

Late Summer

Saxton jammed the butt of his rifle into his shoulder and aimed it at the flash of movement. He kept the front sight trained on a slim form as it moved down the steep slope of a hill his pa, long dead from typhoid, had nicknamed Baldy Knob. His higher position on an unnamed ridge across a deep ravine gave him the perfect vantage point over his target.

Sweat trickled off his forehead and dripped onto the walnut gunstock as an oppressive sun sweltered the entire area around Crescent Gap, maybe even all of Appalachia. He kept the man in his sights as he waded across the small creek that snaked along the ravine; far longer than necessary to determine his closest neighbor had encroached upon his lands, again.

Saxton lowered his rifle and slung it onto his shoulder. His gun sling, a ragged leather strap, dug into the same groove of sore muscles as if he'd never removed the nine-pound rifle. He shifted the gun to a more comfortable position, but no matter how he placed the rifle, it brought dull, deep in the muscle pain.

Saxton slipped between the evergreens and snuck through brambles and thickets as he followed Jessum, who continued his feigned pursuit of game, unaware of his follower. As his neighbor encroached deeper into Saxton's ancestral lands, another quick flush of anger coursed through him and he fought the urge to holler at Jessum—shame him, if that was possible.

After a few moments, Jessum bungled his way over a small riser, making more noise than the warmup band at the Grange. Saxton's flare up cooled. Times were hard, and they were getting harder. His own keen awareness of that uncontested fact was better than most. The leanness and scorching temperatures from an unusual Indian Summer were getting to good people, good church going folk.

Out of boredom and an opportunity to practice stealth, Saxton continued to follow Jessum. About fifteen minutes later, he changed direction, and it piqued Saxton's curiosity. In time, the roundabout loop would've led them back into Jessum's own territory, made by complex archaic pacts. The turn bore them right toward the field being cleared by their womenfolk.

Why would Jessum go there? That was women's work, or at least would be, while game remained scarce. As he tried to comprehend his neighbor's move, Saxton scratched at the raw, pus-glazed rash of poison sumac afflicting his legs, arms, torso, and face. The misery could not quell his temperament, even though the painful rash reached its peak a few days ago.

If the bane had been self-inflicted, such as the last time when he rubbed it all over himself to quell a fit of rage for missing an easy shot at some grouse, the discomfort might've taken the edge off. The insidious eruption of skin was accidental and elevated the foulness coursing through his veins instead of soothing it.

Soon his neighbor strolled out into the small opening of a field taking shape, a crude rectangle void of trees, large rocks, and tangled weeds. Saxton stopped and crouched between a boulder and a sizeable oak tree. His own wife, their two mules, and Jessum moved about in the partial clearing and not much else. He held his breath, unsure if he would be able to hear them. When they began speaking, their voices murmured, but still carried well enough.

Jessum nodded. "Where's Lew and Gertrude?"

"Your wife's fetching more water and one of Gert's young'uns came to get her. Said their best milk cow went down and couldn't get up on its own."

"How's Sax fairing?"

"Not so well. How 'bout yourself?"

“Great today. I got a boar down ‘bout two miles back, but I plum forgot my knife.” His shoulders moved up and down as if he were a gobbler frisking its chest.

Sarah’s eyes widened. “A hog? Is he big?”

“Oh, taint huge, but he’s right nice considering.”

“Mm mmm, that’ll be good eating. Better than the jerked ducks and such we’ve been getting by on.”

“I’d ask y’all over but...”

“Oh, I know. Don’t fret ‘bout it none, Jess. Them crops of yours... they’s looking better than last year’s bumper crop.” She turned away from him and started fidgeting with the harness spanning between the mules.

“That’s awful kind of you to say so. I think they’s far enough ‘long that this heat won’t bother them a bit.”

“Lord, I hope them beautiful fields remain impervious to the scorching temps.”

“Yessum, me too. So, is the heat getting to you?”

“Oh my, yes. It’s suffering and suffocating. Makes me want to go on down to the river, strip off all my clothes, and jump right in.” She cringed after the last word escaped her lips.

“Maybe we should do that.”

“Your wife ain’t going to give me no eggs and such for helping clear this field if I dash off to the river with you and go skinny dipping. ‘Sides, ain’t you got a hog to clean?”

“Oh yeah, I nearly forgot ‘bout that. Talking to you always seems to distract me from most everything.”

“I’m so sure. Well, I’d better get back to it or this field ain’t never gonna’ get done.”

“Hold on a minute. How ‘bout we leave one of them mules for Lew and take the other one to get my hog?” He cocked his head off to one side and stared at the mules as if they were timber rattlers, ready to strike without rattling first.

“Oh, I don’t know if that’s a grand idea.”

“That’d be worth at least the eggs and whatever else you all worked out—plus a small ham and a hock or so.”

“Why don’t you take one mule and I’ll keep working the field with the other?”

Jessum’s face contorted. “Naw, I’ve been ‘round them damn stubborn things ‘nuff to know they’s men haters.”

“You’re quite right ‘bout that.” A jovial smile removed the scowl from her face, and she eyed Jessum as if he’d changed colors like a paper doily.

“So? Is it a deal?”

“Ham sure sounds real good. I s’pose there ain’t no sense leaving one mule behind, they’re much better as a team.”

“We shan’t be gone that long.” He stretched his lanky legs and torso to make ready for another long trek.

As the little group plodded along, Saxton stayed out in front of them. Wave after wave of hot wind roasted his flesh and made his rash itchier, unbearable. Sarah and Jessum’s voices cut through the forest, but most of their chatter came to him as muffled garb. He traversed the rough terrain in utter silence, doing his best to guess where Jessum was leading them.

The mules picked their way across the terrain with a sluggish but determined gait. Sarah held the lead ropes in her right hand like a bothersome hem on a billowing dress. The mules

whipped their tails and twitched their long, stiff ears showing mild concern, but followed her lead like well-trained coon hounds. Jessum walked a few feet ahead of the mules on the same side as her. Their conversation continued as though they were sitting at a picnic table sipping iced sun tea after a stimulating sermon by Pastor Altieri.

“Say, you ‘member when we were in school?” Jessum lifted his hat and wiped his brow.

“That was a hundred years ago.”

“That’s for sure. Back then—I... I wanted to kiss you so bad it ‘bout drove me crazy.”

“When we were kids, you wanted to kiss all the girls.”

“But I really wanted to kiss you.”

“Little ole me? Well, what stopped you?” Her face flushed, but the redness caused by walking in the heat made it hard to discern.

“Cuz you were already with Saxton. Your eyes said how much you liked him.”

“I liked you and all, but I became infatuated with Sax.”

Jessum twisted his head and peered at Sarah’s face, a longer gaze than the quick glances he’d stole the entire time they strolled along. “What’d you a done if I’d have kissed you?”

“I’d have told Sax of course... but I guess we’ll never know how it would’ve made me feel.”

“It’s better that a way, I s’pose.”

“Yes, it is. Who’d of ever guessed we’d be neighbors?”

“Not me.” He tripped over a fallen tree branch, and it tore his gaze away from her.

Saxton remained ahead, out of sight, and as quiet as the surrounding woods, yet fretted he might not find another opportunity to eavesdrop. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. His

feet ached like he'd ran to town and back, an arduous six-mile trip. His pains mounted as the foray played out before him, but he ignored all of it.

Trees and bushes kept impeding his views. He squinted against the bright sunlight and long distance, trying to take everything in. It was hard to tell, but his wife's white cotton work shirt had at least two more buttons undone than before. The yellow bonnet dangled from her hand and sweat beads glistened on her forehead. Jessum continued to cock up like a rooster ready to announce the morning. *Damn the bastard's pluck. How had the blundering swaggerer get a hog down?*

Jessum said, "That offer for the river still stands."

"It does seem like it's gotten hotter." She used her bonnet to shield her face from the sun's intense rays. She gazed at the yellow globe for as long as she could, like she was praying to God to turn down the heat for a little while.

"It's all this walking. I'd offer you that kiss if there's any chance you'd take me up on it."

"No chance at all."

"Cuz of Sax?"

"No, cuz of God."

"Ah, but don't this heat of God make you want to do something a little—" He glanced up at the sky and then right back down again.

If Sarah noticed his action, she hid it well. "Jess, just cuz it's hotter than blazes out here don't mean God ain't watching. I believe he's testing us."

"So, if it weren't for God, then you'd kiss me?"

“If it weren’t for God, then I’d probably do a lot of crazy, stupid things.” She eyed him up and down, as if he were something other than their neighbor or the other marriageable boys from her childhood.

“You sure are a great Christian. If God were standing right here, I’d do all that with you and more.” He stopped himself from taking another quick glance up to the heavens, and the reverential fight made his head shudder.

“You’re only saying that cuz of the heat.”

“I meant every word I said.”

“You better watch it, or you’re gonna go to hell.”

“It’d be worth it.” Another spasm, but this time his entire body trembled.

For the first time since they’d met in the clearing, a long, awkward pause in their conversation ensued. The heat continued to build as if layers of clothes were being piled upon Saxton’s back. The snap of twigs and clop of hooves were all that shattered the quietness. With greater difficulty, he remained their stalker. He thanked his hunting prowess for his ability to dart around the obstacles with the agility of a spooked sneaky quail unwilling to take flight.

“I won’t apologize for what I said.”

“It’s not I who expects you to.”

“If it were so bad, then why in tarnation didn’t he strike me down?” Another full body convulsion.

“The Lord don’t work that away and you know it.” She glanced at him and then back to the forest floor after his face darkened like an ear of field corn covered in smut.

“The longer I walk upon this Earth, the less I understand him.”

“Strange, cuz the longer I live the better I understand his ways.”

Saxton hustled up the bank of a ravine and dropped into a crouch behind a downed sycamore tree. He peeked over the tree’s midsection, collapsed by decay, and smiled. In a small clearing, the distinct form of a medium-sized hog lay near the center: a mere thirty yards away. The group would arrive in minutes, so he hopped over the log and worked fast to hide the kill, then cover his tracks. With seconds to spare, he situated himself in a dense mass of undergrowth and waited.

“You know what they say about non-believers.” Sarah’s moony face glowed with righteousness, more than it ever had in church or their in-home bible studies.

“I also know... hey, whar’ in the hell is it?” Another tic stuttered into an upper body convulsion.

“Where’s what?” Her mooned face disappeared as if the spirit left her in the lurch. A fearful, confused look replaced it after his words hit her.

“The hog, I left it a laying right here.”

“You sure?”

“I shot it over there, near the center of the clearing.” No more tics came, and his body language transformed with every word he said.

“I don’t see a hog and I don’t see any blood neither.”

“It didn’t bleed much... it was a darn good shot.”

Saxton heaved and panted while covering his mouth with his collar, grateful to catch a breather from his exhaustive efforts to steal the prize. Euphoria of his great luck made the heat and his rash nonexistent.

Jessum flung his rifle and game bag near the base of an Elmwood tree. Their neighbor stood transfixed while the mules and Sarah observed him with fearful curiosity. Without warning, he dashed over to the center of clearing, which caused Sarah to jump from the unexpected blur of motion.

He studied the area for a long time and then walked circles away from the clearing's center. His actions grew more spasmodic and frantic. The mules swished their tails and twitched their ears as they waited. His wife shifted her stance dozens of times and tried to keep her face as expressionless as possible. A few of Jessum's large arcing circles brought him close to Saxton's hiding spot. When less than twenty feet separated them, he would turn back and start the search all over again.

After twenty minutes, Jessum paused and glared at Sarah. "It don't make sense."

"Maybe it was still alive, or a bear came 'long and took it."

"Did the bear cover its tracks? Some bastard must've done stole ma hog."

"You better get on to the house cuz you're talking and acting crazy. You must need some water or food." Sarah seemed as if her words of piety lifted her off the ground and she was talking down to the tall man.

"Times is tight. By God, sleepy ole Mrs. Alexander stole a loaf of bread and a rhubarb torte off'n Maybel Bearer's windowsill not more than a week ago."

"Do what you want, I'm heading back."

"I'm going to look for my hog till I find it or the son's a bitches who stole it. If'n I find the bastards, I'm going to kill them." He studied her, as if she might've stolen his precious

trophy. A smile broke across Saxton's sore lips, and he winced from the pain. He ran his tongue, caked with tacky phlegm, over them, which irritated them more instead of giving him any relief.

"I'm telling Lew you're out here and that the heat has done made you lose your mind."

"You don't believe me."

"I ain't sure what to believe."

"God damn it. I shot a hog—you must believe me." His voice shrilled louder with each word.

"It don't matter what I believe." Her air of virtuousness had deflated in seconds. She backed away from him as if Old Scratch was grinning at her while beckoning her into his den of debauchery.

"Don't you see, it matters more than anything."

"I'm leaving."

"Don't go. Not like this, please don't go." Jessum's hardness fell apart at her instantaneous movement to depart with the mules in tow.

"Jess, you need help."

"What I need is you."

"God be with you Jessum, God be with you."

Saxton's gaze followed Sarah and the mules until they disappeared back through the trees. His neighbor remained rooted to the ground, stupefied and unsure of what to do next. They might as well be standing next to one another, gaping at the trees that had swallowed Sarah and the animals. This time the silence became so heavy, so repressive Saxton absorbed every noise like a field of head-high shatter cane.

The clomp of hooves and snap of sticks crackled through the forest as insects that dared to defy the heat buzzed and hummed—a symphony of defiance. A leaf departing the tree earlier than its counterparts crinkled when it landed on a growing pile. He wanted to slip away, but the quietness forced him to wait.

Soon, Jessum trembled out of statue form back into a crazed man. Jessum scoured the area for his kill, shaking his head in utter disbelief repeatedly. Soon he erupted into a fit of rage, as if the devil himself had possessed him. When it seemed like his blasphemous tirade against everything under the sun was at its height, Saxton slipped away.

The rants and raves of the madman carried to him as he walked away in a moderate stride. Jessum cried out against God, the thief, the heat, but he castigated himself more than anything else. Saxton was halfway back to his own house when his neighbor's epic tantrum became lost in the forest behind him.

Saxton strode along the side of his house and rushed up onto the back porch. He wedged his body into a student desk, blistered and warped by years of the elements tormenting it. He engulfed the strange piece of furniture, but an average sized man in a small space takes up a lot of room. The desk, acquired by his father when he was young, came with a muddled, incoherent explanation to his mother: a mystery that still flummoxed him.

A thick wall of woods stood in front of him, a disenchanted audience judging him. He pondered the earlier part of the day for a long time. Her words rang out in his mind as the treely audience haunted him with cruel whispers and laughter. *'For God, for God, for God' ...*

Later, once the temperature cooled down a few degrees, he set out again. He hunted, but he was just going through the motions, even more so than the morning outing. Success was improbable, and he had other matters to deal with.

Soon, he neared the area where he'd left Jessum in a raging fit of blood searing anger. He crept through the trees as he closed the remaining distance to the location. His eyes darted around for movement and the stillness resounded louder than ever before. His mind focused as if he was inches away from getting an elusive gobbler lurking within range of a sure shot. By now Jessum must be long gone, but the risk he might return to take another look for his prized kill remained.

He pushed through some brambles to enter the small opening and caught sight of Jessum on the other side of the expanse. Saxton kneeled to lower his profile. Jessum was curled up in the fetal position at the base of an Elmwood tree. Saxton pushed away his impulse to hurry away from the site. The noises and signs of movement he expected from Jessum were absent. Saxton made his approach across the clearing to the lifeless body as if he were about to finish a wounded animal.

As he passed the area where Jessum claimed he shot the hog, he paused. He searched for signs of blood and evidence of his theft, but none existed. Countless tracks from Jessum's boots marked the ground in all directions from scouring the area in search of his pig. He smirked and moved on.

When his long shadow cast over the limp pile of flesh, he grew more cautious and slowed his approach. Like a tombstone giving unnecessary shade to the occupant below it, his stretched shadow darkened Jessum's body. Towering over the lifeless figure, the man's unpleasant body

odor grew more pungent. The stench, no stronger or worse than his own foulness, made their vast differences more apparent.

For a few minutes, he loomed over Jessum. The well-worn clothes fit the man in more ways than snugness. Dirt, torn leaves, and blanched grass covered his outer garments. The area underneath him was all torn up because he'd writhed upon the ground for hours. Was the poor, dumb sap even breathing? If so, it was faint, and if he died, then it happened moments ago.

"Jessum are you alright?" No response came, and Saxton used his foot to nudge Jessum's leg. "Jessum say something if you's all right." The balled-up body of his neighbor remained lifeless.

He laid his rifle and hunting pack down on the ground a few feet away from Jessum's gear strewn all over the place. After easing onto his knees, he rolled Jessum onto his back. He leaned over him and tried to discern if the neighbor was still breathing. Jessum's eyes remained closed, and the immobile mass seemed dead.

Having no other choice, Saxton placed his face closer to Jessum's lips. Light breathes tickled his ear and confirmed the man still lived. His breathing was weak and raspy. Saxton shook the catatonic man with a few jostles; gentleness he'd have used to rustle one of his children from sleep. He got no response, so he began shaking him with more vigor and abruptness. After three to four minutes of manhandling the limp form, he stopped.

Jessum groaned and said, "Whaaat?"

"Jess, its Sax." He stood up and stepped back to give him room. "What in the hell ails ya?"

“I searched high and low, but I can’t find my hog anywhars.” He opened his eyes, but it took him some time to locate Saxton standing in front of him. Then he snapped them shut, like he went into deep thought or prayer.

“What’re you talking ‘bout?”

“I shot a hog and the damn thing vanished or...”

“You want me to help you find it?” He scanned the area pretending to search for the man’s pig but checked to make sure they were still alone. When his gazed returned to Jessum, the man’s eyes were open and wide-eyed, like he was looking at Christ or the Holy Spirit. Saxton stopped himself from flinching away as Jessum stared into his eyes. After a bit, he leaned away from the man, adding much needed distance between the intense connection.

“It’s no use, I’ve looked every which-a-ways for it.”

“Here, you need some water.”

“Lew brang me some, but I done chased her off.” He snarled at Saxton warning him as if to try and run him off too.

“I ain’t Lew, now drink it god damn you.”

“I won’t. I’m punishing myself since I went against God’s will. He’s punishing me by taking away my hog, but it ain’t enough.” His face softened and awe from staring at a religious icon morphed into the calmness Saxton always associated with his neighbor.

Saxton squinted. “It ain’t never enough. What’d you do?”

“It too horrible to tell you, but it was bad, real bad.”

“God forgives if you let him, now drink. He ain’t quite ready for you just yet.”

“How do you know that?” The man’s eyes latched on to his. The childlike gaze made pity rise into Saxton’s stomach, which pushed up into his chest.

“Cuz he must have sent me here to find your sorry ass.”

“That makes a lot of sense.” He turned his head and coughed.

“Let’s get you on home.”

Saxton shook his head. *Pitiful, so fucking pitiful.*

It was a struggle, but he knelt and forced his neighbor to drink some water Saxton carried with him whenever he remembered to bring along his canteen. Jessum drank as if he were a stubborn young runt that needed extra milk but fought against the idea of accepting the additional help from a foreign entity. It must have looked damn strange as he cradled his neighbor and forced him to drink a few gulps of water.

As soon as he could, Saxton hefted Jessum and draped one of his rubbery arms across his own shoulder. He gathered up their gear, which proved difficult, but leaving any of it for a

second trip was unacceptable. For most of the long trek to his neighbor's home, he carried Jessum more than he walked on his own. All their belongings, additional weight upon him, made the trek more arduous. The objects pushed into areas of his body unfamiliar with an extra amount of pressure or pain. The brambles, branches, and rough terrain beat them with savagery as they made their way using the most direct route to Jessum's home. Saxton welcomed the horrific torture, but not as much as if it'd occurred before the day's events.

When he got Jessum back to his homestead, the wondrous aromas of an active kitchen wafted in the light wind. Lewellen rushed out of the front door to greet them. He tried to ignore the food she'd prepped and placed on the table as they helped Jessum through the kitchen. The springs squealed as they slumped him down onto the mattress and then laid him flat on his back. Lewellen's worryment lessened the longer she tended to her husband, but her furrowed brow remained.

Saxton stood behind Jessum's wife while she cared for him in their most private setting. He shifted his weight many times, and each movement caused the floorboards to creak. The obtrusive noise flushed his awkwardness into every part of him. He concentrated on a vase of fresh wildflowers sitting on a crude mahogany dresser to help him push through the emotional discomfort.

Every so often he studied the younger woman. She was as good looking as Sarah, yet her buxom and voluptuous figure contrasted with Sarah's lean hardiness. His wolfish lust followed her curves and lumps. However, his allure lacked genuine conviction or barbarity. Over the years, he could not understand why his attraction to her was always diminished.

As she tended to Jessum with great loving devotion, he realized the way she looked at her man pushed all the coveting thoughts out of his mind. Her love helped keep his muted wolfish wants at bay. Coming between something so pure was a notion too disturbing for him to act upon. The amount of devilish evil it would take to wedge himself between them was immense, perhaps insurmountable.

When he turned to walk to the kitchen, many of the floorboards croaked out a chorus of creaks. Giving them their privacy became paramount and easing his awkwardness an added bonus. Silence in the house indicated the older children were still outside completing the evening chores. One of the youngest of their brood, a pretty little girl with long, black hair peeked at him from around the corner of a door. He didn't smile and gawped at the child. She shied away into her haven, the other bedroom of their small home. He pondered the similarities of their homes and if overlaid they would match with uncanny precision.

He'd been in their homestead many times before, but no further than the conjoined kitchen and main room. Now that he'd been deeper into their sanctuary, it was like he'd breached an odd code of conduct. The label trespasser or interloper made his rash burn, yet thief gave him no pause.

Lewellen returned to the kitchen and continued to adulate him until the warm rush of blood engorged his face and head. Her stubborn insistence for him to eat some of their meager dinner agitated him. His heated anger to make her realize he had no intention of supping upon her food burned hotter as he stood near the table refusing. The full proof way she could thank him for what he'd done and her ability to accept his cordial no thank you became untenable.

“I said no, and I damn well meant it.” He grabbed the door handle and yanked it open with too much force. The door slammed against the wall and knocked a few items off a shelf, but he rushed through the entryway without stopping or looking back.

Night was in full swing when he made his abrupt break from her insistency to dine. The darkness had overcome their world. The voices of children lilted out from the barn as he shuffled past the old structure. Laughter and jovial voices revealed the chores neared completion. The pinpricks of a few stars dotted the blue-black sky and a screech owl called out.

Saxton paused for a moment to reflect upon the consternation on Lewellen’s face when he rebuked her offers and apologized over his shoulder: her shadowy figure on the porch blotting out the light. Perhaps she’d accepted his apology for not accepting her gracious offer and the fiery manner he told her no. Perhaps she would question his actions for as long as she would live.

He’d said he was sorry and wished he could muster remorse. The last thing he wanted was to take part in their paltry meal. He headed toward the clearing, dreading to finish his dirty deed. Field dressing a day-old hog in poor lighting would be rank cumbersome work. And hauling the carcass home in the dark would take the real toll, but at least it had cooled off a few degrees.

End