caleb*' scratched into it with a rock, then '*James Mack*' just a few feet past. All three turned now as '*Orin*' was written five feet further, and then they all turned and looked back toward the ever-shrinking opening.

"Here. Take it; it's yours," Orin went to hand the flashlight to James and it fell onto the ground and shut off, leaving them in near-total darkness.

"*Shit!*" James cried out.

"It's here; it's here!" Caleb said as the flashlight luckily rolled up against his foot. He bent and felt for it, then turned it back on.

"Be careful with it, Orin. It cost like five dollars!" James scolded, in a bullying tone he rarely used with either of them.

Caleb shined the light in both boys' faces then back down into the impossibly long shaft. Then, he suddenly became very interested in other names on the walls which neither James nor Orin seemed to object to at the moment while they all tried to catch their breath and bravado. Caleb's mouth was dry from the shallow breathing and he licked at his lips and tasted fine dust. More from fear of another mishandling and the ensuing near total darkness than any daring, James took the flashlight. He shined it forward, through the floating dust motes where it was then

swallowed up by the sinister, unknown, inky black. For a discomfoting moment, nobody spoke. But as it had been his idea to come as a group and as his breathing was back to near normal, Caleb said: "Let's see if we can find my grandpa's name or yours. Then we'll see how far in we are. Decide then."

This was mostly agreeable as it meant moving forward past the rockslide very slowly while the light beam scanned the ceiling and walls, illuminating the stirred-up motes, the spindly, fingerlike dangling roots and ancient cobweb detritus, the boys close enough that they were almost touching one another, desperate to stay within the tiny halo of the protective light.

"Say, here's '*Clive Esch*'. Ain't that Tommy's great-grandpa?" James asked.

"Think so. Maybe," Caleb replied, though he had no idea, then turned and noted silently that he could no longer see the sunlight from the cave opening at all. He was going to say something but felt that Orin and James were already terribly edgy themselves so Caleb just kept quiet.

The names were becoming infrequent now or so old that they faded and just as James was about to comment on this point the beam swung across the second big rockslide and the three boys froze. Each knew that this in and of itself was a feat worthy of much schoolyard bragging, even if it was apparent from their fresh signatures that they were there as a group, should someone come to check. They approached the rockslide timidly, the cutting, jagged rocks covering the bottom of the cave opening, angling nearly all the way across.

"Hey look!" Caleb exclaimed. "Shine it back over here. No, right. There. Stop."

"*Henry Collins*," James moved the light up close and read.

"That's my grandpa!" Caleb cried.

James scoffed. "That ain't your name. It's Grenier."

"He ain't my pa's pa he's my ma's. That's him all right." They took a long moment to study the name as if it held some mystical significance.

"Wonder how old he was?" Orin piped in, his voice now somewhat shaky.

"Never made it past the second slide neither," James noted.

“Well, we hadn’t seen your pa or your grandpa at all,” Caleb blurted, a bit defensively, wishing for a moment he hadn’t lest they continue onward and find ‘*Cole Mack*’ or ‘*William Mack*’ scribed even further in. Caleb had little doubt from grandpa Hank’s commentary that ‘*Cole Mack*’ might be there, probably was, but more than likely William, James’ pa, couldn’t have been bothered, even as a boy. James mumbled something but did not respond.

Caleb said: “Should we go on? What if that flashlight goes out? We’d have to feel our way out. We’d get cut up for sure.”

For a cold and utterly eerie moment the enormity of where they were and what was above them, unimaginable tonnage of mountain rock, kept the boys frozen in place, three tiny beings cocooned in a small bead of light in an seemingly endless oil-black tunnel that was somehow keeping a mountain of jagged rock above them from crushing them like ants beneath a boot. James was normally the most adventuresome, but even he was close to being overcome from excited adrenaline and raw fear.

“We could get some more batteries for it and then come back,” James offered weakly, but they all knew that if they didn’t press on, more than likely they never would again.

Showing a sudden burst of moxie, silently Orin took the flashlight and moved slowly and determinedly forward, leaving James and Caleb no choice but to follow right behind. There was a palpable exhale by all three as they climbed over the second slide but they didn’t slow as Orin continued to move straight ahead almost robotically, snaking his way around rocks and roots, crouching when roots or cobwebs hung low overhead. They walked nearly three-hundred feet, a good six-times further than they had ever been previously. There were no longer any names written on the walls, but no one noticed.

The tunnel shaft bent a little to the right then began to angle slightly downward, narrowing seemingly with every step. It had been several minutes since anyone spoke. They were so far in, yet none of them had ever bothered to think about where, if anywhere, the shaft actually led. The mountains were pocked with

test shafts that were anywhere from ten to hundreds of feet deep and then just stopped. The fable of drunken ‘*Peters*’ said that he went all the way to the end of the cave, but what exactly did that mean?

“Hold up. Orin,” James croaked. “Hold up. Shine the light over here.”

Orin turned and took a few steps back then aimed the beam at the floor. There was a sparse but steady stream of old, mostly broken (and clearly unwanted) tools, and various pieces of wood; creosote coated beams; twisted sections of old narrow gauge rail track; pieces of heavy, rusted wire.

“Steer clear,” James warned. “Don’t want to get cut up on none of that.”

“You guy’s smell that?” Caleb chimed in as for some reason they were suddenly walking with a bit more confidence. Normally, they would have stopped and examined every old item for something worth retrieving.

“Smell what? It’s creosote,” James said.

“No, not that. Well, that too, but the air. Don’t it smell fresher?”

They all took a moment then there was nodded agreement.

They moved in deeper. The thin strew of discarded hardware was suddenly framed first by collapsed beams, some more than a foot thick, then a proper framing structure, and then suddenly, and without warning, the edge of a giant vertical shaft, this one more than ten-times the diameter of the horizontal one they’d just traversed. They’d reached the end! There was the barest of ambient sunlight here, yet some light nonetheless.

“*What in the heck...*” Caleb moved up beside his pals but none too close to the edge, he and James bracketed Orin, each with one hand firmly grasping the sidewall as a cautionary measure.

“Where the heck are we?” James asked.

“Cain’t see the top,” Orin noted.

“Here. Give it here,” James motioned for the flashlight then leaned over as far as he dared and confirmed the smaller boy’s statement.

“Heck, if this one’s cut down from the top it could be five hundred feet deep itself. More, maybe,” Caleb noted. “A thousand. Why you think we caint hear them rocks hit sometimes?”

“We been all over this mountain,” James commented. “Ain’t never seen a mine hole this big before.” Caleb and Orin nodded their heads in concurrence.

As their eyes made use of the tiny bit of added light, strange shapes become known things; large lines of thick, old cable hanging dangerously as if from the clouds, sharp, barbed, frayed ends dangling, swaying slightly, threatening tiny, painful punctures the boys knew all too well from handling scraps on the surface without wearing protective gloves.

“Kind ‘a looks like there was some kind of ‘splosion or something don’t it?” Caleb said.

“Might be,” James shined the beam slowly across the far side. The rock was jagged from blasting but also coated in many places with thick, black soot. “Might be right. Look at them beams over there. Tore clean apart.”

“Y’ think maybe the cave tunnel’s just here for air? For ventilation?” Caleb queried.

“Air shafts ’s usually smaller,” Orin noted. “Might ‘a been for lookin’ for silver. Then maybe they found some, so they blasted down to it.” None of the boys knew much about mining.

“There’s some water runnin’ over here,” James noted. The wall had a steady seepage that dripped like a staggered row of gigantic kitchen faucets, the water drops catching in the light beam, cascading end over end and disappearing meekly into the blackness below.

“Hey, look!” Orin grabbed James’ arm and pulled him to the side.

“*Samuel Peters*’.” James brushed some dust away with the side of his hand. “You’re darn right, that’s just who it is. Guess that makes the story true don’t it. We done proved it. Let’s write ours too,” James began to shine the light about on the ground looking for something to carve into the rock face with.

“We best be getting back,” Caleb said but found that he was also looking for something to scratch with.

“Here’s an old railing tie.” Orin squatted down and worked an old railway spike from beneath a pile.

“Just write first initial and last names. Give it here. We never would’ve made it without my flashlight,” James tried to wrest the rusted spike from Orin but surprisingly Orin turned away. He didn’t say anything but the uncharacteristic meaning was implied: *wait your turn or find your own*. James stood shocked for a moment then hastily grabbed a piece of rail connector and Caleb did the same. James’ last name being ‘*Mack*’ meant he finished carving first. The other boys had enough ambient light to see their crude scratches whitening the dark, reddish rock. James whipped the light around. “Say, there’s a ladder here. A ladder! Looks like it goes straight up!”

Caleb was starting to get nervous again, with the promise of a long return trip back through the cave, ahead he was done and quite satisfied with the day’s exploring. “We really oughta go, James. Bet we been gone near two-hours by now. Don’t want my grandpa to come lookin’ for us.”

“Ah, he ain’t climbin’ all the way up here, no way,” James scoffed.

Caleb frowned. “It don’t matter, bein’ late-wise. You ain’t the one gonna get a hollering, or whipped.”

James ignored Caleb and moved cautiously along a perilously thin ledge to an iron ladder that seemed to hang from the air. “Looks like it got tore loose some when they had the explosion, or whatever tore everything up.” He came up to it and gave it as good a shake as he dared, given how thin the ledge was and how far the drop if he was to slip. “Seems bolted on pretty good. Caint see the bottom or the top.”

“Must go all the way up,” Orin commented, a fairly obvious observation.

“Should we climb it? Probably ain’t nowhere near as far as walkin’ all the way back through the cave tunnel,” James remarked.

“I don’t know,” Caleb fretted. “We got no idea. Could be it’s half a mile of climbin’. For all we know.”

“Could be,” James agreed. “But we already seen what’s in the tunnel, nothin’ really ‘cept maybe some old tools. Got no idea what’s up this ladder. We already signed our names to it, right along with old man *Peters*. We’re heroes, boys.” James boasted, and it sure sounded good. Then Caleb began to think about his ma and his grandpa’s reactions if they told, *when* they told, no way any of them could keep this a secret for long, probably not even for one minute. Maybe they’d make a discovery of significance, enough to sway Hank in their favor, although even wishfully thinking Caleb doubted this. His grandpa was real particular about his warnings and admonishments and Caleb had been told since he was maybe five years old to stay away from the mineshafts and the ‘*Cave*’, never to go in even a little way as they could collapse at any time. So maybe James’ notion wasn’t such a bad one as a horizontal shaft was much more likely to cave or have a slide than this giant hole in the ground. “I can climb up for a spell and see then call down to you.” James added.

“What about the flashlight?” Orin said.

“Why, I figure I’ll use the strap for the side of my head. You just stay here in the end of the cave tunnel and don’t move none.”

“We should all go together,” Caleb said.

“Yeah,” Orin concurred.

“Well, okay. But I’ll go up first,” James began fitting the strap so it would hold the flashlight to the side of his head.

“I say we go for maybe five minutes. If we caint see to the top we come back down and go through the tunnel, get back to the cabin quick.” Caleb offered.

“Hey, guys?” Orin’s voice faltered in a way that made James’ and Caleb’s skin suddenly crawl, like maybe something had a den in here, maybe something big and fearsome.

“What is it?” James quickly turned the flashlight beam.

“Down there. Look. Don’t that look like a foot? Like a skeleton?”

“*Oh shit,*” Caleb leaned lightly on James shoulder and both boys peered past their smaller friend to see what he was commenting on. Down from the edge to the left where several thick, braided wire cords dangled ominously there was an outcropping that blocked a complete view of a small ledge. There appeared to be an old boot with a shin bone protruded to the knee then disappeared from view so they had no idea if there was a complete body along with it.

“Is it a body? Caint see,” James knelt and got as close to the edge as he dared and still could only see the boot and lower leg in the spot light beam.

“Maybe it got blown clean-off in the explosion but no one could find it ‘cause we’re the first one’s could’ve seen it.” Orin said.

“Well, it’s somebody’s dead. Or gone out with a peg-leg for sure.”

“What should we do? Go down and see?” Caleb said.

“I ain’t goin’ down there,” Orin said before either boy could suggest that he be lowered.

“Been dead a long time. Don’t see much purpose in goin’ for a look.” Having been reunited with his flashlight, James was not favoring any further responsibilities.

“We’ll have to tell about that. At least to my grandpa,” Caleb said, then looked over but James was already slowly and deliberately climbing up the ladder with Orin right at his heels.

Caleb took one last look into the ink-black cave tunnel then shuffled over and began to climb.

The boys wished they had work gloves on. The ladder hadn’t seen use in maybe a century and was pocked and rusted with a myriad of little cutting barbs. Despite the bleeding they didn’t dare release any of their grip. Up they climbed, hugging the ladder that was hugging the wall, when suddenly the air became noticeably warmer and more damp, and not solely from their exertions. Both Orin and Caleb had flecks of soot and dirt, and possibly iron freckling their faces as James was dislodging it like snow down onto them with each rung he climbed.

“Can you see?” Caleb hated taking up the rear. All he could focus on was not letting go, and the bottoms of Orin’s old shoes, shoes which were once Caleb’s if he recalled properly.

“I think it’s getting’ lighter. Sure is hot though.” James called down. The boys had climbed for what seemed like an hour but in reality was only five minutes. Caleb chanced a look down then one foot slipped and he realized the ladder rungs were now damp too and he pressed himself so tightly against them the rungs would leave marks on his skin and clothes, while he tried to catch his breath.

Don’t look down again. Don’t look down –he told himself.

Now, Orin’s feet were ten rungs up but Caleb couldn’t move.

“I...I *slipped!*” he gasped, verging on tears. “Hang on! Wait a minute!”

“You okay?” Now Orin was sharing in his friend’s terror and did not want to try to look down himself to check. In fact, all three boys stopped climbing and pressed themselves impossibly tighter into the iron ladder.

“I’m okay. I’m okay. It’s hot. It’s slippery. Got blood on it. Why’s it so darn hot? We should go back.” Faintness made Caleb blink several times. He could feel his knees beginning to buckle and quake.

“You guys stay there. I’ll go to the top and tell you how far away you are. There’s enough light up here. I think I can almost see the top.” James called down but he didn’t turn to look down either.

“We should come,” Orin said. “We should all go.”

“We’re comin’,” Caleb voice croaked, his fear roller-coasting from the near fall to thoughts of being left alone, or with Orin, in the almost pitch dark, on an ancient ladder, beside a precipice to death.

For another three-hundred feet they climbed. Then, suddenly, everything went bad.

The ladder broke right were Orin was climbing. One side snapped, shrieked and bent grotesquely while Orin grasped and hugged onto it for his life.

“*Orin!*” Caleb screamed, but he was pressed so tightly himself that his whole body was throbbing painfully.

James was screaming something but all Caleb could focus on was his friend who was hanging and swaying out over the darkness, just a few feet above him, Orin unable to reach the stable part of the black, rusted iron rungs.

“*I don’t wanna die. Die. I don’t wanna die,*” Orin plead, holding his eyes pressed shut and trying unsuccessfully not to shake, waiting in peril for the last piece of iron to rip and tear with a gouging-sharp sound then finally give way and send him plunging to his death down into oily darkness.

“*Orin, hold it! Hold on! I’m coming up!*” Forcing himself, Caleb began to move one slow foot at a time.

“Is he okay? *Orin!* You all right?! I’m scared! Don’t let him fall.” James cried from above, too paralyzed with fear himself to think really clearly or even turn his head downward.

“*Hang on, Orin!*” Caleb continued determinedly. “Try not to shake it! Whole thing looks like it could come down. Don’t you move neither, James! Just stay still!” Caleb reached the first broken rung then gathered himself, turned and swung off to the right so he could climb a few more feet and try to reach Orin and then swing him back over. Orin continued to sway perilously on the patient, creaking iron. Wrapping his right arm, locked at the elbow, Caleb got his best purchase with his right foot and stuck his leg out to the left as far as he could. “Grab my foot. Go on! I caint hold on much longer! Grab my foot!”

Orin opened his teary eyes and saw Caleb’s dirty boot bobbing unsteadily a few feet away. Then, in the scant light he locked eyes with his friend. Caleb saw a mix of shock, terror and raw fear, an image he would never forget. The ladder continued to creak and groan vilely, and for a second Caleb thought it might just shear off and he and Orin and probably James would plunge to their deaths together, the final solemn chapter in a story about three boys who played around the mines.

Then, almost miraculously Orin steeled himself and swung his weight, just enough to grab hold of Caleb's toe then his pants leg, and finally his outstretched hand.

"Put your foot right here, right next to mine. It'll hold. Grab hold of me! I won't let go!"

"Okay." Orin sniffed. "Okay," he was panting.

Then, like that he was wedged on the tiny rung and holding fiercely onto Caleb's sweat-soaked back. They stayed frozen for a moment then monkey-like Orin began to move. He worked his way past and continued up to the unbroken part of the ladder. Caleb cautiously followed.

Both boys were panting heavily. "Thanks, Caleb. Thank you. Thanks," Orin said without looking down. "You saved my life. You saved my life."

"Thought it was gonna break for sure. Thought we were all three gonna die. Thought we was done for."

"You guys okay?! *Orin?*!"

"We're okay," they croaked in unison.

"We're past the broken part." Caleb called up. Then: "Just go real slow, Orin. Real slow!" Caleb admonished.

"Okay. Okay."

Slowly, they began to climb.

"I can see it!" James cried out. "The top! I can see the top! We're almost there! Not much farther."

Caleb and Orin were buoyed and their climbing pace quickened, oblivious to the bloody palm prints they were leaving smeared on the rungs which were responsible for some of their slipping.

After a moment: "Hey! I'm up. I'm all the way up!" Caleb and Orin leaned back about an inch, as far as they dared and could see *some* sunlight but none of the actual opening. Then they could see James.

"What is it? Somethin' blocking it?" Caleb hollered as they had climbed within twenty feet of James.

“Got it sealed up with a grating, looks like. Warm as heck up here too. All overgrown with plants and shit. Don’t come no further ‘till I figure what to do.”

Caleb and Orin could now see the bottoms of James’ feet then an amazing amount of flora growing from every tiny crack and cranny on the walls: moss, ferns, small bushes even, making the final five feet to the grating even more difficult and treacherous. Some of the mineshafts, very few, had been covered over years back when people started migrating to the area for living and not just the silver, and many of the newcomers’ animals and rumored a few inquisitive souls lost their lives falling in so the locals covered them with iron grating. The heat from the thermal vent kept the last ten feet, which got just enough sun, covered in the kind of thick growth one would see on a Pacific forest floor, drawing hungry animals to the heat and food in the winter where there were also inevitably accidents.

“I think I can see a opening. A door. Right up here,” James had pressed through the thick foliage and hooked an elbow under a rung so he could give a good yank on the trap door without slipping off the ladder. “It’s locked up. I can see the lock on top. We’re stuck!”

To keep kids out, like grandpa Hank said –Caleb thought. Stupid kids. Kids like us.

Caleb slumped heavily. To be so close -James within inches- and now realize the prospect of having to climb all the way back down, past the broken rungs, and then have to traverse the entire cave tunnel. And be very late getting home even if nothing calamitous occurred along the way back.

Orin was scanning what he could see of the grating and the area around it.

“You think we could fit through that opening? Over yonder?”

“Where?” Caleb said.

Orin flicked his head but would not let go with either hand. “Other side. See the openin’?”

Caleb noticed an opening with a thick bar across it right Above James, then following a logical line he saw the edges of another opening choked with growth fighting for the sun, gripper spots where a cable was likely hooked to lower the

grating into place. “Caint see, there’s one over here too but it’s all full of bushes and ferns. Don’t look big enough to fit.”

“That one over there ain’t either. Not for you.” Orin spoke with an odd assurance that under normal circumstances Caleb would have paid mind to. It was all the way across, a good twenty feet that seemed forty.

“Couldn’t get there anyway. We need to go back. We’re gonna be real late. Ma’s pro’lly already worryin’, ‘n I bet my grandpa’s plenty sore. We only told ‘em we ‘s just goin’ up to the dump.”

James continued to shake the trap door with increasing frustration. Suddenly, just as Caleb was about to shout warning there was a loud snap and one of the brackets that was holding a bolt and the ladder to the sidewall snapped free and with it the ancient iron ladder torqued to the right and twisted just enough to send their balance off.

“*Hey!*” They screamed in unison with renewed panic.

“Okay, okay. *Sorry!* *Sorry!*” James now had both elbows locked under a high rung and wasn’t moving anymore.

Caleb was just about to reassert their need to start heading back down even if it meant leading by himself and then feeling the whole length of the tunnel in the pitch dark when suddenly and without warning Orin began to climb. Within ten rungs he was at James’ feet, then without slowing he moved to one side of the ladder and with one shoulder pressing painfully into the jagged sidewall he climbed past the startled and speechless James until he reached the grating, prompting James to compose himself and say: “It’s locked, Orin! I tried to open it twice and I’m stronger’n you. You can see it from there! Be careful! Damn, be careful! You could’ve knocked me off!”

Orin wasn’t paying James any mind at all.

“What’re you doing? *Orin!*” Caleb called out in fear. “We can just head back down. It’ll be easier, come on! Don’t be dumb!

“James is right; he’s stronger’n you...”

“Yeah, come on Orin! I’m agreein’ with Caleb- let’s just head back down. Slow.” But Orin wasn’t listening.

Without warning Orin grasped the grating above his head with both hands, took a deep breath to steady himself, and left his feet.

“Wonder where the boy’s are,” Caleb’s ma was finishing up her cleaning and came out behind the cabin while Hank tinkered in his tiny shed.

“What’s that? Oh, pro’lly up the old dump. I’ll get out my rifle here in a minute. Shootin’ll bring ‘em back down. You ready to go home?”

“I think I’ll have a glass of ice tea first. Maybe something a little stronger if you’ve got it.”

“Sure do. Got some hard-cider in the cabinet by the sink. Mixes in right well with some cold lemonade.”

“Need ice for that, Pa. Your’s is all but melted off already.” She turned and went back inside.

“Yeah. Should’ve sent those boys up to the snow field. Fill my chest up, packed tight with ice keeps things cold near two days.”

“Lemonade’s still cold enough. You want some cider in yours?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Hank came out from the little shed wiping his greasy hands on an already filthy rag. Caleb’s ma had washed all of the old man’s clothes in the creek and hung them on the line to dry. Hank took a look slowly up the mountain, took a long draw in the breeze, then shook his head of the slight feeling that something was wrong.

“*Orin!*”

“*Orin!* Orin, stop!” Caleb and James both called out but Orin was already hanging and swinging like a monkey, kicking his legs and wedging his shoes above his head to rest his arms every few swings as he worked his way across. “*Orin!*”

“He ain’t gonna fit, Caleb! *Orin!* Ya ain’t gonna fit! Come back!” James was fighting back tears. “He’s gonna fall!”

“*Ssh!*” Terrified himself, Caleb at least had the sense not to make matters worse.

They watched in horror as Orin swung and groped and wedged and shimmied his way half upside-down across the long grate.

Please don't let him fall in, god. Please don't let him fall.

Twice Orin's fingers lost purchase, and once he nearly hung upside-down by one leg, nearly losing a shoe wedged between the grating.

Then, miraculously he reached the opening. He went to slide his feet up, to grab around the crossbar, but then almost unbelievably he did a sort of gymnast's pull-up. Both of his legs, then his hips, then his torso were through!

James and Caleb gasped, shivered then hollered with glee.

“Orin! Hey Orin!”

“How's he gonna get the lock off?” Caleb asked suddenly remembering that only one of them was to safety.

“Ah, bash it with a rock. *Hey! Orin!* Bash it...” James was cut short as Orin had already composed himself and was busy pounding the old padlock with a good sized shard, snapping it off with only four solid whacks. He opened the trap door and with considerable maneuvering and effort managed to help first James then Caleb through while the ladder swayed unsteadily below them. Greatly relieved, the boys whooped and hollered and pounded their tiny friend on the back. Orin had a grin that Caleb rarely saw.

“Bravest thing I ever seen,” James gushed.

“Me too. Thought you was gonna fall for sure.” Caleb added, patting Orin on the back.

“All that wet heat. Must've heat up the ground too, makes the stuff grow. Caint see none of the usual roads up to this mine,” James commented. “Have to walk right up onto it or you'd've never knew it was there.”

“Yeah, where are we?” Caleb spun slowly around.

“Near the top of *Shoshone* I figure,” James replied. The trees around them were tall and making it hard to see and find their bearings.

“We did climb awful far,” Caleb noted. “In and up.”

“You saved my life,” Orin said to Caleb who merely shrugged.

“Didn’t do nothin’ you wouldn’t ‘a done if I was the one stuck.”

“Let’s head on down. But keep track ‘a where we been so we can tell your grandpa ‘bout that body,” James said.

Caleb immediately began to worry that there was no way they could properly tell the story without it coming forth that they’d traversed the entire cave tunnel then climbed hundreds of feet up a decrepit mineshaft.

“Hold up a minute,” Caleb stopped them. “Let’s see if we can see any more of them skeleton bones from up here.”

James and Orin ambled back over and all three boys lay on top of the heavy grating and looked downward, keeping their feet safely hooked to the edge as if it would help any should the grating collapse and they were to plummet downward. James stretched as far as his arm would allow and pointed the light beam down the ladder into the dark, near-black abyss but they couldn’t even see the opening to the cave tunnel let alone a ledge below it. Then, as James was going to move the light and had just commented on the futility of trying to see he dropped the flashlight, and end over end it went and quickly disappeared.

“*Shit*. Damn it, there goes my flashlight!”

“Broke for sure,” Orin noted.

James glared at Caleb. “Told you we couldn’t see nothin’. Now I done lost my flashlight. My pa’ll be sore,” he said with little conviction as all three boys knew this was an embellishment of what actually went on in James’ fancy house.

“Hope it don’t get dark on us,” James said as the boys headed back down the mountain laughing and joshing in relief.

Caleb’s mom took the other boys back to town with her but Caleb stayed behind with his grandpa. The adults didn’t seem to notice much different about them but Caleb was sure they were babbling to his ma while he was prattling to his grandpa.

“You boys got through that grating? How’d you get into it? Bustin’ that lock? That’s state property. Could get you in some hot water, if Walt finds out,” Hank was referring to the local game warden. Caleb knew eventually his grandpa would have found out; even if by some stroke of magic all three boys held their tongues, eventually the broken lock would be detected and obvious questions asked of all boys in the area. Caleb only told a little, and omitted the scary parts about Orin’s death-defying inverted climbing after suffering near-death from the broken ladder, or the fact that they’d traversed the ‘*Cave*’ tunnel shaft to get there. James and Orin had been extra fidgety and were grateful when Caleb’s ma seemed in a hurry to get back to town so they could each tell a one-hundred percent worthy confidant the story in sworn secrecy, a confidant who would in turn tell a one-hundred percent worthy confidant of their own until the whole town knew what had happened that afternoon.

“Was the old *Marshall/Coogan* mine. Silver. Run dry in the twenties.” They sat on the back porch since there was still a bit of sun, more of a wide stoop really, Caleb grateful that his grandpa had hardly got sore and ravenously finishing some elk meat stew from a pot his ma had left simmering on the wood stove while his grandpa continued the tale.

“Was there ‘a explosion?” Caleb asked between mouthfuls.

Hank had finished with his bowl. He leaned back against the side of the cabin and looking over his growing belly, then eyed his grandson. “Who told you ‘bout that? You ain’t even been back to town. One ‘a you boys lower on a rope?”

“Uh, no sir,” Caleb answered honestly.

“And I’ll bet none of you boys knew a thing about that mine. That mine like all them others you ain’t supposed to be foolin’ around in.” Hank stroked his chin while he thought.

“Explosion,” Hank went quickly on, “kilt a lot of men. Didn’t have the court systems like we do right now or my guess is *Marshall/Coogan* would’ve been sued right out of business, right then and there. Nineteen-ought-two.

“Remember my pa tellin’ us folks called it the ‘*Hell-Hole*’ for a long while after that.

“Made a lot of men rich, but then that can also be a curse in the long run. Too much of anything, too quick like.”

Caleb gave this some thought. “How can gettin’ rich quick be a curse? That don’t make sense.”

“That’s ‘cause you ain’t seen it first-hand. These boys...well, most of ‘em, were just like you and your pals there. Not that Mack kid, he’s different, but most of them others, ya’ll don’t have a pot to piss in. Then one day one of ya finds a vein of silver the size of your forearm that runs from *Shoshone* to *Lookout Peak* and next thing you know you’re rich as the *dickens* and your life is all turnt upside down. Seen it myself, a couple of men in town, when I was a boy and the mine was operatin’. They had never had nothin’, never been rich, so they didn’t know how to be, what to do about it when all that money come to ‘em.” Hank looked into space, reminiscing. Then his eyes grew clear and he gave Caleb a look.

“We gotten off track here. Hadn’t heard you explain how it was you’d heard about the explosion if you didn’t go down on a rope an’ see it.”

Caleb was well past any grip held over his tongue. He knew he hadn’t heard the last of it for playing around a mine to begin with; but, only very rarely did his grandpa ever take to serious hollering, and only once to the belt and for that Caleb had been very young (and deserving) after finding one of Hank’s loaded rifles and bringing it outside. He was reluctant to finish the complete story because he knew that would mean more to it. But, he had no choice. “Uh, we seen a dead body too. Well, a dead leg. A skeleton one. In a boot.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, what’s this now? You had better start from the beginning. All of it. Tell it all, right now,” and Caleb did, Hanks face showing a range from anger to admiration, to concern when the boy got to the part about seeing the skeleton, well, the skeletal leg protruding on a ledge.

“Skeleton? Don’t be tellin’ no wild stories now, son. A human skeleton’s always a serious matter. Doesn’t matter how old it is to the Law. And usually some relative wants to know.”

“Yes, sir. We all seen it! James had a brand new flashlight, stayed lit the whole way. ‘Till he dropped it, but that was when we got all the way back up top. I seen it, not ten feet from me. Could only see the boot, and then the lower part of his leg, though. I swear, grandpa! I told you everything!”

Hank stroked his chin and looked off into the woods, then subconsciously cast a quick glance uphill in the direction of the covered mineshaft.

“Well. Come on,” he stood on his creaky knees. “Best be getting’.”

“Where we goin’?” Caleb stood along with him.

“Well, I damn sure ain’t climbing up the hill to that damn *hell-hole* to see for myself so I’ll take your word on it and we’ll go down to town and see the sheriff.”

Not really heroes or villains, all three boys told the same story so the sheriff took a couple of deputies and firemen and a good part of the curious (or bored) folks from town in tow and trekked up to the *hell-hole*. They brought ropes and lights and a rescue basket and lowered Whitey Hollander down because he was the smallest of the firemen. There was a lot off commotion and buzz and speculation over who it might be with the most pervasive wild story bandied around being that old man ‘*Peters*’ had plum fallen in, which again didn’t make a whole lot of sense since he’d made it back to town at least once that everyone knew of to brag about his deed. In the end Whitey Hollander just brought up a leg, that’s all that it was, wrapped carefully in a cloth. No one had any idea who the leg belonged to although there were a couple of comments that the boot looked like ones that Jerome Refino might wear so they meant to ask him if his great grandpa had been one of the men kilt when the *hell-hole* blew.

But that was it; a fresh padlock applied and further admonishment from both the sheriff and Hank to all of the boys present regarding playing around the mines.

It was the day after his twelfth birthday. The woods felt somehow fresher; cleaner; definitely cooler.

Caleb didn't know how his grandpa Hank could sit so silently. Sometimes he thought the old man might be sleeping, maybe even dead, but then his grandpa would always catch him looking at him just before he did.

The crossbow, glistening from all of the coats of varnish now felt slippery in Caleb's warm palms. He tried alternately holding the weapon forward with one hand while wiping the other dry on his blue jeans but still it felt slippery. Maybe, when the time came, despite all of the practice he wouldn't be able to shoot straight! Hank had stressed repeatedly how important it was to shoot accurately, that otherwise the animal would be injured and might have to be tracked for miles through unforgiving terrain.

Caleb thought it best to move away from his grandpa a bit so he walked as quietly as he could through the woods to the other side of a small hill. Caleb understood that deer were prey animals and therefore always on their guard but sitting in one spot for an hour or more just didn't make much sense. He knew his grandpa was capable of tracking, definitely a small herd, and then if they came up on them from above the deer would be easy to see and they could get into position to shoot. This was Caleb's thinking but as always he deferred to Hank. Caleb picked a spot behind a small copse of trees where he could see down the animal trail in both directions. After a few minutes he set his crossbow carefully on some soft, fallen branches, and took a drink of water from his canteen. He took a minute to take in the forest, the sounds of birds and insects, the steady stream of unknown plinks and thuds as things fell to the forest floor, often after bouncing off branches after a gentle breeze. Generally, Caleb liked the sound of running water but there was none in this part of the hills.

He checked his watch. It had been less than fifteen minutes since he moved to this spot. He thought about eating the food he'd packed but then he'd just had breakfast two hours ago and figured he'd be real hungry later if they stayed out all day. He wanted to hum, or explore around the small hill or maybe break some sticks

but he was more grown up, on his own now with his weapon, hunting, and he knew that silence and stillness were vital to any success. He imagined the look of pride on his ma's face when they drove up, probably with a big buck strapped to the hood of his grandpa's farm truck and she learned that it was Caleb who'd shot it, alone, and not with some fancy rifle even but with a crossbow, handmade by his grandpa Hank. A single, perfect shot to the heart, killing the animal instantly. Caleb thought that maybe then his ma wouldn't miss his pa as much.

Caleb jolted, from more of a monotonous daze than actually falling asleep, a sound subtle but distinct; a branch broken underfoot.

Something was moving up the trail.

Cautiously.

Barely breathing, Caleb righted himself, so, so slowly, reaching for the crossbow, settling it back into his lap. He'd been leaning against a tree but now he sat cross-legged while he gradually snugged the crossbow into his arm and chest, then very slowly rose to one knee.

There. To the downhill side, about a hundred yards, he could see three or four deer, does, one smaller, maybe a yearling fawn. They were moving up the trail and sampling the vegetation as they went, unhurried; cupped ears flicking pesky flies, always stiffening and alert. Caleb tried to calm himself, remembering his grandpa's admonishment about how getting too '*breathy*', as he called it, would make you sweat, and when you start to sweat you start to smell, and then a breeze turns unfavorable and you're given away without ever being seen.

Cautiously, Caleb wiped the sweat from his eyes.

He nocked an arrow, pulling carefully back with the *jackbow* until the crossbow was incredibly taut. .

Just then a buck, a big one came into his periphery, taking up the rear of the little herd. Caleb counted its antlers unconsciously, a '*ten-pointer*', the way it was second-nature to count when you saw one strapped to someone's hood. If it was

large like this one, its antler rack would be boastfully displayed, probably driven around town a couple of times.

Caleb made himself very small as the deer made their way up the trail, maybe one hundred feet from him, the buck eating but keeping a wary eye behind the group, relying on the does to alert him if there was cause ahead. If he moved along the trail just a little ways Caleb would have a perfect vantage point for the buck's broadside. Caleb prayed silently that his grandpa didn't decide to come looking for him right now as his placement was almost perfect. Caleb quivered with nervous anticipation as if it had suddenly gotten cold despite the eighty-degree heat.

Two of the deer moved past and were reaching up to eat some leaves from the same bush. Caleb blinked several times from his intense stare back down the trail to see that the smallest of the does had moved off the trail and was rooting around in some tall grasses that were at best but forty-feet from him. He tried not to breathe at all, knowing that even the slightest movement or noise could spook the little one and then the herd in an instant.

The big buck continued to slowly come up the trail. Caleb cursed himself for not having his crossbow aimed and *at-the-ready*; if he even attempted to move it into position now the little doe would surely see and spook and it would all be over in an instant.

As he turned his head back to check, to his horror Caleb suddenly locked eyes with the little fawn, except it didn't seem to notice him at all –what? It appeared to be staring right at him, *right at him!* –as it chewed carefully, chewed on something green. Caleb remembered his grandpa telling him that deer saw things in funny ways, different from humans, a much wider view but they often had trouble focusing on things that weren't right up on them; they picked up movement from a broad area and figured to run first thing as a precaution. Caleb could see one of the deer's eyes and for a frozen moment he could see the white and even the cornea, the lid as the animal blinked; then, as always, the deer stopped and surveilled in a soft and total stillness before flicking its tail and leaning forward to eat again.

The buck moved even closer now, almost into Caleb's range. Fretting, Caleb decided that the worst thing that could happen was that his movement would spook then little one, then all of them, but maybe just around the small hill where at least his grandpa would get the big buck for sure. He moved the crossbow cautiously around, aware again of his breathing, trying to draw only slow, deep breaths. The little doe came up munching then stopped and stared again, once again seeming to lock eyes with the boy. But this time when the moment froze there was recognition in its eyes, followed by instantaneous fear.

Caleb flashed to the memory of his small friend Orin and the broken iron ladder, his best friend swinging out over the yawning precipice, fearing for his life. Terrified. Caleb blinked and like that the small doe was gone. But the expected, frantic flurry of activity for some reason didn't materialize and the small animal simply scampered back over to where the three larger does were grazing, paused to look back toward Caleb one last time before flicking its tail and joining in. Caleb was kneeling on only one knee and his leg began to throb, so badly that he simply stood up, suddenly feeling tired of the whole thing, unbelievably near to the point of not caring if he hunted at all.

The forest became surreal. Then, the buck stopped perfectly in broadside and turned its head away to reach for some leaves on a high branch.

Unsteady, with a dizzying combination of excitement, anticipation, fear and numbness, Caleb raised the crossbow and took careful aim.

Hank thought might have been dozing because his back was stiff against the tree. He'd seen the boy move off by himself some time ago and felt some pride, having raised him like a son when his daughter's *good-for-nothing* husband decided to get himself killed somewhere, or decided that seeing after his family was just too much of a burden to be bothered with. Caleb was a good boy, generally well mannered and disciplined. Heck, Hank himself and half the men in the valley had played around mineshafts they weren't supposed to when they were boys. He hoped that his grandson would at least get a good look at a buck, and if somehow he managed

to down one on his very first day of hunting, on his own, well, so much more the better. Hank had never seen a boy so eager to hunt and suspected it had a lot to do with growing up without having a pa around. Hank wasn't entirely sure if anything could stand up to the anticipation and just hoped that the boy wasn't too discouraged and disappointed if as was often the case he didn't see a thing at the end of a long day.

The big buck stood ramrod straight while it munched on leaves. Caleb had no idea if the does were even in the area any longer. He swore he could see the animal's heartbeat despite the thick, wavy muscles, and mostly smooth fur, some missing in ugly chunks, the result of catching on sharp tree limbs or fending off sharp antlers from a foe.

Breathe. Slowly.

The heart spot became an easy tin can sitting on a stump, just like Hank had told him a thousand times, and Caleb's right forefinger gently felt for the trigger. His breathing was slow and steady. His grandpa would be proud. He was finally ready to take the killing shot.

At that instant the buck somehow sensed him. It stopped chewing and turned its massive head and dangerous, heavy, pointed rack.

His finger squeezed firmly and smoothly back.

Just as Caleb fired, time seemed to stop altogether. Sharply, like a picture show, he flashed to the terror he'd seen in the little fawn's eyes moments before, Orin's eyes as he swung from the broken ladder long before that.

The razor-sharp arrow flew. It sailed over the buck's shoulders by a good six inches.

By the time Caleb blinked, the animal was gone.

Caleb found himself gasping for breath. He quickly scanned the area but all he could see were brush and grasses, trees and leaves.

He felt suddenly impossibly tired and unbelievably low. He thought about looking for the arrow but decided it must have somehow been poorly made and was

imbalanced for him to miss so badly. He was, however, grateful that his grandpa wasn't there to see. For a moment he felt sadness, deep sadness, and great shame. He sat on a rock and let the crossbow drop unceremoniously by his side.

After a short spell, Caleb decided to head back over the hill. His mood picked up a bit as he'd been told how challenging hunting could be at times for even the best outdoorsmen, men like his grandpa Hank, and how the old man always preached, and practiced, patience.

As Caleb came around the hill and tried to get his bearings he saw the hind quarters of another buck, a different one, only an eight-pointer by quick count. This time he was far enough back to swing his crossbow at the ready without fear of detection. Adrenaline flowed. Then, as he crept to follow, Caleb saw the animal move to within fifty-feet of where he was certain that Hank was secreted so he stopped stalking and made sure he was well hidden himself behind a tree. It was dangerous for two hunters to target the same animal, even with bows.

Caleb waited with renewed vigor, nearly the anticipation he'd felt for himself moments before as he watched then heard the familiar '*thwack*' sound and knew that Hank's arrow was loosed. In that fraction of a second the buck heard the sound too but didn't react in that instant, probably too stunned from the impact or maybe already in shock, Caleb thought, as he waited inevitably for the beast to get that queer death look and then fall. The buck took a step but not with any apparent pain or dismay, then slowly picked up its pace and disappeared.

Hank appeared from behind the small copse and acted momentarily startled to see Caleb come out from behind the tree. Caleb waved a hand, somewhat timidly, and moved toward the old man.

"Did ya see a big ten-pointer go by?" Caleb croaked in a half-whisper. "With three or four does?"

Hank appeared to be uncomfortable, like a man caught having a private, emotional moment, in the back room at a funeral home maybe when somebody opens the door without knocking first. "Nope. Sure didn't.

“Did you get a good shot off?”

“Yes, sir. Uh...I missed him though. A little high.”

Hank ran his hand through his white-grey hair and set his crossbow carefully on the ground beside him, then reached for his canteen. “Get a clean look did ya?”

Caleb didn’t really want to tell the truth nor did he want to lie, coming off the episode with the mineshaft. “Thought I did,” he mumbled.

“Ah, well. Don’t fret none. That’s how it goes sometimes. Animal was just fortunate today.” Hank wiped his forehead across his forearm.

Caleb wanted to comment on what he’d just witnessed but he too felt as if he’d maybe come upon an adult doing something privately. He just wasn’t sure how his grandpa could have possibly missed from such a short distance himself and thought for a moment that maybe his grandpa had been asleep and another hunter was around.

Then, frowning, Caleb got a strange feeling in his gut. He realized suddenly that he’d never seen Hank come back directly from a hunt before. Despite his reputation as an outdoorsman, and of course the certification of having taken the largest *bighorn sheep* in Idaho state history, and because he was such a good shot Caleb just assumed that Hank got what he was hunting for whenever he went alone. And, that the times his grandpa had taken him throughout his youth and they came back empty were just on account of bad luck, or because there were two of them there, overly sweating, for the game animals to smell. Now, Hank always had meat; but then again he had a lot of friends. Caleb thought hard. It wasn’t the old man’s eyes; he could still spot birds and deer at great distances. Or reflexes; he was still plenty spry around the cabin. Or shooting; Hank was dead-on whenever he had instructed Caleb with Caleb’s bow shooting at cans. Must just be bad luck. Hunting was uncertain and sometimes you simply didn’t come across any suitable candidates.

That night they sat on the front porch as the sun was going down and ate some supper. Because of the mountains the sun was nearly gone from the little cabin by

about seven-thirty leaving everything pillowed in a dusky glow. Hank could tell the boy was particularly quiet. Normally, if Hank wasn't telling a story the boy would be asking questions non-stop, or talking about baseball or things from school, or things he'd done or was planning on doing with his friends. Should be running on and on about his first hunt. How close he'd come to taking a big buck on his very first day. Hank watched him while he ate. He was still rail-skinny but muscle was starting to develop in his arms, and he was probably half-a-head taller than he was last summer. Caleb had his crossbow sitting beside him on the bench.

"We need to adjust your bow there?" Hank asked and motioned with his fork.

Caleb looked down at the crossbow then back at his food and shrugged.

"Maybe. I guess. Dunno."

"Well, you said you had a good look at him. Was it the distance? Did he spook at the last minute?"

The food had restored some of his strength but Caleb was still tired and a depleted. He merely shrugged again. "Might've been a bad arrow."

Hank sat back and took a good, long look at his grandson. "Been waiting for this day long as I can remember. Had your birthday yesterday and we went the very next day just like I told you we would. Had a look at a buck, a big one. *Ten-pointer* you said."

Caleb just kept eating.

After Caleb cleaned off the dishes and put them away he came back out onto the porch where his grandpa sat smoking from his corncob pipe, a sticky, blackened thing that had held Caleb's fancy for a while when he was younger but now just seemed unpleasant. While he didn't much care for the smell, Caleb always associated the pipe with long storytelling, and the night was cool and sweet, ripe for some.

Caleb set the crossbow carefully on the porch and sat lengthwise on the bench, looking out over the hills and small tendrils of smoke from cooking fires of hunters or distant neighbors. There was no electricity, and although it wasn't fully

dark Hank lit a lantern and hung it from a hook that dangled off of the porch eave. Said it helped keep the bugs at bay.

“Grandpa, how’d you miss yours? I saw it when I was coming back. Do you need to adjust ‘*Bighorn*?’”

Hank couldn’t decide if Caleb was being inquisitive or unseemly since it was now pretty obvious that the boy had seen him, seen him shoot and miss. Rightly, Caleb wasn’t entirely sure of the purpose of his questioning, either.

After a moment, the old man said: “Lemme tell you a story.” Hank began puffing so much smoke from the corncob pipe that it surrounded his head in great, cloud-like billows as he put it to flame. “When I was your age. Actually, a bit younger’n you. Up til the time when I was maybe ten-years old, my pa, your *great-granddaddy*, used to take my brother, your Great-Uncle Pete and me with him pretty much every time he went into the woods. Which was damn-near every day. Oh, we’d fish a lot, fool around mostly, but back then there weren’t no seasons for huntin’ or trappin’. You didn’t see many ‘a these ‘trophy hunters’ neither, like you see nowadays. Men hunted and fished because otherwise their families didn’t eat. Unless you were prosperous some way or another and bought everything you needed from the mercantile. Just meant someone else hunted for you,” Hank grumbled this last line then took a second to gather his thoughts, sitting very erect.

“I was a crack shot, even back then.”

“That’s when you got the record bighorn.” Caleb rarely interrupted the long stories but Hank never minded if he was interrupted by someone wishing to comment on the record sheep.

“That’s right. But ten-years old. Never would have had a chance at it neither if I wasn’t such a good shot. Don’t think your *great-granddaddy* could have hit it, even from that ledge I’d climbed up onto. We been over all that, you know that story.

“Anyhow, I was always taking deer, elk, even a buffalo one time. Had meat for a whole year after that buffalo, plus gave half away too. Big one,” the old man

reminisced. “Took that with the *Winchester*. Man’s lying to you, mostly, he tells you he took a buffalo with an arrow. ‘Less maybe he’s *Injun*.”

“Anyhow, my pa could get plum lazy sometimes, havin’ me around. Not Pete, though. Couldn’t shoot worth a lick. Didn’t figure he much cared to, either. Pete was more your...artistic type. Always daydreaming about this and that, ‘bout movin’ to a big city, taking to university, that sort of thing. But me, I couldn’t get enough of any of it, the huntin’ or the fishin’.

“The trapping...” Hank took another huge puff, then a drink off of a bottle of whiskey Caleb often saw appear after supper. Caleb couldn’t see the old man’s eyes in the dim light but they were getting a little rheumy. “Trappin’ was somethin’ my pa *was* good at. Real good. He knew where all the muskrats and the beavers was.

“Heck, for a while there, trader’d give you a nickel for every rabbit pelt you brought him, two whole dollars for a nice beaver, three maybe if he was a real good-sized *beeve*. Pa supported us on his fur trades mostly, for the things...so your *great-grandma* could get things she needed from the store. Clothing items and such.

“Sometimes, if we’d had a good season, and after we’d helped out any neighbors who hadn’t...or, like *Missy Franklin* who lost her husband and had no boys, or girls for that matter, who could hunt, after that sometimes we’d still have left over meat to sell. Grind some up into sausage,” the old man was mumbling more, talking mostly to himself. Caleb was used to it. His ma had told him that when someone lives off alone they often get to talking to themselves and not to worry about it.

“So, that was it. That was how we ate. That was how my pa earned a living. Good by them traps.” Hank took a strong pull from the bottle and wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve. He moved his bulk and turned to lean nearer to the boy. “Any of your pals do any trappin’?”

Caleb shrugged. “Not really. Maybe. But I ain’t never seen none.”

“Okay,” Hank sat back a little and settled back in. “So, it was just before my eleventh birthday.

“Pete was older, by three years. Our pa, I don’t know, still don’t know to this day, but maybe he felt that, mm...” Hank absentmindedly scratched his head.

“Anyway, my pa bought Peter a used *Winchester* when he fourteen. Nice one. Figured he thought that maybe if m’ brother had his own rifle he might take to huntin’ a little better. I always liked shootin’ pa’s rifle, ‘specially since I was such a crack-shot. Always made him proud. But by that time, near eleven-years old, I started to get it into my head that I was the one deserved his own rifle. Not Pete who was always distracted huntin’ and barely ever shot anything at all. Heck, half the time Pete would be fidgety or makin’ noise, spook everything and never see a thing. So I asked pa about it one time but he didn’t pay me much mind, said they was too expensive and why’d we need more’n two rifles? That he was sure Pete would let me borrow his from time to time, lendin’ like he did with his gun.

“Now, he could tell I was hurt by it, kind of sore, you know. So then, later on that day he comes and tells me that if I could save up enough money by laying my own traps, well then he would let me buy my own gun.”

“How much’d they cost they back then? For a good one? A *Winchester*?” Caleb asked.

“Oh, I’d say a good one could run upwards of ten-dollars or more. Yeah, maybe ten-dollars.

“Well, let me tell you, that was a lot ‘a more rabbits than we had pro’lly here in the whole valley. And I didn’t know of no beaver dams that pa or someone else hadn’t already laid claim to so for a while there I stayed pretty sore.”

“Did you save it all up?” Caleb propped himself up on one elbow. Deep in some heavy thoughts, Hank didn’t seem to hear him. The old man took another long drink.

“Trappin’,” he muttered.

He looked hard at Caleb and despite the weak light Caleb felt more than saw the intensity in his eyes. “You’re a good boy, son. You make me and you make your ma real proud. You done good today, too,” Hank reached over and gave Caleb an affectionate squeeze on his shoulder. “You been followin’ everything I told you and

you deserve to have that fine bow. Last you a lifetime, you keep care of it proper.” Caleb nodded but was feeling a little uncomfortable and a bit confused by the old man’s sudden affection. “Now...now, I’m sure you’re gonna grow up an’ become schooled. You could be a doc, whatever you want. You’re smart enough for it. Huntin’ and fishin’ will always be just sport for you. You needn’t worry about ever having to use them to provide.” Caleb was used to some rambling and generally Hank got more animated as he drank. But Hank kept holding onto his shoulder and for some reason it was making Caleb feel sad, in the way someone might if they were telling you they were leaving you, dying even, maybe.

After a moment, Hank let go of Caleb’s shoulder and sat back into his chair. Now Caleb could see the old man’s eyes fairly clearly despite the flickering, weak, lantern glow. “So, did ya save up for that rifle?” Caleb ventured, and then was surprised when his voice cracked. His grandpa didn’t seem to notice that either.

Hank’s broad shoulders slumped some, then he leaned forward and rested his arms on his knees. He appeared to be staring at something through a crack in the porch. His voice became distant. “That October was real cold, unseasonable; like February usually is.

“One day pa wasn’t feeling right so he had me ‘n Pete go run the traps for ‘im. We was supposed to go together, for safety, but there was already some snow on the ground and a good wind kickin’ up that made you feel cold no matter how tightly you bundled. So, me and Pete decide to split up, take east and west of the *Shoshone*, then meet back at the river, go on home. Take half the time. Pa’d be none the wiser.

“Huntin’ had been pretty bad on account ‘a the cold that fall, and the trappin’ wadn’t much better. Plus, I had to move fast so I could check on my traps, too. I remember thinkin’ that if pa had some caught in his, well, how would he know if I told him they was from mine, you know? Not really stealin’ I didn’t figure as we’d be eatin’ the meat regardless. And I wasn’t thinking to do it with no good pelts, beaver or whatnot, maybe just a couple of muskrats. Trader paid a quarter for those, same as five rabbits. But it was bitter cold, like I said, and I was havin’ to hurry.

“So, I went by my traps first, had about maybe eight or ten of ‘em, but there weren’t nothing caught in ‘em. Not a thing. Then pa had a couple of rabbits but one had got tore up and et mostly by some other critter the night before so it’s pelt was no good. I remember being in a foul mood about it all. And real damn cold.

“The last traps was all beaver and set along the *Hellroaring Creek* and parts of the *Salmon*. Normally, when it’s real cold, by the time you got to ‘em they’s already froze to death, which was good ‘cause maybe the pelt is a good one on account of the beaver not thrashin’ around overly, tryin’ to get itself freed. So there are two fine beavers in the first two I check. And they’re both already froze. Otherwise I would have dressed ‘em out there so there’d be less to carry back.

“Now, I’ve got Pete’s rifle mind you, just in case we was to come across a deer maybe or an elk. Weren’t no huntin’ seasons back then, remember.

“I go all the way down to the last trap. And these froze *beeves* I’m carryin’ is damned heavy. And it’s still so damned cold.

“I come up on the last trap. And I see some movement. And it’s a beaver, a real big one, and he’s movin’ through the river pretty good, headed straight for that trap. So I set the two I’d been carryin’ down for just a moment, so I can creep up on this big one, figure I can shoot it if it don’t go into the trap, but then it does, it does right in front of me. I hear the trap snap shut.

“And then there’s this screamin’; sounded like sounds a young girl might make if she was getting’ hurt, noise like that, only louder, real loud. Had never heard that before. Then it stops, after maybe a minute or two, I don’t really know ‘cause I went back to pick up the other two what were froze. Not wantin’ to draw a mountain lion in maybe, they’s already gettin’ winter-hungry in that October.

“I take the two and I go back over to the last trap and the big *beeve* is caught in it good but ain’t makin’ that horrible noise no more. Trap’s right along the river’s edge, and as I’m making my way over I punch through the ice and one leg goes into the freezing water, ‘bout up to my knee. Good way to lose some toes to frostbite. Sure didn’t make my mood any better neither. No.

“So I come up on this *beeve*. And I sling the rifle around, not to shoot it, ‘cause that could ruin the pelt, but I figure to club it. Which I should really be usin’ a stick or a baseball bat, somethin’ like that, but I’m cold and now I’m wet so damn it all to hell I figure.

“The *beeve* is in some pain now, bleedin’ too.

“As I come up on him, he tries to stand tall, tall as it can, even with the busted-up foot caught. Brave-like I figure, at first, ‘cause that’s what most animals’ll do when they know it’s their time. Stand tall and fight for their life no matter the reality of the situation. But this *beeve*, he looks up at me. Looks me right in the eye. Looks to me for a moment like he might be cryin’. Cryin’?! I swear -a damn beaver!

“And...and he looks up at me, looks me right in the eye, and I can tell you that if he could’ve talked he’d’ve asked me: *Why? Why are you doing this to me?*”

The old man dropped his head lower. “Had no answer for that.

“Couldn’t bring myself to club him.”

They sit in silence for a moment.

“Let him out of the trap. Opened it right up, with the rifle butt and my one dry boot. He looks at me queer for a minute then limped off and swims down into the river.

“Not sure if he could’ve lived. That busted up foot.”

Hank sat leaning over for a moment longer, then slowly sat back up. He wiped a tear from his eye. Caleb had never seen the man come even close to crying before, not at any funeral. Never.

“Last thing your grandma Sofia did before she passed on was look up at me, in all of that pain. Couldn’t do nothin’ to help her. Nothin’ at all.

“Same look as that beaver. Couldn’t speak none by then, but Sofia, her eyes, she seemed to say: *why me?*”

“Didn’t have an answer for her, neither.”