

The Forgiving River

If Adam's hands hadn't been so cold as he reached out his hand to steady himself, he would have felt that the bark of the towering pine tree was coarse, furrowed and scaly.

If he hadn't been so scared as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, he would have heard the crunch of the needles beneath his feet.

If his lungs hadn't been about to explode as he struggled to catch his breath, he would have noticed that it was pouring out of his mouth in a steam and mixing with the fog that enveloped him.

The men scrambled by his hiding place, laughing at their evil deed. They passed so close that he could smell them. They smelled like everything the night had held: cheap whiskey, sweat, blood, burning flesh, singed hair, fear.

Once they passed, he leaned against the base of the tree, feeling the adrenaline drain from his body, leaving him weak. He sat there, man-spine to tree-trunk until his breathing returned to normal, his heart rate slowed, and his nausea subsided. Then, he pulled himself wearily to his feet and made his way, stumbling and disoriented, through the woods, up the hill, to the safety and warmth of home. When at last he reached his house, he tripped up the stairs to the porch, threw open the door, and collapsed on the bed, where he spent the remainder of the night in a fitful troubled sleep, thrashing and crying out, dreaming of it, waking up, gasping for air, and then drifting off to dream of it again.

He awoke the next morning and remembered it. He was instantly sickened and raced up the hall to the bathroom where the previous night's nausea overcame him. When the waves ebbed, he leaned his head against the cool porcelain. After a couple of minutes, he stood, shaky and unsteady, but he was upright.

He leaned on the vanity, putting all of his weight on his right hand, and wiped his eyes with the back of his left hand. As his hand came down, he caught his own reflection in the

mirror. He looked deep into his own eyes, questioning himself, wondering what to do. As bad as it was, he couldn't tell. He was part of it, for God's sake. And if he did tell, they would come for him. So standing there, looking at himself, probing his soul, he made his decision. It was over. He would forget it. Never visit that place again. Not the place in the woods. Not the place in his memory.

Adam worked in the hot noon sun, working on the dilapidated tractor, his hands and lower arms covered in grease, dirt and sweat. The knuckles on both hands showed torn skin in various stages of healing, tears caused by a slipped wrench or a wayward rope. He paused and took his cap off, pulled his arm across his forehead, wiping away the sweat that threaten to drip into his green, troubled eyes.

Off in the distance, he could see Jasper, his old bloodhound, running across the field, carrying something in his mouth. Jasper loped up to Adam, dropped the treasure at his master's feet and looked up at him, waiting for a rewarding pat on the head or scratch behind the ears. Adam smiled down at the dopey dog face and reached out a hand to pat the dog. But before his hand reached Jasper, Adam froze, his hand suspended in mid air. At his feet, laid a human hand.

Adam looked away at the woods, and then down at the hand. At the woods. At the hand. Hand. Woods. Hand. The panic build slowly in him. Rising from his groin, through his stomach, chest, heart, burning his throat, filling his head with tightness and chilliness. The river of despair that he swam in his nightmares now spilled over into his waking hours and threatened to drown him. It was almost as if Adam could feel the water rising around his ankles.

Slowly, he knelt down to pick up the hand. It was hers, there was no doubt about it. The skin was callused from doing laundry, dishes, gardening, all of the duties that a wife would have, not to mention the plowing, sowing, livestock care, all the duties the wife of a farmer and a drunk would have.

On the back of the hand was a smudge of dried blood and about two inches above the ridge was the jagged, charred edge. He turned the hand over, and noticed the bruise around the ring finger and the abnormal angle at which the finger bent. They had yanked on her finger until the ring came off, dislocating her finger in the process.

He was going to have to go see them, he thought with a sickly braveness. He hated himself for being such a coward, but even in the blazing sun, he felt a shiver tremble up his spine.

He got into his dusty pickup, slammed the door, rolled the window down, and gunned out of the driveway and up the road, kicking up a cloud of powdery dust as he went.

As he drove, he thought back in amazement at how it came to be that he would be involved in something so dirty and criminal as this. It had all started innocently enough, just a night out for poker with Jack. Now he drove up the road with a dead woman's hand on the seat beside him, on his way to reason with a pair of madmen.

On that night, he and Jack had gone to a friend of Jack's. Adam didn't even know the names of the men at the poker game that night. They were drunk when the pair arrived and as he pulled a chair across the wooden floor, he had pushed a tiny stab of apprehension aside. Although Adam hadn't had anything to drink that night, Jack had immediately accepted a drink. The poker game really never took off. It turned out to be a night of loud drinking, laughter, and cursing. Made uncomfortable by the abusive boasts and violent threats, Adam prepared to leave. But before he could, a fight broke out between two of the men. In a flash, surprising considering the size of their bellies, both men were on their feet, sending their chairs clattering to the floor. Although everyone else in the room was hushed, the two men began to yell threats at each other.

Before he could react, Adam caught a glimpse of something white and soft out of the corner of his eye. He turned to see a woman standing in the doorway of what he assumed to be the bedroom. She was dressed in a white, flowing gown, made of a gauzy, dingy fabric, worn thin by age and frequent washings.

His recollection of the night was cut short by the cabin coming into view. It little more than a shed, and had, at one time, been white. However, what was left of the paint was barely visible, most of it having peeled away years ago. The yard had only a few sporadic patches of knee high grass.

Adam made his way across the dusty yard, onto the porch, and rapped on the unlatched door, which swung open wide. He stepped inside, realizing immediately that the cabin had been abandoned. The chairs were still overturned, the room still in disarray.

He walked over to the fireplace, knelt down, and placed his hand on the fireplace hearth. The stones were loose, as he knew they would be. He pulled one of them out and turned it over. He closed his eyes when he saw the sandstone rock stained a dark blood brown. His mind flashed back and she was there, sprawled out on the hearth, her auburn hair spilling to one side of her head, her blood pooling out on the other, the two together forming a gruesome halo.

Adam choked back a sob and ran from the cabin. Once outside, he slid down the wall and sat on the porch. The sweat poured off his forehead and he realized that the men were gone and they had left him to take care of this. It really wasn't his problem. Unless it was taken into consideration that he was there, did nothing to protect her, helped dispose of her body on his land, and had not reported it to the authorities. Oh, and the fact that he had a murdered woman's hand on the seat of his pickup. He started to laugh out loud in hysteria, at the hysteria of it all, but only a sob came out.

He stumbled down the path to his pickup and crawled into the cab. He banged his head on the steering wheel. He was in deep and the water was rising.

When Adam reached the edge of the woods, he didn't hesitate. He tore through the underbrush, making his way to the place in the woods where they had taken her.

After the life had left her that night, they had wrapped her in a sheet, turned the blood soaked hearth stones over, and carried her limp body to the woods. Once there, they had

soaked her sensible gown and the blood soaked sheet in gasoline and lit her up. While she burned, the men seemed unmoved to the horror of what they had done. As they talked and continued to drink, watching to make sure she was completely disposed of, Adam was able to slip away and up the hill. Now he was headed back down the hill...to finish it.

When he got to the clearing, he saw the large blackened circle where they had burned her body. He saw immediately that she hadn't burned completely. Animals had scattered what remained of her body. He had to gather the remaining parts of her body and dispose of them elsewhere. He picked up a charred stick, squatted beside the circle, and started poking around in the ashes.

The first thing he found was part of her skull, hair singed off, and skin blackened. He also found various bones that hadn't burned that night. Then he found the partially burned body of an infant, its mouth open in a silent scream, its back arched, and its fists clenched.

When the baby's mother had entered the room that night, Adam had noticed her swollen belly. She had waddled across the room, tried to break up the fight between her husband and his brother. Adam, Jack, and the others had watched as she fell backwards, propelled by a wayward shove, splitting her skull open on the hearth. As she lay there dying, Ellery watched in horror as the baby kicked, perhaps trying to break free of his dying mother. As they carried her to the woods, Adam felt as the movement became more infrequent and then stop.

Adam gathered up the body parts that were still big enough to find and placed them in the burlap bag that he had brought from the truck, the one containing her hand. He walked to the bluff overlooking the river, and threw her, piece by piece, into the fast flowing, swollen river. He watched as the bones shattered on the rocks below and washed toward the sea, all evidence rinsed away from the airy world by the forgiving river. It was truly over now. No one would ever know.

He reached into the bag and pulled out the last piece of evidence he had to dispose of. He cradled the little boy gently in his arms, tears falling from his own cheeks, dripping onto the

cheeks of the baby. Then after look down at the river once more, he took a deep breath and flung the baby...and himself into it.