BLIND SOW

DILLON HAMILTON

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by Dillon Hamilton

Piglets brushing against her flanks and hind, a sow, trying to detach herself from the teat-abusers, stomped into a groomed clearing. She kicked through the rice powder until it filled her blunted snout and shrouded her squealing brood. She thrusted her tusks into the pile, taking her fill and then, crushing the shelled fruit from the blackjacks and any puny pork that found itself beneath her. The piglets sent their despairing cries out of the haze they were trapped in. They were grapes being tread in their mother's winepress and pulled down into the depths of the vat by naïve yeasts that assured them of their mother's care. But she stomped and treaded thoroughly, ate and thrashed over them until they lie still beneath the milled rice, all except for the few who were graced with being cast out of the vat.

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Dad told me that my siblings, Jesse and Pearl, had went to my aunt Cindy and uncle Sam's for a short vacation and speech lessons, when I stepped off the bus Tuesday afternoon. Since my aunt was a speech therapist, this made some sense, but considering Pearl had yet to begin babbling and Jesse's speech was better than mine, I wondered why I hadn't been chosen for the therapy and time off from school. He went about explaining, in tedious detail, why they must be sent away and why I must stay. Things about my working value in the home and their need of constant care were mentioned and that one "outlaw", as he used to call us, was more than he and my mother could handle. He ended every explanation with, "It's gonna be good, bud." I believed him on all accounts, of course. Dad wasn't one to flatter or lie, but he was a man who wouldn't make his reasons quite clear for telling certain truths and excluding the others.

I bumped into his hip all the way up our driveway and kicked at the red sandstone dust. By the time we reached the porch my mother's rant was audible and my shoes looked like they had been seasoned with paprika. There was a Ford truck from the era of Dad's childhood days that was parked in the carport that he had made with some leftover wood and sheet metal from a project in Holdenville a few years before. The untreated wood was separating at the grains and turning gray and if one stood directly beneath the sheet metal, they could see hail dents.

"Who parked in the carport?" I asked, panicked.

"Let's go and meet him." Dad wasn't sorrowful or sour, but he wasn't himself. As one prone to fret over things outside of my control, I understood later why he seemed uneasy, if not downright scared of bringing me in the house, even though he adhered to the absolute sovereignty of God in all matters. He tapped his fingers on the chipped hood of our maroon Eclipse as he rounded the missing grill. He nudged me past him and up the porch stairs before reaching past and opening the door for me. The rant that I had mentioned before died as Dad pushed the door in and said, "Look who's done learning for the day." The learning and attraction of mystery had just begun for me that day.

My mother looked breathless in our kitchen but full of words and almost relieved at the chance to recover her wind. A pair of corduroy pants towered above a steaming cup of coffee on the coffee table in our living room and that was just to the knees. The rest of the pants sank back in the crease of a maroon loveseat that Dad had brought back strapped to the hood of the Eclipse one winter. When mother refused to let it in the house, he had appealed to her love for things that matched saying, "It complements the Eclipse quite well." Above the pants was a starched shirt that acted more as a parachute around the skeletal frame. The face that sat atop the shirt was as plain, sheened, and wooden as the fake paneling that covered our walls.

"*The* Reverend P.T. Voight. And you must be the famed Clanton your mother was just praising?" He offered me his pipe-cleaner fingers to shake as he stood. He was smooth—smooth-voiced, smooth-skinned, and that lie had been so freshly sanded and lacquered I could smell it. Or maybe that was something Daddy had just poured down the sink.

"Nice to meet you, Reverend," I said.

"You as well, little brother. Your mama and daddy and I have been talking about actions and consequences this afternoon. Do you know anything about actions and consequences?"

I began to sweat, thinking he knew already of my infractions, especially the one that would soon affect him, but I knew there was no way he could have known. Still, I couldn't help peaking between his marble clean eyes and his pickup.

"Clanton?" Dad patted my Hulk backpack.

"Uh, I know a little bit about that, sir. Uh, Reverend, sir."

The reverend winked at me. "I can see you've been raised to show respect, but my brothers and sisters in Christ call me Brother P.T. and I must insist that you do the same."

I looked to Dad for permission and he nodded. "Yes sir, Brother P.T.," I said.

My mother was wobbling, plum-cheeked and lemon-eyed, before the dripping sink. She was holding the coffeepot and with the same hand pointing an accusatory finger at the reverend, who broke her focus by addressing her. "Anna, I commend you for raising such a respectable boy. Don't you want to be around to raise two more respectable children?" The question sounded kind and lightly weighted enough to ease even the tenderest nerves, but mother straightened like an air-dried hand towel and went to cursing him. Dad pulled me back through the front door before I memorized all the curses and lifted me past all the porch steps to the ground. The landing pinched something in my ankles and knees.

“Wait here,” Dad said. He was gone for about thirty seconds. I know because I kept track on my Treasure Planet-themed wristwatch. He reemerged with a rusted single-shot .223 that had the serial number filed off. I learned later the weapon had been used in a copper robbery of an air conditioning unit factory and Dad had traded one of my mother’s friends for whatever bottle she had been holding at the moment. Dad bragged it had been the best bargaining he had ever done. “Let’s go,” he said with a cheeriness that was an excess for the moment and background chatter.

“Where?” I asked.

“Hunting.”

“It’s April.”

“There’s always something in season, isn’t there?”

“I don’t think—”

“Pigs! What about pigs?”

He had me with that one. I had memorized most of the hunting season dates for big game and furbear over the last few seasons but thought little of pigs. In fact, I never considered wild pigs in this part of the country until Dad mentioned them. They had yet to invade the Cross Timbers, though we all knew they were quickly pushing north based on what the Texas hunting shows were telling us. My mind meandered into mesquite pit barbeque dreams, forgetting all about the hunt I was being scuttled toward. Dad shoved me along as I dreamed of building the pit and filling it with kiln-quality coals. I could hear the foil and smell the onions being sliced. My eyes watered and I didn’t see the hackberry sapling before me. A wicked branch, like a claw, reached out and scratched my jaw. “Ah!”

I bled lightly. The wound wasn’t deep enough for a rich dark flow. Dad clacked his toes into my heels and tilted my head by palming my crown. “Barely got you. You’ll have to pay

better attention when we pass the briars." The correction was as light as the scratch, but they stung the same.

We gave the green briar a wide berth and settled under a dead blackjack with a tornado twisted trunk. It had rained recently, and the green undergrowth of spring was brought to my eye level when I squatted. The sun's rays had finally squirmed through the Spring's low-hanging clouds. Steam rose around soft satin petals produce by some weed I have forgetten the name of and I happily breathed in whatever pollens would make me sniffle for the coming weeks. I sat with a pointer's instincts, looking straight ahead not knowing the object of my fixation but that I must focus on something. Dad breathed wintergreen mint over my shoulder, and I thought that is what all woods should smell like. He pointed out to an ivory dust pile in the middle of a game trail. "Keep an eye on that rice bran, would ya?" He asked. It was a stone's throw away. I had clear sight to the pile and beyond.

Normally, a stationary hunt like this would have bothered me to no end. I grew up reading the adventurous spot and stalks of Western lore, where men blistered their heels on long treks or rode their mustangs to exhaustion, but this gentle sloping acre pacified my feet's need for adventure. Instead, I let my eyes wander where my feet could not. Fungi grew here with the same amount of mystery, prevalence, and color as insects in a National Geographic documentary about the Amazon. Bluegreen lichens were neighbors to woodears, oyster, mock oyster. Deadly things grew on the ground next to things Dad fried and I dipped in ranch, but we were here for pigs. The pigs never showed.

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One of the junior high kids planted their gum on the bottom step of the bus and I stepped on it coming off. The doors shut behind me and the gum tugged at me until the connecting

tendril snapped. I heard a few laughs and snorts fade under the diesel roar and a perturbed citizen whose momentum was ruined by the bus's stop on the unkept state highway. Dad didn't come out to meet me today, which was a return to normality, but I wished he had. I had enjoyed the welcome of yesterday. Our tire-cut driveway had fresh sprouted henbit in the center and sharp-bladed fescue growing shaggy at its sides. I picked a few of the purple henbit flowers for my mother along the center and shoved them in my jeans pocket. On most of my approaches to our house I could hear Jesse and Pearl playing, rattling, rambling through our thin walls, but now I could only hear somber conversation and another car sat next to the Eclipse. Today, it was an old, sandy Cadillac sedan, which I remembered had made a previous visit but couldn't recall its owner. I was reminded when I heard the gargling voice that came through a perpetually cracked window. I remembered comparing the old family doctor's voice to when my baby sister Pearl would drink milk and groan through it without swallowing. She spat and splattered the milk on her chin and cheeks. "An utter waste," Mother would say, set Pearl down, and rush into the kitchen. She would come back moments later, calmer, water-eyed, and breathless.

While the adults were inside with their talk, I scurried around the side of the house to Daddy's battered carport. A light wind blew faint whiffs from an open gas can toward me. The Reverend's tire marks pressed over a glinted patch of clay—diamonds and silver. It was so bright I wouldn't have missed it even if I weren't looking for it. I moved closer, inspecting the trove and praying nothing had been lifted from the spot. But there were tiny molds left behind by the vacant nails and shards of Mason jar.

"Momma has your snack ready inside."

I whirled, forgetting to breathe, and said, "Thanks." Dad knew how to get the jump on me. My mother clattered and stumbled. I always had enough time to hide from her and whatever

help she was looking for, but not Dad. I never discovered what made him so light-footed. He was not menacing by any means, but to keep a body like his, a laborer's body, from cracking and popping in all the worn-out parts was miraculous. He always credited a long-dead, Cherokee grandfather with teaching him stealth, though it had little use these days, with the exception of frightening his children, of course.

"Is that Doctor Snodgrass?" I asked, knowing full well it was him. He had run for a county seat a couple years before and still had the campaign stickers, in faded form, stuck to both bumpers. He also had a magnetized banner on his passenger side door that said, "SNODGRASS FAMILY PRACTICE. MEDICINE WITH SOME MILEAGE."

He still drives that poor old Cadillac and I have always wanted to check the odometer when he parks at the Senior Citizen's building for morning coffee and dominoes, but I'm afraid of what I'll learn. Dad claims to never have seen it parked at a gas pump, which isn't too unbelievable considering many of the wealthier residents of Hughes County have their own gas tanks on their property.

"Yeah, it's old Snotgrass." Dad used my old name that I had used for the Doctor before I could properly differentiate between the pronunciation of my D's and T's.

Normally, this would have made me giggle, but I was still keenly aware and worrisome over the debris in the clay. "Hmmm," I said, trying to sound disinterested and too old for jokes about names.

"Whatcha lookin' at there?"

"Tire tracks." Which was partially true, so it came across as genuine.

"Whose tire tracks?"

"I'm not sure."

Dad waited, his mind and eyes wondering about me. My gut tucked in on itself. I gripped a beltloop in my jeans before they fell off my hipbones. He waited some more like a buck at attention near the edge of his wood, splitting his hooves in case he needed to flee. But Dad had no need to check the air to know what I was about in that carport. Lies were about me and I was about lies. He knew I would stack one upon another until the base lie could not hold the weight of the others. He asked a rebuke upon my lie in silent prayer and said, “Come in the house. Dr. Snodgrass wanted to listen to those lungs.”

I forgot to mention, as I often do, that those who knew me at birth consider me one of those miracle babies you see on all the talk shows. I wouldn’t know any better. I have no lingering memories or effects from my pulmonary problems. I only have others’ memories of me to go off of. When I’m feeling curious about those days, I always start with my mother’s story and then end with my father’s. Mother knows how to stack the odds of life against her characters well and Dad ends all tales victoriously.

Lost in the comparison of my parents’ memories, the business end of Snodgrass’s stethoscope woke me on the loveseat. I jerked away from the metallic chill and huffed.

“A better set of lungs I couldn’t find in the rest of the county. And that includes any singers at the Pentecostal churches,” Dr. Snodgrass said.

“I’ve got a stack of unpaid medical bills that would say otherwise,” Mother said as she exhaled cigarette smoke.

Snodgrass, still looking at me and sensing the cigarette, upturned a corner of his mouth and mustache. He seemed on the verge of chiding my mother for smoking, but his mustache fell and quaked and his bovine-like demeanor returned, remembering the problem that brought him here. “Miss Anna, you were saying you needed a prescription?”

“Yes,” she put out the cigarette in the sink and threw her hips off the counter in a frantic almost squirrely fashion, “I’ve got that chronic pain from that wreck a few years back and nothing is giving me much relief besides that prescription painkiller and we’re fresh out.”

Snodgrass continued to face me. Everything about him was sad and somber. His neck and chin were three days unshaven. He had missed a button on his shirt. When he rose from the coffee table, he didn’t tower over me like I remembered from all his other visits, even the recent ones. I had never seen him so lowly and smote like a man off to do the unthinkable for someone of his profession or carry out impossible orders. He turned to Dad. “I don’t believe in most of these new facilities. They’re damned rackets, if you ask me, but there are a couple numbers I want you to call, Jimmy.”

Snodgrass was the only man I knew who enjoyed the privilege of calling Dad Jimmy. Dad preferred James or Jim. “They’re wholesome spots with good results. They don’t do none of that modern witchdoctorin’. And if they don’t think they can help Anna, they’ll be honest with you.” He slipped Dad a few business cards.

Mother had left without our notice. *Her* cabinet was ajar, and her bedroom door was shut. There was a click of a lock and the unscrewing of a bottle cap. Snodgrass patted Dad’s shoulder, which, in his osteoporotic state, was a magnanimous and sacrificial gesture. He then left to the babble and chortle of political radio blaring through the Cadillac’s stereo. Snodgrass was hard of hearing. Dad made me wait outside until he finished calling the facilities. I spent that time in the carport mining out my mistake. I caught one or two nicks from the shattered glass, but by the time Dad came outside I was pleased to know I had gathered most of the calamity into an old bulk-sized green bean can. Dad found me and smiled. He was holding the .223. All he said was, “Clanton,” and we were off to the woods.

We sat beneath the same tree, facing the pile of rice bran that seemed denser and lower than it had the day before. “Do you like hunting?” Dad asked.

I was afraid that he was afraid to hear my honest answer, so I pretended to think on it.

“I don’t like to hunt. At least, not like this,” he said.

“I don’t like it neither.”

“Either.”

“Huh?”

“You do not like it *either*,” Dad corrected.

“That’s how we say it at school.”

“And they let you?”

“Yup. I don’t like hunting *either*.” I threw all my weight into the “either”. I’m not sure why but my childish embellishments on words came across in the Queen’s English. Maybe the Brits are that good at embellishment and I felt I must imitate the best.

“Why don’t you like hunting?” he asked.

I had considered it long before and the answer came forthwith now that Dad agreed with me. “I always feel we have to come back with something,” I said.

“That’s the feeling but it isn’t true. You don’t *have* to come back with something.”

“I know, but I still feel it and I don’t like it. I’d rather just sit and watch.”

Dad tilted his head back into the oak’s bark and sighed. “Then that’s what we will do.”

We sat and watched until Dad could not take the silence anymore. “How is school? How are your friends?”

“Good.”

“Made any new friends this year?”

I nodded. “Kelci Pratt.”

“I went to school with her uncles. Is she nice?”

“Yes. She draws Pokémon for me to color. She says I’m a better colorer than her and she’s a better drawer than I am, but I think she’s better at both. I never pick the right colors.”

“But she draws them for you anyway, huh?”

“Yes, at first I thought they were traces, but I watched her do it freehand.”

Dad was impressed. He leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his knees. “What do you do for her?”

I sheepishly pecked in the turf near my rear. “Nothin’.”

“Are you sure? It could be something she likes, and you don’t notice.”

Thinking back, there were things that I did that she had admitted enjoying, but the fact I had not consciously gone out of my way to do them for her pained me. “She said she likes it when I hit Cody Wilcox in the face with a dodgeball. I get him at least once every game.”

Dad almost laughed. “Why does she like when you do that?”

“She said she likes to hear him squeal and whine to Coach Metzger, but I think it’s because he’s mean to her.”

“It’s probably a little of both. You think you should be trying to hit someone in the face with a dodgeball?”

“I used to, but when they made me start sitting out because of it, cause I throw so hard, I quit trying to. But now I think Cody and the other boys get hit in the face on purpose. It’s the easiest way to get me out of the game,” I spoke this last part with more than a wee bit of pride and bitterness.

“Those Wilcox’s are masters of strategy.”

Dad put loads of stock into a child's rearing and familial knowledge. I believe he was partially right. I even imitated the way he turned a doorknob, with my pinky finger free and dangling.

I threw my logic out for Dad to test. "People get hit in the face with a dodgeball all the time. If they can't get out of the way, then why are they playing?"

Dad smirked and said no more of dodgeball. "What else do you do for Kelci? You opening doors for her?"

I opened doors for my entire class. In fact, I would race ahead to hold the door open for everyone after lunch and recess. It was all for the high fives they would give me. "Yes, but I do that for everyone."

"Can you think of anything else you have done for her?"

There were no conscious gestures I had ever paid her, but I did spend much of my time at school with her and answered any question she asked me, which was more than I would do for the other females in my class. "No, we're just friends," I said, finally assured the nature of our friendship was one-sided in her favor.

Dad hummed and looked pleased. Glad that he was exhibiting some semblance of contentedness on the day, I leaned into his ribs with my head and shoulder and asked, "You and Mother are still friends, aren't you?"

His body, which at first was warm and inviting to the point that it felt receptive to my tilt, now hardened and vaulted itself from anything and anyone. "Yes," he said.

"Good. Kelci's parents aren't. She says it's because her mom got mean toward her dad and now she's mean to Kelci."

"That's not why," he said.

“Why then?”

“If Kelci doesn’t know the real reason, should you know, son?” he asked this kindly and slowly, trying his best not to insult me.

“No.”

“Kelci will know someday. She won’t think her momma is so bad when she knows. Don’t tell Kelci any of this. Her momma is a good woman. She may be a little bitter right now, but it won’t be for long.”

“Is Mother bitter?”

He didn’t answer at first and seemed as if he didn’t want to. Whether he felt compelled or it just spilled from him, he said, “Yes. I’m praying it is just a season.”

“It’s been longer than any season I’ve heard of. I think she likes it.”

Dad wanted more than anything to be able to protest. Being yoked to someone much deeper in the mire than him, and who dug their heels into the filth, burdened Dad. I think he would have enjoyed Mother more, if she had been willing to move a few steps forward with him, or at least support his efforts. He had my support, but what chance did I have of balancing the scale against a quarrelsome, boisterous, contrary wife. “Yes, she likes it,” he said.

“Why did she start?” I figured I was old enough to know.

“I can’t be sure, son. Sometimes she says it was the wreck she had. Sometimes I think it’s when I lost my job. I can’t be sure.”

Dad wept. I was relieved to see it. He had been bearing weight he was not built and meant to withstand alone. He was honestly good at it, but I wanted to know he felt the brokenness that I did. It made me wish Jesse and Pearl were here to see Dad cry, not that it’s something young children ought to see their father do, but that confusion, sorrow, and

brokenness were the things to undergo and that at least one of their parents shared this with them. It had made me grow indignant with the flippant and sometimes grateful talk from my classmates about their split or divorced parents. I never believed them when they made claims that two Christmases were better than watching their parents wander to the same bedroom every night to talk over infomercials or local news before dosing off. I almost dosed off myself. There, under Dad's arm and tears, in view of an empty clearing was peace for a troubled boy. A protective, dutiful caress, I learned that day, could fight against a boy's brokenness better than well-thought and timed counsel. I did end up drifting to sleep with these thoughts and many like them. Some time before sunset, Dad scooped me up and carried me through the treacherous parts of the wood without my knowledge.

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So, if the last two days had not dulled my surprise toward the sight of unusual scenes stepping off the bus, this day did. To be clear, this scene, being the most and last unusual scene, I was to ever catch at our house, calloused me to anything I might see again, here or anywhere.

Deputy Clifton Moor stopped my bus, Bus 8, a hundred yards short of our clay drive. Light rain, the same rain we had started the day with, fell continuously, gently, like a mother's hand laying on her sleeping infant's back. Our clay, the clay that hid a surprise for THE Reverend, caked Deputy Moor's tires. I gave each tire a dismissive glance, praying I wouldn't see ominous signs of deflation. The tires were well-aired. The sudden, hopeful expectation that I might get to ride shotgun next to a shotgun grew, but Deputy Moor wilted these hopes as he told me through coffee and tobacco breath to walk the rest of the way. He whined about nearly being stuck twice in our driveway.

I liked our driveway the way it was. Our Eclipse struggled through the rutted, muddy, low points, making it tough decision for Mother when she wanted to leave. She did not have a choice to stay on this day, not even if she had wanted to. They wheeled her out, a pale green and jiggly blob strapped to the starch white gurney. Many years later, I recalled the image when reading through the book of Revelation, where the Greek word used for the pale horse is *chloros*, meaning a pale green. I felt as though I knew Jerusalem's fear when that pale horse approached. Cometh the Man, cometh His promises. Mother parted with our expectancy of her meeting the same ends as Jerusalem had. Dad expected it so much that he no longer looked after her, nor would he follow her where she would go, even at the behest of the emergency workers. With the .223 clinging to his shoulder, he sniffled and said, "That gurney is the dragon's back."

I still don't know exactly what happened at our home while I was at school. Dad has only spoken of it twice and never to me and not without much coaxing. We settled in the clearing again and our trek, even in consistent rain and slick footing, seemed easier, more a stroll than an escape. Dad let me lead. We didn't speak. I knew I should have been grieving over seeing my mother that way. I should have forced myself into the back of the ambulance. I did love Mother, but how could I grieve over someone that I spent less time with than my schoolmates?

We came to the clearing dry-eyed and clothes sopped. Determined something should die, today, we took our stealth seriously, crouching and treading low over the new grasses that bent under the rain's persistent hand. The rice bran looked yellowed and ruined, but I couldn't be sure. I filtered the view of the wood through raindrops caught on the ends of my eyelashes. A stream formed along the game trail where Dad had dumped the rice bran. Cardinals, blue jays, mockingbirds all took their turns bathing themselves in the flow. If Dad would have let me take a

shot at one of those mockingbirds, I would have. They used to terrorize my Scottish terrier, Arty, when he was still alive.

The rain made the budding blackjacks' bark darker, dark enough that in my young mind I expected something utterly wicked to step out from behind one of the wider trunks. The fungi and lichens thrived and appeared to throb a happy, pale glow. We sat on a fat and sloppy Earth, who had had its fill long before. We were soaked and shivering but knew we both needed to sit and wait for our minds to settle on the consequences of what we had just walked away from. The goal, for us, was never escaping judgment in our home, though, you can never record these sorts of happenings honestly while they unfold. Our spot, where we daily plopped ourselves and soaked our underwear through, was a grace given to us in these three days. And as we were commonly seen in the woods together many times from this point, we were never seen in this place, again. The light of day, dark of night, growth, and death of this clearing along a rather ordinary game trail reordered the world for us in simple enough terms for us to digest. In our home there had been a relational fast inflicted upon us by the presence of Mother, and neither of us could stomach a revelation concocted by her. So, we breathed in what God breathed out to us in the clearing and Dad saw the sow coming first.

Piglets brushing against her flanks and hind trying to detach herself from the teat-abusers, she stomped into our clearing. She kicked through the rice powder until it filled her blunted snout and shrouded her squealing brood. Excitable and ravenous, she thrusted her tusks into the pile, taking her fill and then some and crushing the shelled fruit from the blackjacks and any puny pork beneath her. They were grapes being tread in their mother's winepress and pulled down into the vat by naïve yeasts that assured them of their mother's care. But she stomped and

tread thoroughly, ate and thrashed over them until they lie still beneath the milled rice, all except for the few who were graced with being cast out of the vat.

Dad restored order with the .223. The sow dropped in her measure of rice. Some of the piglets lay still beneath her, some squirmed, injured and maimed, and those cast out wondered the clearing, aimless and confused. I stood before Dad and raked some of the rain off of me with the back of my hand. Dad did the same to the rifle and then himself. “Let’s have a look,” he said. I wasn’t convinced that he really wanted to have a look.

The roaming piglets darted in and out of our orbit. A yellow-haired one with black and brown spots caught my attention. I assumed something was wrong with its liver. Dad told me that’s why Mother’s eyes were often yellowed. Something was wrong with her liver. I wanted to follow it, but Dad kept us on track toward the sow. When we got to her, she looked like she had just keeled over from overeating. The entry wound was hidden behind matted fur and the trampled few of her brood lay hidden beneath her.

“What about the ones still alive?” I asked.

“They’ve been shown mercy,” Dad said.

“Mercy? They don’t have a mother anymore.”

Dad nudged the sows head with the steaming muzzle. “She was blind.”

“Even the ones under her? They’ve been shown mercy, too?” I asked.

“However they were rid of her can be considered a mercy. Those hidden and crushed may have gotten off easy.”

“Will the others starve?”

Dad watched a particularly active piglet for a moment. “They seem old enough. They’ll be fine.”

Dad must have sensed my unease at this answer. He added, “I’ll set out enough rice bran to get them through the rest of Spring.”

“Will Mother be shown mercy?” I asked.

Dad had started to pull the blind sow off the pile and into the woods next to the game trail, but he stopped. “I don’t know, Clanton. That’s not for me to answer,” he said. This answer satisfied me in itself, but Dad added, “I’m praying she does receive it.”

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