

### The Widow Watcher of Wooten Creek

There is a kind of mist deep in the hollers of Leslie County, Kentucky that clings to your boots and wets your hair to your face. You cannot shake it off or blow it away. It creeps into your mouth and coats your throat with its humid strangling; screaming will not free you. It is best to swallow it down, to let it sit in your belly and make you part of the landscape.

I am not from those Appalachian mountains of Eastern Kentucky, though they claim me. I grew up 130 miles away in Lexington, horse country. But my father was born there, at the head of Wooten Creek, surrounded by dozens of farms and family. Scottish and Irish ancestors populated the hollers and glens in the 1950's. By the time I came to visit 30 years later, the Farlers and Cornets and Staceys were mostly gone; abandoned homes and lonely rock chimneys were all that was left, and they were falling back into the soil and slate. But I was still kin, so I was welcomed.

The trip to the head of the creek was like stepping into a land made by fairies and giants, something the Irish and Scottish ancestors would have appreciated. My father's great-grandparents built a sturdy white frame farmhouse at the base of three mountains, snugly nestled there on a triangle of land bordered by Wooten creek on each side. The mountains still guard the house a hundred and ten years later from the worst of the wind. The creek still runs pure and

steady, rarely escaping its banks. The whole place is coated in green moss and sweet grass, carpeted with laurel hells, hung with wild honeysuckle. Big boulders slid down the mountains ages ago; those rocks and the giant tulip poplar trees stand guard over the old farm as ancient sentries.

My granny still lived in the house alone when I was a kid. White siding, gingerbread trim. Her porch was hung heavily with birdfeeders, windchimes, and little mirrors strung on twine around the whole thing like garland. Dad would walk me from her place around the old farm and he'd narrate its past into being. "This is where Thumb George lived. Drove a team of mules with the reins wrapped around the stump of his hand and that one big thumb. Lost the rest of his fingers in the sawmill. Great-grandad sewed him up. He was always grateful to keep that thumb..." A dozen tales of gruesome mangling would follow, each with old Dr. Hamilton coming to stitch men back together with his big needle and thick thread. We climbed the ruins of a grist mill, dug around for rusty nails and ox shoes near the old forge, and sifted through the sandy dirt at the base of the Indian Cliffs, looking for arrowheads and stone ax blades. My dad loved watching his little girl explore his childhood memories.

I had thought about seeing a ghost there, imagining it would be something friendly, just a flash of my grandfather as a boy, he and his brothers sporting summer buzz cuts, dangling from wild grape vines or splashing in the creek. I thought I would find the shadow of my great-grandfather walking the old barbed-wire fence line, counting his cattle.

I should have known the spirit would be a woman.

We had come to visit my granny again at her farmhouse, high back in the hills, up the holler at the head of Wooten Creek. Dad had let me go outside to explore, but "Stay near the

house! Watch for snakes” had been shouted loudly as I left. Though many of the old houses and stores were crumbled, the one-room schoolhouse my father had attended still stood straight and strong: white clapboard with a little bell tower. Even at eight years old, I was already destined to become a teacher, the kid who passed out papers and bothered the grown-ups at school with tattling. I couldn't resist; I headed straight for the school, fifty yards from Granny's front porch.

I knew the front door was nailed shut. I still scrambled up the sagging steps anyway, clinging to kudzu vines instead of the rotted railing, and leaned over to a window, trying my best to peek inside.

The chalkboard still clung to the back wall with dusty outlines of old sums still faint on the surface. A green banner hung above it, the curly cursive alphabet marching along its length. Golden afternoon light filtered in through the broken western windows, little clouds of dust swirling. Instead of desks, the floor was filled with old wooden radio cabinets: Zenith, RCA, Edison, models spanning the century. One of my great uncles took these old machines in the way some people collected stray cats; he repaired what he could and used the schoolhouse as a warehouse.

The front window was cracked like a spiderweb. When I pressed my hand to the surface, the glass gave way, cutting my fingers deeply. I watched with detached fascination as my bright blood trickled down the white wall.

The friendly afternoon sunlight disappeared all at once as a gust of icy wind blew through the trees and straight down my back. The poplar leaves turned silver and shook. A streak of terrible lightning cut the sky. I broke from my trance at the window and ran back down the schoolhouse steps.

The creek lay between me and the house. I knew to run from a storm, to find shelter, to hide from the lightning. The house seemed close enough, but another loud crack of lightning and thunder rang out, bringing one of the bone white sycamore trees by the water crashing down onto the bridge. My way was blocked. I turned all around, desperate for a safe place, but the school was all I could see.

I ran back up the steps and shoved all my fifty pounds against the door. It splintered under the force, the wood more rotten than I'd thought. I landed hard on the floor and clouds of ancient chalk and coal dust swirled around my head. Sneezing, I sat up carefully, intent on sizing up my injuries. But another loud BOOM scared me deeper inside, and I hid behind the bulk of a Sylvania console.

I closed my eyes against the bright lightning, counting as all children do between the flash and the thunder. The storm tumbled on top of me, and I couldn't hear the numbers leave my mouth.

Another sound started up: a long, high-pitched wail. At first I thought it must be the wind, singing through the old windows that hung like broken teeth in the west wall of the schoolhouse. But the sound got louder and more human. I opened my eyes and crawled to the door, looking for funnel clouds. The sky was the sickly green we'd been warned about at school.

I huddled behind the biggest radio I could find, my back to the wall of broken windows. As the storm grew, the wind picked up more swirls of the dirt from the floor—I felt the grit of it enter my mouth before I could think to keep it closed. I buried my face in my arms.

The scream filled my ears. I tried to block the sound, but there was no getting away from it. Pain filled my head and I thought I would puke with the intensity.

I suddenly felt a cold hand on the back of my neck.

I popped up, expecting to see my father. But there was no one. The storm was completely gone, as if it had never started. I sat there on the dirty floor, stunned.

I looked down to see a shiny red puddle at my feet, growing as my hand bled. I could see my face reflected back at me as if in a red mirror, my pigtails and plastic glasses unmistakable. And there, over my left shoulder, a woman's broad white face, her eyes wide and her mouth flung open. I whirled around.

I was alone in the room.

I ran back down the steps and tore up the road. I stared at my pink sneakers, willing myself not to stumble. I made it to the bridge at the creek, ready to scramble through the fallen sycamore's limbs, only to find my way clear. The white tree still stood with its arms raised to a now cloudless sky. I pounded the gravel pathway up to the house, tore up the steps, and found my dad and Granny sitting on the covered porch, breaking green beans into a dishpan. Granny's windchimes and mirrored decorations swayed gently in the soft breeze, not a hint of the storm left.

"You look a site, Little Rabbit," Dad said.

"Scared to death!" Granny added. "What's happened to you, Rachel? See a snake?"

Adults always think kids are ready to tell their trauma, ready to tattle on the forces that have terrorized them. They forget that agonizing fear a child has of not being believed. When the world is still new, you aren't always so sure what is real and what is not. And rather than being laughed at, many kids choose to keep these fears buried.

That's what I did that day. I felt immense guilt at breaking the door, of invading the old school. I stumbled towards Granny, my hand dripping. When asked for the cause of my injury, I just said I'd fallen into the weeds. I remember the intense sting of iodine from an ancient bottle in her bathroom and longing for the gentler Bactine my mother kept at home. I was scolded, but I don't remember the words.

We ate our supper as the sun was setting; home canned green beans and cornbread; steaming hot fried potatoes and onions; chicken crispy and still stinging with the heat of the skillet. I was uncharacteristically quiet, and Dad asked more than once if I was all right. I just nodded and tried to eat.

Bedtime found me tucked up under three of Granny's quilts, the weight of them pinning me to the mattress. The adults sat up and talked by the fireplace, their soft laughter lulling me to sleep.

I woke to darkness and lay silently for a while, trying to gauge the time and listening for the sounds of anyone stirring. I let my feet dangle over the side of the bed and winced as they met the freezing floor. I wrapped one of the smaller blankets tight around my shoulders and crept to the front room.

I peered through the front window into the darkness. Granny had one intense spotlight that lit up the whole front yard. I could see no movement or sunlight and decided it was far too early to be up. I was just about to tiptoe back to bed when I heard the wailing begin again.

There was no wind or open window to explain the sound this time. The cry was faint, but steady, and very human: a woman's cry. I squinted into the dark.

Thick fog swirled slowly around our car tires and the porch steps. I crouched down low, just the tip of my nose and eyes still in the window.

I heard a soft scuffling behind me and then a moment later, Granny was there in the doorway to the living room. She wore a terrycloth robe and rubber-soled house shoes. Her hair was up in rollers and covered with a gauzy scarf. She shuffled right past me, never looking my way, and went right out her front door. I wanted to call after her, to warn her of the screams, but I choked on my words. I finally found my courage and scrambled to my feet, running into the night after her.

The spotlight made a bright pool of the yard but stopped like a wall at the gravel drive. The mist soaked my feet and ankles. I felt the dampness climb up my body. I swam through the whiteness, keeping the dim outline of Granny's shape just barely in site.

She crossed the bridge over the creek and I lost her in the thick fog. It swirled up to meet my face. I tried to fight it, but the urge to open my mouth was stronger than my will. I gulped down big mouthfuls of the wet, cold air. I pushed forward, blind now, worried I'd tumble off the road and down the mountain on the other side.

The wailing was louder now, filling my head. I looked around wildly, no longer thinking to save Granny, just longing for her company. I saw a blur ahead and realized she was climbing the schoolhouse steps. I broke into a run.

Just as I got to the school, I saw the white glow of Granny's fuzzy robe disappear inside. I scrambled up the steps after her, trying to call out the whole time, choking on the mist.

The wailing stopped.

When I finally made it to the top step, I gasped. Granny was sitting on top of one of the old radio cabinets, her slippered feet dangling. A beautiful woman with long silvery hair knelt next to her, holding my granny's wrist to her lips, sucking away. I could hear her smacking her lips. It was the woman I had seen earlier reflected in the pool of my own blood.

I stepped backwards, lost my footing, and tumbled down the whole flight. My head hit every step on the way down, bump, bump, bump. I landed in a tangled pile at the bottom, the wind knocked out of me.

I lay there, gasping like a beached trout, cold fog rolling all around. After a few moments, I felt warm hands on my face, warm breath on my cheek, pushing the mist away. I was lifted to my feet and guided me to a big boulder and made to sit. I looked up and saw not Granny, but the white woman from the puddle. Her hair shone bright as silver, skin pale as milk. And her mouth was blood red.

A sight like that would have sent any other child screaming through the woods. But I sat, enchanted. I felt no fear, only warmth and safety. She smiled at me and stroked me hair. She pulled my wrist towards her face.

“Not her, Banshee.”

Granny stood at the top of the schoolhouse steps, her feet planted wide and her fists balled up on her hips.

“You've had your fill for tonight. No more. Be gone with you,” she scolded.

The white woman smiled down at me again and patted my head one last time. Then she danced off in the foggy woods, disappearing in its shadows.



Granny took the steps one at a time, grunting with the effort. “If it’s not one thing, it’s another. These knees!” she said.

I couldn’t move. I had forgotten to breathe. I sucked in a big gulp of fog, coughing at the unexpected heaviness of the wet air.

“Take it easy, Rachel,” Granny warned. She walked slowly towards me. “You’re all right. Let’s get back to the house.” She pulled me up. We shuffled slowly through the dark, our feet loud in the silent fog. I kept my eyes wide, afraid to meet the white woman again.

We made our way back to the house and Granny pushed me into an overstuffed chair. She bent down to the hearth and built up the fire again, its gentle glow filling the room with orange light.

“Hot chocolate,” she announced and disappeared into the kitchen.

I strained to hear the wailing, half hoping it would happen again. But all I heard was the gentle tinkling of a spoon in a teacup.

Granny appeared back in the doorway, a cup in each hand. I took mine and let the warmth seep into my cold hands. I suddenly realized I was freezing and shook with the surprise of it.

“Now what you saw tonight...You need to promise me you won’t go telling tales if I let you in on the secret,” she started. “You’re not from here, but you’re *of here*, which is the next best thing. Your kinfolk have lived here for almost two hundred years. And in that time, we’ve had to learn to make our peace with all kinds of creatures. Your grandpa farmed these fields for sixty years with the mice and the skunks and the copperheads all around. You just have to walk

carefully and carry a good stick with you. And the deer we used to have, and the raccoons. Why, they'd eat two whole rows of sweet corn every summer. Grandpa just planted two extra rows, knowing that was the price you had to pay to get your own share. This creature you saw tonight, she's not so different."

Granny paused and motioned for me to drink. I took a tiny sip, coughing as the steam filled my mouth.

"The fog," I said in a whisper.

"Yes, the fog is her pet. It searches the dark places for her. Looks for the black lung inside you. Some say it even cures you. But let me tell you about the lady; she's just another thing that clings to these hills. She's always been with us."

Granny wrapped her crocheted afghan around her lap. I waited for her to settle into her big chair. She stared hard at me. "I am going to tell you about the lady the same way my granny told me." She yanked at her robe sleeve, covering her bitten wrist. "My Granny said the White Lady is the Banshee, the woman of the fairies. She keens when death is near. She also keens when she's hungry."

"Keens..." I tried to word.

"A long, shrill wailing. Now some say she followed us from the old world. Our Irish and Scottish kin knew her well, the white lady with long silver hair. The stories from the old ways, passed down from Granny to granddaughter, say she comes to comfort us when the men cannot. When they've died before us, as they so often do. She is a reflection of our sorrow. She appears to those who will soon know death. She warns us of our fate."

I shivered and gulped my drink, desperate to get warm.

“But she...She was...” I stammered.

“Hush, Rachel. I know you saw something shocking. I’ll get to that. But let me tell you what I know. Here about sixteen years ago we had a bad mining disaster down on Hurricane Creek. An explosion caused a collapse, killing 38 men. Now those boys were trapped, some of them for a few days, before we got them all out. And when all that rock gives way, it’s not a pretty thing.” She stopped, studying my face. “You all right to hear this, Little Rabbit?”

I nodded.

“All right. Now. They laid them out in the high school gym and the women and children poured in to go through their pockets and study their boots, trying to find daddies and husbands and sons. You understand, their faces were....they weren’t what you’d call recognizable. Women started wailing then, their cries filling up the holler and echoing off every mountain from Hyden to Hell-For-Certain. The Banshee, she always comes around death, all this noise drew her out. She feeds on those mourning cries, gets fat with their grief. And there was plenty to be had that day.

“Three of the men were from here at the head of Wooten Creek. They were brought up here and were laid out in the old schoolhouse. Martin Cotrell, Morris Mullins, Timothy Shancey. Their women were there, washing their dead, wailing and crying. They sat up with the bodies all night, waiting for morning to come and bring the preacher with it.

“In the night, the women heard the Banshee keening and it grew so loud, they ran out into the woods. When the cries stopped, they came back to find the bodies all white as sheets.

Rumors spread that the Banshee had drained them of their blood. The preacher scoffed, but we knew what we'd seen. Bite marks on the men's arms. Their color too pale, even for death."

The cold I'd been feeling gripped me. I shook so hard I dropped my empty teacup and it rolled over the rag rug to Granny's foot. She bent down and picked it up. "Can't read cocoa like tea leaves," she giggled. "Come over here."

I scrambled into her lap, my long legs dangling. She wrapped her afghan around me and I sank into her body, searching for her heat. She rocked me a little.

"Baby girl, I tell you this to calm your fears, not to feed them. You have to know this about the Banshee: she is ours."

I didn't like that idea much. The broad, white face had been angry and terrifying. Who would want something like that hanging around?

"Can't you send her away? Say a spell or ask the preacher to bless the schoolhouse?"

Granny squeezed my shoulders. "Now listen to the rest, and you'll see why we claim her and ask her to stay.

"After the miners were buried, one of the widows, Bonnie Mullins, she was taking it harder than the others. She about grieved herself to death. Wouldn't eat. Wouldn't wash. Took to wandering around barefoot at night. We were all fearful for her."

I pictured a young woman crying, walking the woods, the rocks and sticks making her feet bleed.

"She had nearly wasted away, when one night we all heard the keening again, loud as a freight train. I thought it was a tornado, finally come to Wooten Creek, but I knew it for what it

was as soon as I stepped off our porch. I could see the Banshee, standing in the road. She was beckoning me with her long, pale hand. I had no choice but to follow.”

I buried my face in the scratchy front of Granny’s white nightgown. She took my chin in her hand and tilted my it up with her soft warm hand. “You ready? You’re going to like this part.”

I had my doubts. My heart was racing.

“I followed her up the road and into the woods. We walked down a path towards the creek bottom. And soon I saw Bonnie there, lying by a big fallen tree. I ran to her. She was half-dead, starved and cold. I found her just in time. The Banshee had saved Bonnie. After that night, Bonnie started to take to her food again, started to have some interest in the land of the living. So you see, our Banshee, she doesn’t just come at a killing. She comes to warn us, too.”

I did like that part. I felt my heartbeat slow. I sighed and laid my head on Granny’s soft shoulder.

“I’ve been alone up here in this holler a long time. Your grandpa left me ten years ago. She came on the night before he died. I heard her keening out in his watermelon patch. I asked Grandpa if he could hear it, but he told me it was coyotes. He got up the next day and went to hoe the corn. He didn’t come home for his noon dinner and I went out to look for him. Found him between the rows, his hat next to him and his hands folded on his chest. They said it was his heart. I know my Banshee was with him because I know she laid him out like that for me, all peaceful and calm, as a comfort to me.”

Granny stood up slowly, pouring me from her lap. She walked over to the mantel and took down a black and white photo. “Here we are, on our wedding day. He was just home from

the war. Look how handsome he was in his uniform.” I could hear the tears in her voice. I studied their impossibly young faces, their smiles broad and shy. She placed it back on the mantel and sat down, pulling me onto her lap again.

“I would’ve had to move to town long ago if it weren’t for my Banshee. I was all alone after Grandpa was gone, all by myself here on this farm. All the neighbors had moved away by then. The whole holler was closing in on itself, the woods taking it back. Oh, the boys come to help. Your daddy is here every spring to plant. Your cousins come every summer to weed and work. We get the crop in. But the nights are long and lonesome. My Banshee comes to visit, right here on the porch.”

I glanced quickly out the front windows, terrified of seeing her there. But the rocking chairs were empty.

“She doesn’t chat. But she sits with me while I sew or shuck corn. That’s why I have all those mirrors hanging around out there. You can’t see her unless she wants you to. But a mirror reveals her, every time.”

“When I saw her the first time, yesterday, there was a storm. I thought there was a storm...and I ran into the schoolhouse for shelter. I had cut my hand and there was a pool of my blood on the floor. I saw her reflection there...”

“And then you came out and there hadn’t been a storm at all, right? She does things like that. Makes me feel half crazy sometimes. But she was trying to show herself to you. I take comfort in her. She saw my mother safely to the other side. And all my sisters and brothers who died up here long ago. Of course Grandpa, too. And she’s better than a guard dog.”

I laughed a little at that. “Granny,” I said. “Really?”

“I was picking peas this past spring when I heard her starting up. Don’t often hear her during daylight. I thought my time was up—”

I gripped her arm.

“I heard her over and over, getting closer. I decided to go find her. No sense waiting for death to hit. Meet it head on, I thought. So I walked towards her voice. Crossed the creek; she seemed further downstream. So I followed the road on down past the old mill and guess what I saw!”

“What?”

“A whole bevy of those big pickup trucks. It was loggers, coming onto my land illegally, stealing my timber. Now this farm isn’t worth much for the dirt, but the trees have gotten a good size. A big poplar might bring a thousand dollars. That’s nothing to sneeze at!”

I pictured Granny coming up on a bunch of big, strong men all alone. She was such a small old lady.

“I bet you were pretty scared!” I said.

“Scared? Shoot, I was mad as an old wet hen. I marched right up into those woods and found them, the scoundrels. I knew them all. Paul Clancey’s bunch, from down around Cutshin. Him and all his boys. I walked right up to him and stuck my finger in his chest. I said, ‘I guess you didn’t figure a lady old as I am could hear your chainsaws down at the house. Well, I did. And y’all are trespassing!’ And he did the God awfulest thing, Rachel. He laughed at me. I guess I was a little less angry and lot more afraid then. But My Banshee, she started up, right at that

moment. She started that awful wail. I was afraid at first they wouldn't be able to hear her. I wasn't sure she was something just anyone could experience. But those boys tucked their tails and ran. They peeled out of here and left nothing but tracks. Never came back."

Granny was giggling to herself at the memory.

I wasn't so sure about this creature. "Granny, she was...biting you..."

"Oh, honey. There's no one dying up here anymore and I'm taking too long to do it. My Banshee, she's hungry. She feeds on death. So I give her what I can to pay my dues."

I grasped her arm and pushed up her sleeve. Two pinpricks of bright red blood stood out on her white wrist.

"I've got high blood pressure anyway. I let her have a little drink from time to time and it calms her down. And my pressure comes right down, too. Not much of a price to pay for her company and protection."

I stared up at her. I thought of her lonely there, no one to talk to for weeks. I thought of all those acres of woods, growing up around her, thicker every year.

"What will happen to the Banshee when you're gone? You're the last one here," I said softly.

"I think she'll find her way down out of this holler. I hope she does. Now that you've met her, maybe she'll follow you home the day they put me in the ground. Do not fear her. Pay her little price. She'll watch over you, too."

I was too stunned to speak.



Granny patted my head. “Going on daylight soon. Let’s go fry up some eggs. I’m starved, myself. All that work tonight.” She winked at me and shuffled into her yellow kitchen.