

# Lemon Drops for the Green One

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*In my many travels around the state of Tennessee I have collected a lot of what some might call "folklore", stories passed down from family to family, friend to friend, embellished, colored and polished with each telling. They're entertaining, to be sure, great fodder for those chilly nights you're sharing a "toe roaster" with your friends somewhere deep in the woods, perhaps in a clearing so far from the city lights that it seems you could reach up and scoop yourself a handful of stars.*

*This is, I hope, not such a story. I heard it myself not long ago, and I tell it as simply as I can...*

He wasn't quite sure what took him to Mansfield. It was--and is--an insignificant town in the western fringes of Grundy County, Tennessee; which is, to say, the middle of nowhere. Eastern Grundy was justifiably well known for its spectacular hiking trails of the South Cumberland, but Mansfield really couldn't boast such, at least according to the maps he had, the topography appearing rather less than spectacular. But here he was, easing his battered Nissan into the cherty parking lot of a small country store.

At first glance (and the second, and the third) Mansfield really didn't qualify as a town. A few houses, some farms, and the store with its pair of gas pumps. That was pretty much it. Not even a post office, apparently there weren't enough residents to the area to warrant it. Mansfield, Tennessee, and Drew Harden was parked in the middle of it. But why?

He was an avid hiker. Already he'd covered most of the trails in the Savage Gulf region, which lived up to its name, and he'd walked the length of the Fiery Gizzard trail, over thirteen miles and during a driving rain storm, no less. It was simultaneously horrible and spectacular, the rain making the crossing of endless boulder fields more than treacherous and the climbs downright deadly. But it also added power to Fiery Gizzard Creek, whitewater a rafter would lust after, and wash after wash--and heretofore unseen caves--pouring deep, dark, thunderous water into the creek. Oh, and the lightning. There was that too. Fun? Probably not, but it was undeniably exciting.

It also infuriated his wife. She wasn't crazy about his various adventures to begin with, but that eleven hour trip...that had been her proverbial "last straw". *You'll have to choose, she'd said. Spend that time with us, or leave. You can't be a part time husband, and you'd be even less good as a dead one.* All of which was at least true, of course.

He knew he'd never been anyone's idea of an ideal mate, and had in fact many times questioned his decision to enter into the marriage. *Till death do us part*, he often mull'd. A shrewish wife, a son who seemed to have no respect for him...this was what he came home to every night from a job he detested but tolerated because of his complete lack of a marketable skill set. If only there were a call for hikers. His kind of job. But even the Forest Service wasn't hiring, and the travel involved would no doubt doom that prospect anyway. Amy loved where they lived--and why shouldn't she, she'd lived there all her life--and Peter adored his grandparents, who lived just down the road. *Probably cares more for them than he does me*, Harden thought sadly.

Still, there were the forests and the hills and the spectacular rocky gorges. They'd always called to him. Even when he was deeply involved in caving, that singular sport that required such a specialized calling, he'd always enjoyed the walks to the caves more than he did the act of entering the caves themselves. More, cavers never go underground alone, or at least those who want to come out alive don't. Hiking though...while it wasn't advisable to go alone, it was certainly done, and frequently. Not without incident; one particularly memorable event had led to his being escorted from Collins Gulf in the South Cumberland well after dark when an ill-planned trip saw his overly optimistic plans for an early exit from this most spectacular place go terribly awry. The rangers found him still plodding, still two and a half miles from the trailhead, and half that distance was over a treacherous boulder field. Sure, he'd come back and redone that trail successfully, but the memory of having to be...well, rescued...that still stung.

But now, with all the major trips in the South Cumberland region complete, the Big South Fork reserve mostly covered, as much worthwhile trail in his own home long since traveled, and no desire to mingle with the crowds at the Smokies, Drew Harden was left with a momentous decision: head west to the many and varied areas still uncluttered with humans, an action that would surely lead to a messy divorce, or look closer to home for parts unknown, perhaps with wonders yet unseen. Not surprisingly, he opted for the latter.

So, Mansfield. Mansfield, whose surrounding terrain looked wholly uninteresting. Little elevation change on the area roads, a couple of possible--possible--waterfalls and hidden coves...it all looked like it had very little potential as a hiking destination. More, he wasn't keen on bushwhacking, and there was a decided lack of even Jeep trails on his maps. Still, whatever he did find, it would be his own. There would be no one else around to disturb him, to interrupt the solitude he so desired.

The Mansfield General Store was a typical wood frame building with whitewashed walls and a rusted tin roof. A couple of benches sat out front

beneath a wide, shady awning, and as he shut off the car and walked toward the door he noticed the benches were covered with carved graffiti that probably dated back to when the store was originally built. Posters advertising various events--a revival, an appearance at the Grundy County Fairgrounds by a locally well known country singer, and one announcing "rasslin" at the VFW in McMinnville. Of the three, he'd have probably chosen the wrestling.

He walked into the store and stepped back fifty years in time. It was that kind of place. Worn wood floors, shelves and shelves of varied items behind the long counter, a "make it yourself" deli with lunchmeats, bread, and condiments, even an old fashioned soda fountain along with the expected aisles well stocked with just about anyone would need and a lot they probably wouldn't. You could buy overalls, coveralls, and the rugged canvas coats of which Drew was so fond. You could choose from a pretty fair selection of shoes and boots. There was even a couple of shelves of rental DVDs and VHS tapes.

He looked at the soda fountain and was wondering if it worked when the woman behind the counter confirmed it for him. "It's been in here since the place was built, and yes sir, we keep it running. There's plenty of call for it. Can I get you something?"

"Would a root beer float be too simple?"

She grinned, the pleasant smile of someone who probably never called anyone 'stranger' for very long. She was fortyish and weathered, but attractive and well-rounded. She wore faded Wranglers and a Kasey Kahne t-shirt "Not at all. How about a nice fried bologna sandwich to go with it?"

He hadn't had lunch yet, and the idea of a bologna and cheese sandwich like his mom used to fix was definitely appealing. "With a slice of tomato under melted cheese?" he asked hopefully.

"Done. Be a minute. Check out the rest of the place while you're waiting. Lots of interesting things, especially in the back room." She motioned over toward an antechamber, leading past a rack of mugs imprinted, "Mansfield General Store, Conveniently Located in the Middle of Nowhere." Chuckling, he decided he'd have to get one on the way out as he walked through an aisle of canned goods to the back room.

She hadn't been exaggerating. There were many items of unusual interest. It appeared to be a miniature flea market; each item was tagged with a price, and the name of the person to whom it belonged. The prize of the lot was a 1960's era pinball machine he would have adored, but alas, Drew had no way to get it home, and besides, Amy would never go for it. Never mind the expense: *It's just going to end up another of the 'little projects' you start and never finish. Not in my house.*

Her house. Yes, it was. She never let him forget that it was her house, in her name. He'd moved in when they married. That he was allowed a space for his computer workstation in the loft never ceased to amaze him.

Back to the treasure room: books lined the walls. There looked like at least two complete sets of Hardy Boys books, at ten cents a book, a dozen for a dollar. He'd have gotten them for Petey, but Petey didn't read. Oh, he know *how* well enough, but he had no desire to do so. The television in his room pretty much ensured that. Drew had argued against it, one of the few times he'd ever gotten into a serious fight with Amy, but she'd always ended it with, *You're not here all day, Drew. You don't have to deal with him underfoot for ten hours. The TV at least keeps him occupied while he's doing his homework.*

Drew had argued that was why Petey's homework was so bad lately, and besides, he had a stereo, a couple of dozen CDs, a computer, and loads of toys, not to mention the shelves and shelves of books that went unread, worlds undiscovered. But no matter. There the TV was, and there it would stay.

There wasn't much he could see that would catch Petey's interest. Old toys, dolls, that sort of thing, most of it in good shape and some of it with which he might play, but it was used. If it wasn't new, Petey wasn't interested. Amy, though...

There was a glass display case of old jewelry, among which was a beautiful brooch, a print of a beautiful woman done on stone of some sort. The setting was either gold or a darned good imitation. It looked quite old but it was difficult to tell through the glass, which while clean was warped with time. *Maybe Amy'd like that*, he thought. Maybe it would ease the tension he'd undoubtedly feel the moment he walked through the door this evening. Thus, when the woman at the counter came in and informed him that his lunch was ready, he asked her about it.

"Oh, but that's a nice one," the woman cooed. "It's been here a while." She pulled the brooch from inside the case and looked at the tag. "Oh, It's MizGae's," she said with a surprisingly soft voice. "You know, I haven't picked this thing up in years. There's quite a story behind it."

"What does it cost?"

She grinned at him. "The story or the brooch?"

He returned the smile. "I reckon I'd take both."

"Well, the brooch is fifty dollars. I'll throw the story in for free."

It was a bit more than he intended to spend, but what the heck. One extra night at a campground instead of a motel room sometime in the future.

She led him out to where his float and sandwich sat on a porcelain plate resting on gingham covered table. "Chips and a pickle come with it," she said

as she poured herself a cup of coffee. "Go on, try it," she said, pointing to the sandwich.

It certainly didn't look like his mother's bologna sandwiches. "This thing is huge," he remarked as he sat down. "How thick do you cut these things anyway?"

"We aim at about a half inch minimum, but it usually ends up bigger. That's local bologna too. And the pickles I can myself."

He tried the pickle first. He was fond of dills, and this was a good one. He nodded appreciatively. "Great stuff," he said. "You're pretty good."

"Thanks." She held her hand across the table. "Livvie Mansfield. My kin were the first to settle around here, and the name just kinda stuck on the town."

He introduced himself. "Drew Harden. Tourist."

"You don't look like a tourist. You look more like you're from around here."

"Wisconsin. But I have spent a lot of time not too far from here. I hike a bit."

"I figured. You look like a South Cumberland man. I suppose you've already been to the Gulfs and out at the Gizz already?" When he nodded, she said, "You won't find many places around Mansfield to do that sort of thing though." She sat back and watched him eat for a moment, then said, "Now, for the story."

Oh yes, the story. He normally preferred a newspaper with his solitary meals, but she was his host, after all. "Yes. Tell me all about it."

She lay the brooch on the table in front of him. "Would you have any idea who that's supposed to be?" she asked, pointing to the picture on the brooch.

The print--a painting, actually--was the likeness of a beautiful woman from the shoulders up, clad in a dark green dress with gold trim. Her hair was red and long, and gold and green leaves wound through it. Her hands were held before her--just so--and on one rested a bird, and the other, a butterfly. The portrait was framed by what looked like some kind of blooming ivy. Looked at strictly from a technical standpoint, it was astonishing work: some of the detailing was so fine as to appear to be done by a single strand brush. Aesthetically, it was breathtaking. Its value? Probably ten times what he was paying. Maybe more.

But who was it? "Well," he said, "If I had to guess, I'd say whoever did this was trying to paint Mother Nature."

"That's right!" she exclaimed. "That's exactly right. In fact, if you pulled the stone out of the setting, that's what they say's painted on the other side. And it is stone too, creekstone. Not sure exactly what kind it is."

He fingered it absently as he chewed his sandwich. "Travertine, I'd guess," he said. "This is a great sandwich, by the way. Delicious."

"Thanks," Livvie said with a smile. "I like the idea of the tomato and melted cheese. Might have to put it on the menu. So what's travertine?"

"Calcium carbonate. Calcite. Generally comes out of caves. Stalactites, stalagmites, that sort of thing." He held it up and looked closely. "Without my reading glasses it's hard to say, but I think I can make out some rings. This might be a section of a stalactite."

"There's caves around, sure enough. Word was that the boy who made this found the piece of rock in a creek and hounded his Daddy till he would cut it for him oval like this. Then he rounded and polished it till he had it how he liked it, and then he did the painting. He started the morning after he was done with the polishing and didn't stop except to eat and sleep--and his folks had to beg him to do that--until it was done. Took him a week, they say. He did it in layers. If you look close enough you can see them."

He would have to take her word for it, but he didn't find it hard to believe. "Did you say that a boy did this?"

She nodded. "His name was Josh Hooper. He was 12, so they say."

"So they say?"

"Well, this was a long time before I was even born. This brooch is at least fifty years old. Story was, Josh disappeared not long after he finished it. He wandered off into the woods and just...disappeared." She held up her hands, then tapped the brooch with a finger. "This was all they ever found of him. It was lying along a deer path a couple of miles west of here."

"How did it end up here?" he asked, taking it from here and running his thumb over the smooth, sealed painting.

"My Papaw bought it," she said, motioning around her. "This is his place. Rupert Mansfield General Store. Conveniently located..."

He grinned. "...in the middle of nowhere. Remind me, before I leave I've got to have one of those mugs. So he bought the brooch?"

"Yes. Well, sort of. It wasn't a brooch then, just a painted rock. Josh's folks were so broken up, they didn't want anything to do with it. But they needed money for a memorial, so Papaw bought it and put it in the setting it's in now. He had it specially made, and truth told, he probably paid more than it was worth for the whole thing, I'm sure. And when he sold it, he sold it for a lot less than it was worth. But the circumstances were kinda unusual. See, the fella buying it was buying it for his girlfriend, and she looked...well, she looked like that." She gestured toward the brooch.

"You're kidding."

"Nope. Miz Gae. Frieda Gae Owen, that's her name. Lives just down the road. Looked just like the woman in the painting. Not just a fair likeness, an

exact likeness. Papaw swears on it. So much so that when he first met her he about keeled over from the shock, so he says."

"Looks like she was a really pretty lady," he observed.

"Oh, yes. And as sweet as the day is long as long. Just don't cross her. But her husband--he was the one who gave her this--oh, he did. Cross her, I mean. She came home one night and found him abed with another woman and killed him." She didn't wait for him to ask how. "An iron skillet to the skull. Never knew what hit him, as I've been told. The woman, she let her go. Said she didn't have any quarrel with her."

"Did she get put in jail for it?"

"No. Nobody, the Sheriff included, really cared. As I heard it, Wendell was a bastard and mean to just about everybody. Except Frieda Gae. Some people think he might've been afraid of her." She laughed. "Guess in the end he was right to be. No, they left her alone. She came in here not long after and gave Daddy this brooch to sell for her. Funny, because Wendell left plenty of money behind."

He sipped at his float. "Maybe she just wanted to get rid of it. Memories, you know."

"Maybe," she nodded. "I don't know. Funny how it ended up back here after all that. Anyway, she's still around. She's pretty old now, I reckon in her 80s. She doesn't drive but she gets around okay. Shows up here every so often. She lives just down the road a piece."

"Maybe that's who I should ask for suggestions as to where to hike," he said with wistful smile. "I bet she knows every hill and hollow around."

"You wouldn't be wrong, I'm sure. I'm just not sure she'll have much to suggest."

He nodded. "I don't exactly know how I ended up here. The maps don't look real promising so far as surface features are concerned."

"Maybe. But there's always a mess of wildflowers out in the forest to the northwest." She smiled ironically as she pushed herself away from the table and stood, spying customers at the counter. "That's Frieda Gae's land, I believe. If you're lucky, she'll let you tramp around up there. Better take some tick spray though. We have some if you need any."

"I never leave home without it." He ate the rest of his lunch in silence, paid the tab--she did remind him about the mug--and headed out the door.

There was someone sitting on the bench now, petting a goat. She was old, very old, but there was a brightness to her eyes that spoke volumes. No Alzheimer's ridden geriatric, this. A woman of the hills. Was the goat a pet? Was it tame?

It was, at least to the point of allowing him to pet it. Then it turned from her and nuzzled his hand as if to ask for more.

"He's looking for food," the woman informed him. "He'll be disappointed when he doesn't find any."

He smiled at the goat and rubbed its ears. "Sorry kid. I didn't expect you to be out here waiting for me when I went in the store." He looked to the woman. "Is there anything in particular he'll eat?"

"He likes graham crackers." Then she added shyly, "And I like lemon drops, if you're so inclined."

He nodded. "Well then. We'll just have to see to both then."

He walked back into the store and located the crackers; the candy he had to ask for. Upon hearing the request, Livvie looked pleased. "Well, imagine that. Miz Gae's paid us a visit."

"Frieda Gae? Owen? The woman from your story?"

"The same. Like I told you, she comes down here sometimes. Always finds somebody to get crackers for Polly." She giggled. "Polly wanna cracker, get it? That's why a boy goat has a girl name. Polly's been partial to graham crackers since he was a kid."

"Um hmm." He'd tried to avoid the obvious jest but couldn't help but smile himself.

"Doesn't ask everyone for lemon drops though. She must be partial to you." She grinned as she scooped the candy into a bag. "Be careful. She's liable to have you out there all day listening to her stories."

He shrugged and smiled. "If there's nowhere to hike, I have nothing but time." He paid for the crackers and candy and stepped back outside.

The goat was at his side in an instant, snuffling at the box. "Wait a minute, wait a minute, let me open them first." The goat stepped back and snorted impatiently until he got the box open. He lay a cracker at the goat's feet. Looking offended, Polly pawed at it, but made no effort to pick it up.

Frieda Gae Owen laughed. "You don't expect a goat like Polly to eat off the ground, do you? He likes to be hand fed. Mind that first cracker though. He's liable to be upset and nip at you."

But Polly was nothing if not civil, even polite. He waited for Drew to hand him a cracker, then gently took it from his hand before turning away so he couldn't see the mess he was making. Meanwhile, Frieda rubbed the goat's ears fondly. "He's good company, Polly. He understands what I'm thinking, you know."

"Some animals are like that, I understand." He held out his hand. "I'm Drew. Drew Harden."

"Frieda Gae Owen," she said, shaking his hand delicately, "but then I expect you already knew that. Olivia's never been shy about sharing my story, especially when she gets a man around the store. She give you the eye?"

He blushed. "Not that I noticed."



"Then you weren't watching." She sighed and smiled. "Good girl though, that Olivia. Still young enough and pretty enough to get herself a man. If she wants one, that is. Myself, I never had much use for 'em after the first one."

He fed Polly another cracker. "I guess I can understand that."

"Maybe." She nodded. "Or maybe not. You don't know the whole story. Just what Olivia told you." She patted the bench beside her. "Sit, Drew. Lots to talk about, you and I. And if I heard you right, you've got nothing but time. Right?"

He nodded and smiled. "And lemon drops to share." He opened the package and set it between them.

She clapped her hands. "Oh, but I do love lemon drops!" she exclaimed gleefully. "I have since I was a little girl. I never cared much for anything other candy and I still don't." She picked up a piece of the sugar coated sour candy, put it in her mouth and sighed contentedly. "Polly and lemon drops...that's enough for a body to live for, hmmm?"

*A simple philosophy*, he mused with no small amount of bitterness. A simple philosophy and an attractive one at that. Back home it was...stuff. More stuff, more places to put it. Already they'd built an addition and Amy was talking about another. Or better still, buying a larger house. He'd suggested a yard sale, which got a response that was positively chilly. Amy liked her things, and Petey didn't have a single toy he felt he could part with. And aside from his books and computers and hiking gear, what did Drew have to get rid of?

"Life's not so simple in the city," Frieda noted.

"Well, I wouldn't know," he replied. "I don't exactly live in the city. I'm out in the country about thirty miles southwest of Nashville."

"The city," she insisted. "Doesn't matter how far you are from it, Drew. If you work there, you live there. Tell me I'm wrong."

She wasn't, and truth told, he felt trapped there. Even living an hour away he could feel its tug, like gravity, like a tide, relentlessly drawing him in. Worse, suburbia was creeping their way. He figured another ten years and their town would be annexed by Williamson County, one of the fastest growing areas in the country. Already her parents had been made a couple of lucrative offers on their ten acres of land by folks speculating that the value would soon be going up...which, inevitably, it would. But they were resistant; this was their home and they would never be convinced to leave. Amy, on the other hand...

"You're right," he admitted, breaking that wholly unpleasant train of thought. "I work there, and a lot of times I just feel like I'm totally smothered by the place." He sighed. "But I just don't have a lot of choice. Even where I live there's not a lot of call for people like me, and here..." He waved his hands and shrugged. "I couldn't support my family here anyway."

"Yourself, a wife, and a child? Surely, Drew. There are ways."

A sad look worked its way across his homely features. "Maybe. Maybe there is. But even so, we'd never come here. Amy would never want to. This isn't her kind of country, and besides, there's the matter of her folks. That I can understand. She wants to be close to them. They're getting up there in age, and she wants to be able to help them when the time comes."

"She loves them," the woman says. "And you do too, don't you?"

He didn't hesitate. Nor did Polly, as he fed the eager goat another couple of crackers. "I do. They're great people. And of course Petey's over the moon about them, especially his Papaw." Another sigh. "More than me, I'd reckon." He paused for a moment, contemplating. "I know it sounds horrible--it does, even to me--but it seems this is all a trap. Everyone has one. Life puts them there. You're lured in by something, a bait of sorts, and once you're snared, you can never escape it."

"But can't you? You're here, aren't you? To hike, I presume?"

The Tennessee Trails shirt was a dead giveaway, not to mention the boots. "A temporary retreat. And I love the South Cumberland."

She nodded. "Well, what's not to love?" Then she waved her hands around. "But what brought you to Mansfield? There's nothing here like what you'd find at Fiery Gizzard or Savage Gulf around here...so far as anybody knows."

*So far as anyone knows.* He didn't miss the enigmatic phrase. "You know," he said, "I wondered that myself when I pulled in here. I know I can go out west; there's plenty of room to roam out there. The Guads...the Rockies...but I know that'd pretty much end my marriage. Besides, I do like Tennessee. It's just that I feel like I've seen everything there is to see."

She held up two fingers. "Firstly," she said, "you most certainly have not seen everything there is to see in Tennessee, that I can promise. No need to go anywhere west. It's all here."

"You sound like a tourism commercial."

"I could be, I reckon. Second, what's wrong with ending the marriage? If you can't do what makes you happy, what's the point?"

"Well, there's the 'til death do you part' thing. That kinda gets in the way."

"Why should it? And you know I do have some experience there."

He looked at her with wide eyes, shocked.

She smiled gently, took his hands and patted them. "Don't be silly, Drew. I'm suggesting nothing of the sort. It's just that we make promises sometimes it's just not possible to keep. Marriage is no different...sometimes."

"Sometimes."

She nodded. "Like Wendell and me. Lazy bastard. I should've divorced him a long time before I clonked him." The phrase was uttered with such vehemence that Drew couldn't help but flinch. She saw it and added, "Believe me, sweetie, if you were in my shoes you'd have done the same exact thing. It wasn't so much that he was a shiftless jackass or a womanizer, it was that he was a shiftless jackass *and* a womanizer. Know what I mean?"

Now he had to laugh. "You are priceless," he told her. "I really am glad I met you, Miz Gae."

She smiled at his use of the familiar. "And I you, Drew. Now tell me, would you like to see what wonders our area holds?" Her smile now was positively mysterious.

He cocked his head. "You mean there really is something worth seeing around here?"

"Why, certainly. On my property. Would you like to see it? All it'll cost is a ride to my home...and that bag of lemon drops."

He didn't hesitate before handing her the bag with a smile. "Done. As long as I can have a few along the way."

"Done. Is there room for Polly in your car?"

"If he doesn't mind sharing the back seat with my hiking gear. Some of it smells a bit."

Polly didn't seem to care and climbed right in as he opened the door for the goat, even without the lure of additional crackers. He looked back, as if to say, what are we waiting for?, so Drew and Frieda climbed in and he started the car. "West down this road," Frieda said. "It's just a few miles away." She looked around Speck's interior. "I like your car," she said appreciatively. "Small, but lived in. That makes all the difference."

He nodded and smiled. It *had* been lived in a few times when the cost of a motel room was too dear and the weather too lousy to camp. Polly seemed to agree with the assessment as well; rather than step up to look out the windows he had sprawled out on the seat, his head resting on the trash bag containing Drew's ripe hiking togs. *Well*, he thought with a smile, *they sure can't smell any worse*.

The radio came on as he pulled out onto the road. The song playing was XTC's *Greenman*. Satellite radio, he thought with a satisfied smile. It wasn't much of a car, to be sure--Amy hated it--but it was cheap, it was spectacularly good on gas, and it had a CD player. Then there was XM. Amy had pitched a fit at first but in the end even she had to admit it was a wonderful investment. The stations came in clearly even out where they lived, and they were no less flawless here, so far away from any earthbound transmitter.

*Greenman*. It was an enigmatic tune from an equally eccentric band. Drew knew the song well and liked it, and it was the perfect song for such an excursion. Ironic that it should come on just now though. It was rather loud though. He liked his music loud, but he figured Frieda wouldn't. He pressed the button to moderate it somewhat.

"Oh, don't do that," she said, turning it back up, her finger resting for an extra moment or two on the volume button. "I like the sound of this. Leave it up, I'll hear it better."

"Fair enough."

The melody bounced majestically for a moment before Andy and Colin's voices joined in...then he stared curiously at the radio.

That was odd. The tune, a sort of a medieval dance, was the same. But the words were different. Instead of a paean to a mythical god of the wild, the song seemed to have changed gender, and instead of singing about a *Green Man*, it now referred to a *Green One*, and it was pretty apparent in the wording that this *one* was a woman.

He looked over at Frieda curiously. She was looking out the windshield with a delighted smile on her face.

That's strange, he thought. Did they do a second version of the song? He was a devoted fan of the band and knew most of their work, and he knew it wasn't beyond an unusual pairing like Andy Partridge and Colin Moulding to do multiple versions of the same song. Changing the gender though...it just seemed so...coincidentally odd, that he'd hear it under such circumstances. And yet, so seductive was the thought of a wild, earthy maternal figure that he joined in, changing the gender as appropriate...and, not surprisingly, the way it was being sung over the air...

"That's rather nice, don't you think?" Frieda asked, interrupting his interpretation of the strange lyrical doings of Messrs Moulding and Partridge. "Such a nice tune. And you sing it so well, Drew."

"That's not how it goes though," he murmured. "I've always heard it sung another way. As the *Green Man*."

"Well now, who's to say." She pointed to a neatly trimmed yard in front of a small brown house trimmed with white. "Right there. Park on the driveway. I don't have much use for it since they took my license away." She snorted. "Bit of nonsense, that. Kids around here drive crazier than I ever did." She winked at him. "Not much, but enough."

They climbed from the car and she held the door for Polly, who casually stepped out over the front seat. "Now that deserves another cracker," Drew observed, offering him one. Polly nuzzled him first, then politely took it from him.

"I do believe he's taken a shine to you," Frieda laughed. "He's not like that with most folks." She motioned toward the porch. "Come, let's set a bit. Plenty of time for you to see what's out back."

He checked his watch furtively. It was early enough yet, perhaps another six hours or so of daylight remained. Still, she was right, he'd have enough time to wander, and besides, he fully expected a dressing down when he got home anyway. There might as well be a good reason for it.

He gestured for her to sit. "A gentleman," she said approvingly. "I do so appreciate a gentleman. Not so many of you left, Drew. But please, do sit down. You are my guest."

He was always concerned about sitting on porch swings; he wasn't exactly the lightest person on earth, and the swing, from a distance, didn't look all that solid. Up close though it revealed its stoutness, which more than supported his own stoutness as he sat. Nice, he thought. Old but well maintained. It looked like it could use a coat of paint, but that was okay.

"Spring," she said, sitting beside him.

"Spring," he echoed, almost sighing. "Awesome."

"It is, isn't it? So much happening, so much growth. It really is the best time of the year, I think. Some people are partial to the Fall, but it's Spring for me."

"I miss Winter," he mourned. "It does get cold down here, but I miss the snow. I was raised up north. Wisconsin. Lots of snow."

"Well, you live in the wrong part of Tennessee, Drew. We have plenty of snow here." She smiled ruefully. "Getting to and from the store is often an ordeal in the Winter."

"I imagine. I've heard of times that the Interstate up and down from Monteagle is shut down because of ice."

She nodded. "It can get quite bad here. But you're right, it is a wonderful time. The snow and ice covering the trees is so beautiful. It's worth the inconvenience, I think." She smiled. "Yes, I understand. I do love the snow here. It's not at all like that where you live, is it Drew?"

"Don't remind me."

They were silent for a while, then she murmured, "But do you live, Drew?"

The query surprised him, but he didn't bother looking at her. He knew she was scrutinizing him, and he knew exactly what she'd meant. *Sees right through me*, he thought. Well, the truth then. "Not as much as I ought to," he admitted. "But I have responsibilities."

"Which you must tend to," she agreed. "But there are times."

Again, the silence, and the open sentence. "Yeah. There are."

"Like now."

He nodded.

"And you do love them, don't you? Your family? You'd never desert them?"

He shook his head. "No. But..."

"But?" she persisted.

"Well...it's not like I haven't considered...alternatives."

"You don't mean killing yourself, do you?" She sounded shocked. Maybe even dismayed.

Another revealing silence from him. "But I couldn't. For the same reasons."

Did she sigh? He wasn't certain.

She put her hand on his. It didn't feel at all uncomfortable. The feel of her skin was like velvet, and it was warm. "No, you couldn't. You couldn't. You love them too much. In spite of everything you might feel, you do love them. And you know what it would do to them."

Now he sighed. "You know, Miz Gae, I wish you lived closer to me."

"Why's that, sweetie?" She looked at him curiously.

"So I could talk to you everyday."

She laughed. "Be careful what you wish for."

"No need. You'd never want to live where I do." He looked absently across her lawn. An azalea bush was in full bloom and the maple tree was littering the grass with its helicopter seeds, which make fine whistles too. Daffodils grew up each side of the walk. "I'd never want to leave a place like this. Every time I come here it gets tougher to leave. But I can never convince Amy and Petey to even come here just to see the area, let alone live here." He held up his hands, frustrated. "The things you can see just with a short walk, for heavens' sake. Foster Falls. Stone Door. Green's View. I could go on, but you already know, and they never will. It just makes me sick to think of it."

"There are times," she said slowly, softly, "that circumstance intervenes."

"So I hear," he said ruefully. "Well, I hope it does, and soon. I feel time is running out for me."

"You know," she said, "I often felt that way." And she led the conversation off on a whole different tangent. Before long his depressive bent had disappeared, and he was chatting happily, losing all track of time in conversing with such a delightful woman. So much so that the thought of hiking was lost completely till she paused in what seemed to be the middle of an unrelated sentence and said, "Do you know, I don't think you need have any worry about the future, Drew. I have a feeling things are going to come right for you, and just when you're most certain they won't. It may not be what

you expect, and it may be painful--change almost always is--but the pain is never more than you can endure, and the results..." She smiled at him. "Just trust me, Drew. You'll see." Then she stood, offered him her hand, and said, "Now then. Let me see you to my path."

"Is it long? Will I need water or anything?"

"Oh, it goes a long way, but I don't think you'll have the chance to see much today. Besides, my water is sweet and pure. You can drink it without fear. I have for years."

He wasn't sure about the water, but he did want his staff, so he went to his car and retrieved it. "My, that's quite the walking stick," she said appreciatively. "Did you make that yourself?"

He shook his head wryly. "No, I'm not that talented. Bought it in a store up in Cave City, Kentucky about ten years ago. I chose it out of dozens. I didn't like the others. This one just kind of leapt out at me and said, *take me, take me*. Like it was promising me it would lead me to wondrous places and keep me safe along the way." He smiled and held it out to her. "I know, that sounds strange."

"Not at all," she said, taking it from him and admiring it. "It *has* kept you safe, hasn't it?"

He nodded. "It has at that. I can think of more than a few times it's saved my skin. And do you know, if it fell off a cliff, I'd probably try to find a way to climb down and get it back. I'm not so sure I'd do the same with my wallet." He looked at Frieda as she handed his staff back to him. "Will I need tick spray? This is the time of year. They were pretty bad out on the South Rim."

"Of Savage Gulf? That's pretty this time of year. I've been there, a long time ago. No, you'll be just fine. I expect the ticks will leave you alone well enough." She crooked her finger. "This way."

She led him behind the house. Laundry was hanging from a line strung from the porch to the garage. Carpenter bees hummed about busily. "There," she said, pointing to a faint trail leading off into the woods. "Not much of a path, I know, but it'll get you there and back."

"Which is to...where?"

"And spoil the surprise? Never!" She laughed. "Just trust me, it's worth the walk. And you'll be back in a few hours. Just mind that you have a camera with you."

He patted a pouch on his belt. "Got one. Well, I sure do appreciate the opportunity, Miz Gae. Not just for the hike, but for the company." He reached into his pocket. "Listen, I've got something I'd like to give you. Just by way of appreciation."

He handed her the bag containing the brooch. He'd thought about it on the way to her house, and had decided while talking to her on the porch swing. She needed this much more than Amy did. Sure, Amy would like it well enough, but she would always see it for what it was: a peace offering. Nothing more. Frieda Gae, on the other hand...

"Oh my," she gasped as she pulled it from the bag. "My brooch!" She looked up at him. "Do you know the story behind this?"

Yes. Olivia at the store told me." He looked anxious for a moment. "I hope I'm not doing wrong by giving it to you."

"No...no, not at all." She looked at it, tears in her eyes. "It's just that it seems like every time it gets away from me, it ends up back with me again." She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you so much, Drew. This means more to me than I can say."

She was crying.

"Here now," he said, handing her his bandana. "Nothing to cry about. I just wanted you to know how much I appreciated you listening to me."

"And you listened to me. Drew, really. I know how much this must've cost you, and I know that you don't..."

"I don't take back gifts." He closed her hands around it. "It's yours, Miz Gae. I want you to have it. A token, if you will." He bowed to her, like a knight to a queen. "And every time you see it, remember me and wish me safe passage, wherever it is I may go."

She stood in wide-eyed silence for just a moment before whispering, "Oh, I will do that." The tears still shone in her eyes. "I most certainly will." A pause, then, "Enjoy yourself, Drew. It's a rare treat you're about to receive."

"I've already had that," he said, turning back to her with a smile. "Meeting you. I'll come up and check out with you when I'm finished. See you later."

She nodded, but under her breath, she murmured, "Oh, you will. You certainly will."

But he didn't hear. As she'd intended.

The path wasn't very well defined. It was a concern and a delight simultaneously; Drew would have to turn around before it got too dark lest he lose his way, but at the same time it was nice to know that he was surely one of the few who had ever trod this path, and that he was absolutely alone.

Looking at his compass he could tell he was trending east, toward the plateau, but that was a long way off. No rock faces to enjoy out here, surely, no waterfalls. But Frieda Gae had mentioned something about water, so there had to be a stream somewhere. He made that his goal, to see the stream. There was certainly no lack of wildflowers: trilliums, mayapple, toadshade,



and honeysuckle that he knew of, and dozens of others he couldn't identify. The smell was heady and delightful.

How far had he gone? It seemed like he'd lost track of time. His watch read 3:15; hadn't he parted with Frieda Gae at about five minutes before three? *Huh*, he thought. *Doesn't seem like it could've been twenty minutes.* But the going had been remarkably easy and more than distracting. He figured he'd come about three quarters of a mile at such a relaxed pace.

Ah, there was the stream, just as she'd promised, and yes, it did look clear. Periwinkles clung to the rocks, a sign of water that was at least free from pollutants. Bacteria? Maybe not. But he'd risk the screamers for a drink of that water.

She hadn't been exaggerating. It was sweet. He drank lustily till he was sated, then rose to walk along the bank downstream. If there were to be anything interesting to see here, it would have to be somewhere along this stream. How he knew this, he had no idea; it was more of an instinct than a certainty. Still, it was correct.

A few hundred yards away from where he'd turned off the path he began to hear a distinct rumble. Train? he wondered. Waterfall?

Right the second time. Another hundred yards and he was standing on the brink of an impressive void that should not have been there, the water spilling over the edge and into some wide natural amphitheater below.

*Well*, he thought with a grin. *This is more like it!* He took a picture of the waterfall as it passed over the brink, then lay in the water, used his staff as a support, and held his camera out over the edge and clicked off another picture, hoping for the best. He'd had good results with this sort of thing in the past; he'd also come close to slipping off and ending his life. Of course then he hadn't really cared, but now...

He rolled out of the water, soaking wet and completely unconcerned. What was it she'd said to him that had him so convinced now that life was to be cherished, not ended abruptly? What had she touched in him that made him believe, something that counselors and psychiatrists had failed to do?

He looked up at the sun, warm and comforting. Strange. He'd never had laid on the ground before during Spring for fear of becoming lousy with ticks. *But up on the porch she said I didn't need to worry about them*, he thought. And that was enough, no? Roll in the grass, get stains all over his clothes, Amy would scream, but that was okay too, they'd wash out, or he'd get more. They'd come from the Goodwill anyway.

Abruptly he stopped. He'd almost rolled over onto a fawn. A fawn, for heaven's sake, lying out here in broad daylight, and which had somehow silently stole to his side to lay next to him.

Uncanny? At least.

He reached out to the young deer. It didn't move.

"Aren't you beautiful," he sighed. "Aren't you beautiful." It was so wonderfully true he couldn't help but say it twice. Then he just sat stroking it, feeling the soft, downy fur, looking into the animal's trusting brown eyes, almost deferential, lowering its muzzle to his hand, rubbing its chin on his hand, almost smiling in contentment.

"I'd like to go down and see the bottom of the waterfall," he said regretfully. "I hope you're here when I get back."

It didn't seem odd at all, talking to a deer. Completely natural.

He stood, walked to the east till he found what looked like a fairly easy way down, and leaning on his staff he worked his way down till he stood at the bottom of an enormous rockshelter that had to be at least seventy feet deep and twice that broad. The waterfall spilled over the top just slightly offset to the right, its water collecting in a small pool before cascading into the shelter. In, not out. *No wonder it's never been seen from the air*, he thought. *The stream probably comes out of a spring, and it flows into a swallet somewhere in here. Amazing.*

And inviting. The pool was an almost perfect circle and seemed to beg for him to dip his feet. If it was only warm, he thought. But...his feet were a bit sore from all the hiking out at the South Rim, what the heck. He took off his boots, peeled off his socks, grimacing at the pain from the inevitable blisters, and lowered them into the pool.

It was warm.

He looked up. Yep, it was the same chilly stream he'd just rolled in. Only...between up there and down here, the water somehow heated itself to a comfortable temperature, perfect for a soaking.

He was about to wonder how, then an odd thought struck him.

This was Frieda Gae's property.

Anything could happen here, right?

*Yeah surrre. And when I pull my feet out of the water, my blisters will all be gone.*

Just curious enough, he pulled his feet from the water, and yes, the blisters were gone from his feet. Even the blackened toes had healed.

He put his hand over his mouth in shock. And delight, actually; the black toes had been troubling him for years. But how?

Thoughts of the healing waters of Lourdes passed through his mind. Had he found something similar? Was it a fountain of youth? If he drank it, would he get younger?

But even if it was, he didn't drink it. Clearly Frieda Gae hadn't. Or if she had, it hadn't made a difference, at least age-wise. Maybe it just possessed healing properties. So could it cure emotional illness? He wasn't so sure he

wanted to find out. So far just about everything he'd wished for had been granted, and he wasn't keen on having what was undeniably an integral part of his personality just wiped completely away. Amy would think him mad, at least.

But what if he were to, say...

*I can walk into this shelter, he thought, and there I'll find a cave, a big cave, maybe the biggest and deepest in the state, a cave where I could just explore forever...*

...and never go home.

Amy. Petey.

Responsibility.

He sighed. Frieda Gae was right, after all. He did love them, despite everything. And no matter how tempting this all was--and make no mistake, it was--he could never leave them behind.

Well then.

He checked his watch. He was not surprised to see it reading 5:45. In about an hour the sun would be going down, then Amy would be calling his cell wondering where the hell he was. God knows he'd disappeared often enough that it didn't surprise her, it just pissed her off. *But maybe that's just her way of showing concern, he mused. Maybe I've been missing that all along.* And Petey's distance and apparent disrespect? Just adolescence. It was a phase, one he'd pass. One Drew himself had gone through, and his own father had probably been just as befuddled and doubtfully as he was now.

He picked up his staff, gave the enormous rockshelter one last look. *I wonder if I'll ever get back here, he thought regretfully.*

Carefully he picked his way back up the side of the shelter, the staff as always keeping him secure, and, yes, safe. At the top, he was surprised to find the fawn waiting, almost expectantly, eager. It came to him nuzzling his hand. Like Polly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I gave all my crackers to Miz Gae's goat. I don't anything to offer you."

Except attention. He kneeled next to the deer, petted it, hugged it, figuring he might not ever get such a chance again.

The fawn responded. Not like an animal, but more like a human, rubbing its head on his neck and shoulders caressingly. It didn't occur to him just how amazing that was. It did occur to him that no one would ever believe this had happened to him and that he should be taking some pictures, but the moment...the moment...that was something else Frieda Gae had said: *Take the moment when it comes to you and give it your full attention. You won't*

*ever get it back.* He wasn't sure what she'd meant when she'd said it, but now he knew.

He stood and looked at his watch. Six straight up. Well, perhaps another 45 minutes...*if there's a spring upstream from here,* he thought, *it'd probably be a cool thing to see.* He walked along the edge of the creek, following it upstream and into the woods. Amazingly, or perhaps not so, considering all that had transpired thus, the deer followed, walking at his side, nudging him till he put his hand on its head.

They walked almost a quarter mile like that, then the fawn abruptly darted out in front of him, her head facing the direction they'd been heading, her nose in the air, sniffing.

"What's up, kid?" he asked, as if the animal would understand him.

Perhaps it did. It leaned against him, hard. Pushing him.

Pushing him back the way they'd come.

"Here now," he said. "I want to go that way."

Still the deer resisted him.

"All right then." He walked around her...then he froze.

At her feet, on the opposite side of where he'd been standing, low on the ground but visible, was a strand of monofilament. A tripwire?

*Well, it could be one of two things,* he thought. *A still, or a patch of weed.* Either way it wasn't a big deal. He knew 'shine dealers back home, and he'd been known to take a toke on occasion. He stepped over the wire and continued walking upstream.

The deer didn't follow. It stared at him, looking agitated.

"It's just a shiner," he said. "Or a pot farm. Nothing to fear. Let's just take a peak. Maybe we can do some business."

"Not likely," a voice said from behind him. "Turn around, really slow, hands up."

*Shit,* he thought, raising his hands and turning to face a tall, slender woman who was probably in her early to middle thirties but who looked much older. Her look was calm, which was fortunate, as she held a .45 pointed at Drew's chest.

"Hey," Drew said, "it's cool. I didn't see anything, I don't want to see anything, and I don't want to know what you're doing."

"So why are you on the other side of the wire?" asked the woman with the gun. "Better question, how did you see it?" She seemed to think a moment, then added, "Even better, how did you lead the deer all the way out here?"

Drew shrugged. "I didn't lead it. It followed me. Don't hurt it." He looked at the deer and said, "Shoo. Off with you, before you turn into this lady's

dinner." The deer must've understood him, for it darted into the woods with just one final look that seemed to contain sadness.

.45 smiled reluctantly. "I wouldn't have hurt it. This ain't exactly the time to be too much noise, know what I mean? Besides, that just looked so cool, yaknow? It following you here? Like it was a pet or something. Not exactly what I expect to see when I come out here to cop a squat." She stepped forward and softly kicked the tripwire with the toe of her boot. Grinning, she said, "Let's just see how alert my partners are."

*Pretty alert*, Drew thought, *but not very cautious*, as he heard the sound of approaching footsteps and crunching brush. Then, from between a pair of hickory trees two men appeared, dressed almost alike in stained blue coveralls. At a quick glance they looked a lot alike too, the only difference being that one had a beard and the other didn't. And from the looks of the latter's cratered mug, the bearded one had the right idea.

"Got us a visitor?" Beardman asked .45.

"Yep. You know, you two are about as inconspicuous as a friggin steamroller."

"We were in a hurry," Craterface said.

"Uh huh." .45 turned to Drew. "So, state your business, my man."

"Like it makes any difference," Craterface laughed. "Just shoot his ass and get it over with so we can get back to work."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Drew protested, his blood chilling. "Look here, if you're cooking shine, no big deal. I'm from Hickman County and we've got lots of that still going on out there." He smiled, despite his growing fear. "Fact is, my father in law and I built a still once and tried it ourselves."

.45 laughed. "Did it work?"

"Must've cooked it too long. Talk about your sour mash."

"Goddam it, shoot him already," Beardman said in a bored voice.

"We've got a delivery to make in three hours and it just now finished cookin."

*Cooking*, Drew thought. It wouldn't be pot then. And if it wasn't pot, and it wasn't shine, then...

He looked .45 in the eye. "I wondered what it was I was smelling."

.45 looked back at him and nodded. "It does have a distinctive funk about it, doesn't it?" She lowered her weapon. "So, like I was saying, what brings you out here? You're not a Fed; you wouldn't have let yourself get caught this easy. And then there's the deer. Weird stuff."

"Deer?" Craterface asked.

"Followed him out here. Walked right alongside him." She looked at Drew oddly. "That's it," she said softly. "It stepped right in front if you just as you were fixin to hit the wire. Like it knew it was there and it was trying to stop you."

"I think it smelled it too," Drew said. "Before me."

"They do have a keen sense," .45 agreed. "So?"

"I was out hiking. I went out and saw the waterfall, and I wondered where the water came from, so I followed it upstream." He shrugged. "And here I am."

"What waterfall?" Craterface inquired.

"The one about a half mile downstream."

"Ain't no waterfalls around here," Beardman scoffed.

"I oughta know, I've been all over these woods."

"I haven't seen one either," .45 agreed. "Why don't you take us and show it to us?"

"I have a choice?"

.45 grinned. "Not exactly." She motioned with his gun. "Lead on."

Drew did, and after ten minutes of silent walking the four of them emerged in the clearing at the head of the falls. "Well, I'll be dipped in shit," Craterface remarked.

"Maybe someday," .45 said to him. "Guess there's parts of these woods we haven't been around." She peered over the edge. "Pretty cool. So who told you about this?"

"Miz Gae."

"Miz Gae?" Beardman asked. "Who's she?"

"Some crazy old coot," Craterface remarked. "I heard folks talkin bout her at that store in town. There's some folk think she's a witch of some kind."

Drew couldn't resist the snicker that managed to get past his clenched teeth.

Craterface walked up to him, gun drawn. "Think that's funny, do ya?"

"Oh, not at all," Drew chuckled. "Better mind that witch. She's liable to put a hex..."

Stars exploded in Drew's vision as Craterface struck him across the face with his gun, thoroughly blacking his eye. "You want to mind what you're sayin," he warned. "The next word outta your mouth might be the last."

"Oh, shut up," .45 sighed. "You aren't gonna do anything I don't tell you to do." She walked over to stand close to Drew. "Now listen, my friend. You may have some idea what's going on here, but you don't know for sure. Right?"

"Oh, I think I do," Drew said softly, nursing the left side of his face where he'd been struck. "If it's not pot, and it's not shine, what else could it be you'd be guarding so close? Bet if I'd walked just a little farther I'd find a building-- maybe a trailer--with a meth lab inside."

"All right now," .45 said. "Let's say you're right. We already know you're a broad-minded kinda guy. Pot and shine you got no problem with."

Drew nodded. "That would be correct."

"But I guess crystal don't fall in the same category with you."

"That would also be correct." He scratched his head absently. "Weed and shine...so far as I'm concerned, they're things I would have no problem seeing legalized. Why not? I've used them both." He smiled painfully. "Pretty frequently at that. But meth...it might as well be crack, it's so addictive. And it can kill on the first dose depending on the person."

.45 took in a deep breath. "Pretty strong conviction for a fella facing three guns."

Drew shrugged. "You asked."

"So," .45 said to no one in particular, "what do we do?"

"What the hell do you think we do?" Beardman exclaimed. "We plug his ass, that's what we do."

"Here," Craterface offered, leveling what looked to be a .357 at Drew's head. "Let me."

For an instant, Drew thought, this is it.

But it wasn't. "Put that thing down, you idiot," .45 barked. "There's houses within a few miles of here, and sound travels fast over flat ground. You pop that cannon and everybody within a mile is gonna be on the phone to the Sheriff, and that'd be it." He gestured at Beardman. "Same goes for you and me."

"I could run back to the trailer and get the .22," Craterface offered.

.45 nodded. "So we shoot him. Then what? Dig a hole and bury him? Unless you dig it deep, the local wildlife will have him dug up in a few days, then they'll be scattering bones everywhere. Besides, he said Frieda Gae told him about this place. So she knows where he's at and I'd bet she'll send for help if he's late." She looked over the hill toward the setting sun. "Which I'm guessing is very soon."

"We can kill her too if we need to," Craterface muttered.

Drew had a curse on his split lips, but held it back for fear of another blow.

.45 nodded. "We could. But eventually somebody'd find her. And him. Two murders. Number one, I don't want that kinda shit on my conscience."

*You have one?* Drew thought.

"Number two, we do have a couple of options, one our friend here might go for." She stood close to Drew, and asked him his name. When he replied, .45 said, "Listen, Drew. I know what you're thinking. 'Meth is death' and all that. I know. But lookin at that ring on your hand, I can see you're married, and I'd bet you've got at least one kid at home. So think careful before you decide how to answer my next question."

She leaned up still closer to Drew. "Here's what I'm suggestin we do. You give us, say, an hour's head start. We can be packed up and gone by then. You get to leave, a free man, and an hour from now you can call the Sheriff and tell him anything you want. It won't matter. Even if you give a description; we're not from around here and nobody knows us. We know them, but they don't know us. We can change how we look easy enough, and we blend in real well with the rest of the rednecks, because we are rednecks. Just like you, and your family, I'd guess.

"So, it's up to you, my friend. You cut a deal. You promise us our head start, and we let you go."

"That's bullshit," Beardman raved. "You cut that sumbitch loose and I'll shoot him, and I don't care who hears!"

"And if you do," .45 countered in a dangerously low voice, "I will shoot you just as dead. One shot or two, it won't make a difference once the cover's blown, see?" She turned to Craterface. "That goes double for you. Understand?"

Craterface nodded meekly.

.45 looked back at Beardman. "Rodney's run, that's about done, right."

"Yeah," Beardman grunted angrily. "Just got to finish packing it. So what?"

"Well, this is the perfect time for us to skidaddle then. We make our delivery, and head off for parts unknown. Doesn't make a damn bit of difference where."

"So how do we know he'll go along with this?" Craterface asked, obviously uncertain.

"Because he's gonna tell us the truth." .45 stared directly at Drew. "You've got an honest face, my man. And I will believe you if you tell me you'll give us our head start. You know what's on the line. But I have to hear it from you directly." She stepped back and crossed his arms impassively. "Floor's yours now."

Drew looked over at .45. Cleaned up, the woman might pass for any of his computer geek friends. Craterface and Beardman...pure redneck. But .45 was right; they could easily blend in just about anywhere. And if they could get packed up and out in an hour, why they could set up shop again somewhere else just as quick.

To leave Amy and Petey alone...

Petey.

He'd seen kids not much older than Petey on TV, kids either selling meth or addicted to it. Who was to say that these three wouldn't head to Centerville or Lyles or Coble, pull into some deserted patch of woods--there's plenty of empty, untrodden forest there, he knew--and set up shop?



That would give the phrase "local product", usually reserved for moonshine, a whole new meaning.

To allow something like that so close to his son, his only child...

*Well, he thought, I could just as easily tell them I'll do it, then run back to Frieda Gae's and sound the alarm.*

But he couldn't do that either. First of all, he knew, somehow, .45 would be able to see it in him. Second, and most important, was one of the many things he and Frieda Gae had talked about...

*You come out here a lot, don't you? she'd said. You tell them it's because you love this place and being outside, and I'm sure you do. But the real reason...we both know what it is, don't we?*

He wanted to be alone. As much as he loved his family, he'd always preferred solitude to their company. The peace of sitting out on some great stone promontory overlook a tremendous chasm, letting the sun warm his face while a raven circled overhead, occasionally casting a shadow...

...and too, he was looking for something. One of the better of his counselors had hit on it once: You're escaping reality because you believe in your heart there's something better there. She'd gone on to explain why this wasn't true, but he'd never believed that.

Freida Gae had put it more succinctly: *You're living a lie, Drew. And it has to stop.*

But it was an innocent enough lie...wasn't it?

*A lie is a lie, Drew. You do no one favors, especially yourself. I don't care what the circumstance, I don't care what anybody's ever told you. The truth will seek you out, and when it does, it's always worse than if you'd just come out and said it in the first place. Am I right?*

She was.

God knows he'd told the same to Petey often enough and he'd been lying constantly the whole time. *What a hypocrite I am*, he thought.

"So?" .45 prodded.

Maybe this was his one shot as redemption.

Drew took a deep breath. "I can't help you."

"Kill him and be done with it," Beardman growled. "We got a delivery to make."

.45 stepped close and put her hand on Drew's shoulder. "Listen to me, man. Can't you see this is your life we're talking about here? I'm givin you a chance to walk away from here. I don't think you know what you're saying. Please tell me I'm right. You're a decent enough fella...I really don't want to kill you."

"I can't help you," Drew repeated, pushing .45's hand off his shoulder. "You're peddling death and if I let you go, I'm as much as saying what you do is okay."

.45 looked astonished. "But you're going to die. You do understand that, right?"

"I'm going to die anyway," Drew shrugged. "We all do eventually. And I'd rather die now with my conscience clean than a few years down the road knowing I'd let a bunch of meth rats go when I could've at least tried to stop them. God only knows how many people your shit's going to kill."

"I had just about enough a this shit," Beardman shouted. "Now! We kill him now."

Craterface nodded agreement, looking at .45. "You heard him. And that last load of shit's yet to be packed and we've got to meet Dinkins in a couple of hours."

"Now," Beardman repeated.

"But you can't shoot me," Drew reminded .45.

She looked at Drew and shrugged. "Option three. Long drop behind you."

He knew that all too well. "If you think I'm going over it quietly, you're out of your mind." He wielded his staff like it was a pugil stick and he was back at Parris Island. "Somebody besides me is going to get hurt."

He was right, too. Beardman grunted, picking up one of the fallen pines at the edge of the stone platform like it was a two by four. An instant later he dropped it, roaring in pain.

"What the hell...?" Craterface gaped.

"Friggin red wasp," Beardman muttered, holding his hand. "Don't matter." He walked toward another fallen tree, examined it carefully, then picked it up. "Getcha one," he ordered Craterface.

"Aren't you going to join the fun?" Drew asked .45.

.45 held her hands up. "I got nothing against you, man." She started to step back.

"Good to know," Drew said, lashing out with the staff, the butt end of which connected square with .45's prominent nose with a sickening crunch. "This is all your doing. Best to have you part of the finish, right?"

.45 fell back on her back with a groan, then picked herself up, a hand held to her profusely bleeding nose. Eyes furious, she muttered. "Have it your way," then she gestured to Beardman and Craterface. "Do it. And quick. I'm gonna have to have this seen to before we meet Dink."

Beardman grinned. "Finally."

It didn't last long. Craterface took the first shot at him, but Drew easily deflected the blow with his staff. Beardman's first poke wasn't so easily

missed, hitting Drew in the ribs and knocking him backward, only feet from the edge. Beardman followed this with another wicked swipe that worsened the gash Craterface had caused with his pistol not so long ago.

Beardman moved in for the kill, but it was Craterface who put in the finishing shot. He simply threw his limb at Drew, who blocked it, but there was enough weight behind the blow to knock him off balance and backward, over the edge.

He didn't hear Craterface's shout of triumph. All he heard was his own plaintive cries of, "Amy! Petey!" as he plummeted into nothingness.

Frieda Gae Owen made her way through the woods slowly, her walking stick supporting a good portion of her weight as she proceeded. She was slow, methodical, careful, as her age and the growing darkness necessitated.

She knew something was wrong. She wasn't sure exactly what, but she did know exactly who. And that worried her. *What if*, she thought, *what if...*

...but there was no point in idle speculation. Better to just get there and see what she could see and if there was anything she could do about it. She emerged into the clearing, saw the flattened grass leading to the east side of the rock shelf. *Well, he made it this far*, she concluded, carefully making her way down the switchbacking trail that led to the base of her waterfall.

Finally, she rounded the last pile of talus that guarded the entrance to the great stone amphitheater and gasped in dismay. Moving as quickly as she could, she crossed the sand to where Drew lay, just feet from a stone slab.

Curled up against his back, its head resting tenderly on his neck, was the young fawn.

"Bless you, child," she whispered to the deer, kneeling beside Drew. "I only hope..." She leaned down next to him. "Drew? Drew, are you there?"

*I*

There was something...

*I am*

...something there, something...

*I am. I am.*

...like a light, a bright light...

*I am alive.*

He was there now, aware, alert, or at least as alert as someone could be after having impacted following a fall of over one hundred and fifty feet. Dazed, yes. Hurt? Oh, most comprehensively. But alive? Undeniably. And, perhaps, regrettably.

He couldn't move. Not much, anyway. He couldn't feel his legs and wondered if they were even still attached. He could feel warmth on his back

and neck, a pulsing kind of warmth, like bleeding. Or breathing. Not sure what and unable to check, he just accepted it as comfort, comfort he certainly needed...

...then, the voice. Soft, hoping.

He could hardly discern anything with what was left of his vision. Ironically, the eye he could see from was the one Craterface had walloped, and it was so swollen that all he could make out was just a thin sliver of light. But the voice, the voice...Frieda Gae. She'd come to check on him. He tried to speak...

"Oh Drew," she murmured as she saw, rather than heard, his attempt to talk: a frothy bubble of blood issuing from his mouth. "Oh Drew, what happened?" She looked at his horribly distended body. "Oh Drew, you didn't..." There was true despair in her voice. "Oh, you didn't...did you?"

He knew what she was asking. He just didn't know how to reply.

"Oh, Drew," she sighed. "If only...but perhaps it's not too late." She took off her shawl and laid it over him. "Is there anything...wait." She pulled the bag of lemon drops out of her dress pocket. "Here," she said, holding one up to his mouth. "Take this. It'll give you some strength."

He managed to stick out his tongue just enough to draw in the candy.

"Good," she said. "Good. That's it." She laid three more pieces at his lips. "Eat these while I go for help. And I will get help Drew, I promise. You just have to hang on, all right? You *will* get through this. I'll go back to the house and call the Sheriff, and..."

Sheriff? *No!* he thought. *No!* She shouldn't even try to go back up the ravine...if she fell, if .45 or one of her goons found her...

He tried to move. What he could move was awash with pain. He tried to call to her, but again, all he could manage was a bloody moan, not distinguishable from a death rattle, which for all he knew, it might be.

"Shhh," she said, laying her hand on his cheek. "Save your strength. We'll get you out of this yet."

*No! No! Don't...*

She stood, then looked back down at him, unsure for a moment, as if she could hear him, then she turned and made her way toward the trail. The fawn rose and followed a moment later.

Alone.

The sun was going down, stealing the light away from the already dimmed rockshelter.

*Alone.*

*She is alone.*

*They will be alone.*

That he was alone was no concern. He'd preferred solitude after all; that he should die alone was only appropriate, and it didn't bother him. But that Amy and Petey...that they would be alone, and that he'd left on such an unhappy note...

A message, somehow?

He lay prone, his legs spread just slightly and canted sideway, immobile. Even thinking about moving them hurt, more in his hips than anywhere else. The limbs themselves were wholly without pain. A broken back, obviously, but well down the spine. His right arm lay beneath him, horribly broken and agonizingly painful. His head...well, the less said the better. His left arm though...

He tried moving it. The pain was blinding, but he managed to move his hand. Just.

His fingers dangled into loose sand, the loose sand that had kept him from dying instantly. Slowly, so slowly, his finger moved, furrows he could not see etching themselves into the sand.

Slower still, the time passed.

The climb had been as agonizing for Frieda Gae as merely being was for Drew Harden, but such was the toil of a body over 80 years old. When she crested the bluff, she stopped and leaned heavily on her walking stick, her chest heaving. "Mercy," she managed. "That never has been easy."

Never. She despaired for her new friend, now apparently so close to a horrid fate he could never have dreamed...and why? Did he misinterpret something she'd said? Was he so disconsolate that such an act was his only exit? Why here, of all places? Why...

*...why am I assuming he did it himself?* she asked herself abruptly. *Do I trust him so little?*

But if he didn't do it to himself--and she knew it was no accident, he was too careful, and besides, he had the staff--then who?

As if to answer the question, the fawn which had been so lovingly warming Drew appeared at Frieda Gae's side. It pawed at the ground anxiously, nodding its head toward the woods, up the small stream that fed the waterfall.

"I must go get help," she said to the deer, as if it were a child. "You really should go back to him, keep him warm." She started back down the trail toward her house, only to have the deer dart in front of her and block the path, leaning on her, shepherding her back toward the stream, still pawing at the grass.

Now Frieda Gae looked in the direction the animal was indicating: down. And she saw the faint trampling of grass marking human passage. Not a path, but somewhere people had been walking, and very recently.

"Well, mercy," she murmured. "Thank you, child. I might not have seen this." She smiled. "No, be fair, I would never have seen this." She stroked the fawn's head lovingly. "Now, go back down and keep Drew warm." The deer looked back up at her nervously. "Go," Frieda Gae said softly but insistently. "I think I see what may have happened, and if I'm right, then he must be cared for. Go now."

The fawn leaped away, disappearing below the crest of the ridge. *If only I could move so quickly*, Frieda Gae thought.

But perhaps that would be changing soon.

They all wore masks now to keep from inhaling the noxious fumes their "cooking" produced. The process complete, they were "packaging" it for sale now, carefully weighing out dozens of plastic baggies full of the pale gray-white crystals and sealing them with tape. It was very precise work being done by one person who was fastidious, and two who were fumbling, but she had little use for them anyway and only kept them around to do the dirty work. Eventually, and probably not too long from now, she'd find some way to make sure they disappeared. In fact, one of her greater joys in life was deciding what gruesome means she'd use to dispatch them. It took her mind off what she was doing.

They watched her impatiently as she weighed the last bundle, carefully adding grains to make sure the measurement was precise. No thumbs on the scale here; people got what they paid for. "There," she finally said, carefully sealing the package and laying it with the others in a foil-lined box. That would be sealed with duct tape, laid inside a box full of coffee--she wasn't sure it would work, but what the hell, it couldn't hurt--to cut the risk of a traffic stop with a drug-sniffing dog, and resealed inside a box of Christmas ornaments. A nice touch, she thought. Again, it might not help conceal it, but it couldn't hurt. Besides, she liked the ornaments. They reminded her of better times.

"All right," she said, checking her watch. "6:30. See? We have plenty of time to get to McMinnville and meet Dink."

"We better," Beardman growled. "He ain't exactly known for his patience."

"Yeah, I expect he's got people lined up outside his door waiting to sell him crystal," she scoffed. "Besides..." She stopped abruptly, looking over Beardman's shoulder. "Tell me something. Did we remember to reset the alarm after we came back here?"

"Damned if I know," Craterface said with a shrug.

"It's your job, isn't it?"

He shrugged again. "Well, yeah. But it ain't like we get a lot of visitors."

"You moron. We got one about an hour ago, didn't we? And guess what? We got another one right now."

"Bullshit," Beardman muttered.

"No bullshit, asswipe," she spat back at him. "Some old woman."

Craterface picked up his .22 rifle. "I'm gonna be ready this time," he said.

"You do that," she sighed as they walked outside.

*Well*, she thought as they emerged from the trailer. *There's a smell I don't care to be around too long.* "Hello there," she said cheerily to the three of them. "Why don't you take those silly masks off so we can talk?"

They did. "What the hell," Craterface said, "you're not gonna be around long enough to ID us anyway."

"Shut your mouth," .45 told him. "I apologize for him, Ma'am. You deserve more respect than that."

Freida Gae nodded. "I do. But I don't expect I'll be getting much from the likes of you."

"Be careful," .45 warned her, looking surprised at the defiance. "We've already been through a lot today, and I can't guarantee your safety if you push us, know what I mean?"

"Well, actually, yes," Freida Gae nodded. "And do you know, that's exactly what I came here to ask you about. Being back here on my property without my permission, and doing what?" She sniffed the air. "Making drugs, I would presume, more poison for the city streets. Well, that's your business, and you're welcome to it, for as long as you can manage it."

The three traded astonished glances. "You mean...", Beardman started, till a look from Freida Gae cut the words from his tongue.

"Pushing," she said lightly, "that's what I'm here about, pushing. But not like you think." She paused for just a moment, then said, "I only have one question to ask you before I leave you to your work: did he jump, or was he pushed?"

The three looked at each other furtively but didn't say anything, till .45 finally innocently asked, "Who?"

Freida Gae stepped towards them. Not boldly, but with purpose. "You know very well *who*. Did he jump, or was he pushed?" she repeated in a firm voice just below a shout.

"Are you sure you want to know?" .45 asked her.

"Oh, I'm sure," Freida Gae replied coolly. "More than you can know."

.45 gave a slight nod. "All right then. He jumped."

Beardman and Craterface quickly nodded in agreement. "Yeah, that's right," Craterface said. "He jumped. We saw him."

"Tried to stop him too," Beardman added. "Seemed awful upset about something."

Freida Gae was silent for a moment. Then she sighed. "Well," she said, raising her hands in a, what can you do? sort of gesture, palms out. "Either way, it's a tragedy," she murmured, lowering her hands, then raising them, slowly, fingers pointing upward and twisting, slowly, so slowly as to barely be noticeable.

"So you're going to leave us be then?" .45 asked, surprised.

Freida Gae smiled. "Oh no. That wouldn't do. Not at all." Her fingers were still making that waving motion, her hands still raising slowly. "You see, I don't believe you. I haven't known Drew Harden very long, but I do know him very well, and I just don't believe he would throw himself off a cliff. For one thing, I don't think he'd want his body littering up my land. For another, I don't believe he'd want to put anybody to the trouble of carrying out his body." The fingers and hands continued to work, and now .45 at least had noticed what was going on and was watching curiously. "So no, I don't believe you."

And with that statement, she clenched her fists.

Stout vines suddenly clutched the legs and feet of the startled threesome, vines which had sprung from the ground beneath them and wrapped around them unnoticed as Freida Gae had made the spiraling motions with her fingers.

Beardman uttered some remarkably profane statements. Craterface babbled, "I told you! I told you! She's a witch!" as the vines continued to work their way upward to seize the arms of the three, wrapping around the stock and barrel of Craterface's .22 and tearing it from his grip.

.45 just looked astonished.

Freida Gae stepped up to her and looked her in the eye. "Looks as if something's broken your nose, sweetie," she said politely. "Did he give that to you? I wouldn't have thought Drew to be the type of man who would be hitting a lady, but then you're not much of a lady, are you?"

She didn't wait for a reply. Instead, she took .45's face in her hand gently. "Now," she said softly, "tell me the truth, dear. Before it's too late. Did he jump, or was he pushed?"

.45 stared back at her sullenly but said nothing. "Why should I tell you? You're going to kill us anyway."

Eyes blazing green and yellow, Freida Gae raised her hands, fingers clawed, and squeezed.



Three screams pierced the forest dusk as thorns suddenly studded the vines encircling them, thorns that grew longer as the furious woman clenched her fists tighter.

"Tell me," Freida Gae said calmly. "Tell me now. The path from here cannot be changed, but it can be smoothed. But I must know the truth. Did he jump, or did you push him?"

"We pushed him!" .45 cried angrily, blood pouring down her lacerated arms. "We pushed him!"

She turned to Beardman. "How?"

"There's some downed trees around the cliff!" he grunted through clenched teeth. "We flung em at him!"

"There," Freida Gae sighed, unclenching her fists. The thorns remained, but they didn't grow further. "That's all I wanted to know."

Craterface continued to scream, thrashing wildly, his flesh tearing with each move. Beardman had at least the sense to know that if he stayed still, he'd not be hurt any worse.

.45's defiance was all but gone now, replaced by something she'd never been well acquainted with.

Fear.

"Somebody will hear us," she stammered. "somebody will hear us, and they'll come looking..."

"Oh, I don't think so," Freida Gae, with a smile that was not at all pleasant. "Your friend there?" She nodded toward Craterface. "He's wrong about me. I do understand though. I've been called worse than witch before, believe me, many times and in many different places." She gestured around them. "I may not be so prescient as to know everything that goes on here, but I can certainly see to it that the people around here don't know either. That waterfall, for instance. How many times did you three walk through these woods and not see it? The only reason you saw it today was because he was with you." Her lips curled into a very foreign-looking snarl. "Believe me, you can scream till your vocal cords shred and no one will ever know. Till they come to get the bodies, that is."

.45 slumped resignedly. "You are going to kill us then."

Freida Gae laughed. "Whatever makes you say that?"

"You said they'd come to get our bodies..."

"The bodies, dear. I said *the* bodies, not *your* bodies. No, the bodies they'll find will be Drew's...and mine." Then she took .45's face in her hands again. "A kiss goodbye then, perhaps?" she asked softly, placing her lips on those of the startled younger woman.

Then Frieda Gae took her hands from the younger woman's cheeks and waved them, almost casually. And with that gesture, the vines fell away from her three captives.

The kiss lingered a moment longer. Then there was a twitch from both of their bodies, and then the two faces parted.

Two pairs of eyes stared at each other, one confused, one focused...and furious.

"Kill her!" .45 shouted. "Now! While the vines are down!"

Craterface just stood there bemoaning his shredded flesh.

"Now, you...you morons! While you can! Kill her!"

Beardman picked up the rifle and leveled it at Frieda Gae.

Her eyes grew wide. "No!" she screamed. "No! Don't! It's..."

The rifle barked. Twice, three times. Three roses of blood bloomed on her chest and Frieda Gae crumpled and gently fell to the ground.

.45 walked over and crouched next to the body. Lovingly she stroked Frieda Gae's cheek. "I'm sorry it had to end this way," she whispered. "It wasn't what I intended." She reached into the pocket of the older woman's dress. "You'll have no use for these."

"What's that you're takin'?" Craterface groaned, looking miserably at the shredded skin on his arms.

"Nothing that need concern you." She stood, faced them, expressionless until she took a bag from her pocket, reached inside, and pulled out a lemon drop. Now she smiled, putting it into her mouth with an almost sensual slowness. "Amazing, the healing power of a simple piece of candy."

The bloody tears on her body disappeared.

Then she raised her hands and clenched her fists.

Then the vines rose to her call.

Then she smiled wickedly. "You and I," she murmured to the two of them, "have *lots* to talk about."

He lost all track of time after the deer came back and laid back down with him. The warmth was wonderful, and now that he knew what the odd feeling on his neck had been, it was comforting instead of distressing.

Frieda Gae had been right about the lemon drops too. They had sustained him somewhat, or at least as much as a couple of pieces of sugar candy could be expected to. They'd at least kept his mouth moist, and gave him enough of a sugar rush that he'd managed to finish his message. More, he'd managed to get his eye open enough so he could at least see something of his surroundings, or at least the direction he was facing.

He knew he was going to die. It was just a matter of time. But it didn't bother him so much now. He'd left his message: just the words "Amy" and "Petey" with a heart drawn around them, and, next to that, another heart and another word: "Gae".

She had made that much of an impression on him. *About as much as I made on the ground here*, he thought, trying not to laugh. It hurt, and it wasted what little energy he had left. Yes, he knew he was going to die, but he wanted to stay alive long enough to be able to see her just one more time.

And there was so little energy left. Even with the her shawl draped over him and the warmth from the deer, that uncanny deer, he was still losing heat. The hypothermia would just as likely to kill him as the internal bleeding. In any case, as long as he stayed still and calm, it would be as gentle as possible.

Then, a rattle of stones from the path leading down from the top of the bluff. Someone was coming. He smiled despite the pain. his cracked shattered jaw produced. *One more time*, he thought. *I get to see her one more time.*

But it wasn't her. Instead, it was Polly. He gave another smile. *No crackers*, he thought. But there's more left in the box, and he'd left the box with FreidaGae. *Enjoy them and remember me, kid.*

The goat nuzzled him fondly, but gently, as if it knew he was hurt. Why wouldn't it? The deer certainly had seemed to know. Had Polly come here, answering some unconscious call he'd given? It hardly seemed likely, but then his being shoved off a cliff by the caretakers of a meth lab hadn't exactly seemed possible a couple of hours ago either. *There is so much I don't know*, he thought. *So much I will never know. Or maybe I will once it's all over with, maybe I'll know everything. I hope so.*

More stones rattling down the path. Freida Gae? A rescue party?

Then he saw her. *No*, he thought, *not her, it can't be her...*

.45 stepped out from between the rock slabs guarding the path. She was smiling despite the still angry-looking gash he'd given her not so long ago. That, though, looked like it was healing already.

"You're still alive," she sighed, kneeling next to him. "I'm so happy. It must have been just so awful here waiting. I'm sorry I took so long."

???

"You're confused," she said. "I know. I'd explain, but there's so little time." She reached into the pocket of her coveralls and pulled something out. "Here," she said, propping it up in the sand. "Can you see that?"

It was the brooch.

*She's killed her*, he thought miserably.

"There's so much I need to tell you," she said, "So much. But it'll have to wait. There's little time left." She leaned down and kissed his china-white

cheek, then whispered, "You were very brave. Very brave. Would that things could've been different..." She sighed, her breath warm in his ear. "But no more talk. Goodbye, Drew."

He stared at the brooch, waiting for the bullet that inevitably would come.

But no. Curiously, she stood and walked away, disappearing between the rock slabs.

*Well, if that doesn't take the prize,* he thought.

He spent the next few minutes of his waning life debating the merits of death by exsanguination, hypothermia, and a bullet to the brain, and was just about to come to a conclusion when he heard a strange sound, something moving across the sand. Almost a soft scraping, just outside his field of vision. But it was coming closer. He'd be able to see it soon.

When he did, he wished he hadn't.

A snake. More precisely, a copperhead.

*Jeez,* he thought. *All these years I've been hiking and I've never seen a single venomous snake, and now, now of all times...*

*...but do you know, it is beautiful...*

And, as with anything in nature, it was. About two and a half feet long, he figured, maybe three; two inches across, tan and pink with dark, hourglass-shaped bands lightening in their centers to a tawny brown. And the head, the classic shape of the pit viper with remarkable reddish-brown coloring. In all, a striking creature.

Oh, striking. Yes. Would it strike? He thought he knew enough to answer that: if he didn't move, no, it shouldn't. Copperheads were venomous, yes, but not particularly aggressive. And he certainly wasn't going to be moving.

It came closer, bobbing its head before his for a moment, then disappearing from his field of view as if it were examining him. Then it reappeared.

Its head came closer. His eye swiveled to follow it.

Closer.

Its mouth opened, the fangs extended.

*Oh dear God,* he thought. *After all this...*

...but it wasn't all that bad, no worse than getting a shot (well, two shots at once) and certainly not as bad as the time he had to have a cortisone shot in his elbow, my, but that had hurt; the snake was being so gentle, an administration of venom as opposed to a bite. And copperhead venom wasn't generally known to be lethal anyway.

But in his condition...

His vision started to blur. There was a burning sensation around the area of the bite, but it didn't last long.

This was it, surely.

He looked back to the brooch. The lovely woman, with the long, red hair and the green dress, the bird, the butterfly...was it really the likeness of the young Frieda Gae Owen? Or someone else, perhaps?

Maybe he'd know in a minute or so.

His vision shimmered and he lost focus on the painting.

Then, everything became clear again.

Everything.

Including the fact that he had the right half of his face pressed into sand, and that the eye on that side was open. Through that eye he could see the individual grains of sand, some opaque, some translucent, filtering in a faint haze of light. Faint, but discernable.

Not possible. His eye--no, the entire side of his face--had been obliterated on impact.

Well, that was as may be. But he could see. And move his fingers. And toes. And there was no pain, not anywhere in his body.

He wondered if he could sit up. Where was the snake?

Slowly he lifted his head. Nothing in front of him. He twisted his neck to peer behind him; nothing there either.

He sat up. Everything seemed to work. Wonderfully, in fact. So much so that he rose to his feet.

No problem there either. Funny though, while he could see the impressive crater his impact had left behind, he couldn't see his body. He crouched and reached out. Nope, nothing there. But the brooch was there, and his message was still there. Looking around, he saw his staff was even there. He picked it up and examined it. It seemed to have come through its plunge without even so much as a scratch.

But his body was gone. Strange developments, these.

"It's there," came a voice from behind him. "You just can't see it."

He wheeled. There was .45, emerging from between the rocks again.

She had a wide smile on her face.

He watched her as she approached. Her steps were slow and graceful, even regal. And as he watched, he knew, somehow, that this was not the woman who had ordered his execution not two hours previous.

She stood before him, laid a warm hand on his cheek. "Do you know?" she asked enigmatically.

"I do," he said, "but...I don't."

"Yes you do." She took his hand, guided him back down to the ground. "You sang my song. You bowed to me."

Freida Gae?

No, that wasn't it. Again, yes, but no.

"You sang my song. You bowed to me." She crouched and pointed to the names he'd pressed into the sand. "You even wrote my name." Then she smiled. "But you didn't finish it."

She gestured for him to join her next to the words. Taking his hand, she gently guided it toward the names, pausing over the "Gae". With his index finger, she etched another letter next to the "e": an "a".

*Gaea.*

*Gaea*, he thought. *I know that word.*

"Not a word," she corrected him. "A name."

Yes, that was it. A name. He'd loved mythology from a young age and yes, the name was familiar; Gaea, she's the Goddess of the forests. Gaea. Might as well be Mother Nature.

"Exactly," she said.

Just then it occurred to him that she knew what he was thinking.

Then, in his head: *You sang my song. You bowed to me. You wrote my name.*

"Who am I?" she asked aloud, rising to stand above him.

He looked up at her, still assessing it all. The painting on the brooch. The disappearing child. Wendell Owen's murder. His chance visit to Mansfield and his fateful hike.

"Who am I?" she repeated, that wide smile back.

He knew. And she knew he did.

He stood. Then he bowed. Low.

"Rise, Drew," she said softly. And when he did, he wasn't entirely surprised to see that the gaunt, drug marred face and slender body of .45 had been replaced by something else entirely. *Someone* else entirely. Tall and graceful, clad in a dark green dress with gold trim. Her hair was red and long, and gold and green leaves wound through it. The bird and the butterfly weren't there, but he knew that were she to call to them, they'd come.

Polly trotted out from the rocks only to stand on his hind legs and become a young boy, perhaps twelve, with tousled black hair and a lopsided grin.

"Josh Hooper?" Drew asked. Josh nodded and waved.

And the deer? It bounded into the air and halfway through the joyful leap morphed into the graceful form of a young woman with a playful smile on her deeply tanned face. Her hair was tied into what looked like a couple of dozen bundles pointing in various directions.

"I'm Ellen," she said bashfully, holding out her hand.

He took it. "Thank you for keeping me warm."

"You'd do the same for me." Her bashful smile turned more bold.  
"Maybe you will."

With so much going on, he'd forgotten about Freida Gae...no, *Gaea*.

"You'll get used to it," Gaea laughed knowingly.

"Would it be untoward to ask what happened to the people who put me in this state?"

"Not at all." She crouched next to where his body had lay--still did lay, if she were to be believed--and smoothed over where he had written her name. "Best not to leave that there. Questions, you know."

"So, about the three up there..."

"Ah yes," Gaea said with a nod. "The three up there. Or, rather, the two. I'm sure you already know I inhabit the body of the woman, just as I did FriedaGae's for so many years. She was a wonderful host. Ellen will have to tell you how I found her. For now, all that's important is for you to know that her body and soul are at peace. The three...well, the woman is in me now. I'm not so sure she will be as gracious a host as Frieda Gae, but she'll adapt readily enough."

"Like she has a choice," Josh laughed.

"And the two men," Gaea continued, "besides being in terrible pain, are about to be arrested for two murders, those of Frieda Gae and yourself."

Drew squinted at her disbelievingly. "They've had plenty of time to escape."

"Trust me. They're not going anywhere." She smiled a satisfied smile. "They will admit to their crimes. I've seen to that. But my justice will claim them long before they reach a mortal court." Her look waxed serious. "And a rough justice it will be."

Then she clapped her hands twice. "But enough of that unpleasantness. Come, everyone. Meet your new brother."

Around them, trees melted and reformed into human forms, male and female. Some came from the sky as birds, some emerged from the ground where they had disguised themselves as plants. Others...he wasn't sure where they'd come from. Insects, maybe?

"My family," she said simply. "Your family, Drew."

"There's so many of them," he murmured, eyes wide. "Are they all like me?"

"In many ways, yes. In so many more, no. You'll learn. Ellen will help."

Ellen looked more than eager to teach. "But what did you mean when you said you wished things could've been different?" he asked. "Wasn't I meant to be here?"

"You were," Ellen answered. "Just not..." She looked up the cliff and shuddered. "Not that way."

"Alive, she means," Gaea explained. "I need a mate. You would've been wonderful, Drew. But as we know..."

"Circumstance intervenes," he said with a smile. "I understand. I can't very well mate with you if I'm dead."

"He catches on quick," Josh grinned.

"Where'd Ellen go?" Drew asked, looking around for her.

"Look down," Gaea suggested.

There was a copperhead at his feet. The copperhead.

Oddly. This time he wasn't frightened at all, and even less so when the snake slowly transformed itself into Ellen. She smiled gently. "I hope I didn't hurt you," she said softly, holding her hands out to him.

He took them. "You did me a favor."

They stared at each other, a long time.

"All right then," Gaea finally declared with a knowing smile. "Spend some time meeting your family. And after that...well, it's up to you."

He looked down at Ellen. "I always liked the Big South Fork."

"Me too," she exclaimed, her eyes bright.

"We can be there in a few hours. I've got a car up at Mansfield's Store."

"Who needs a car?" Ellen grew shorter and sprouted wings and feathers as she transformed herself into a bird. A very large bird.

"Turkey vulture," Gaea said to Drew with a smile.

"Can I do that?"

"I don't know," she said mysteriously. "Can you?"

He could.

*Someone much smarter than me once said that the best place to start a story was at a point where the rest of the plot naturally follows. I figure that's as good a place as any to finish one, too. Because that's where this story ends.*

*But another begins. You see, I found my way to Mansfield much the same way Drew Harden did. I met Olivia, who told me the story I just told you. The bologna, cheese, and tomato sandwich was excellent by the way, though I got a chocolate soda to wash it all down. You'll have to stop by if you're ever in the area. But don't bother looking in the back room for the brooch; I have it.*

*I wonder sometimes what Drew is doing. I doubt he and Ellen were ever anything but friends; Drew was the solitary type, after all, and I picture Ellen the same way. They cross paths every so often, trade stories, and probably they lie in the damp evening grass and roll around in it as wolves, or cats, or some exotic creatures. Maybe even humans. Where they might be, I can't*



*even begin to guess. I somehow doubt either one of them confines themselves to North America.*

*Gaea though...I think she's still around. In fact, I think she's still in the vicinity of Mansfield. And I think I know who she is.*

*The brooch had a tag on it, you see. The name of the person who gave it to the store to sell. The name is Luci Redman.*

*Just down the road from the store, there is a house. The front walk is lined with daffodils, and there's an azalea bush in the yard. The name on the mailbox reads, "Redman."*

*I'm going to pay a visit. I have a box of graham crackers, just in case. And a bag of lemon drops.*