

## Prologue: Gone

“So what happened?” He’s stitching up her left hand now—this after he pried it open and tweezed the mirror out. She doesn’t answer, feeling her face float, her ears displaced. She’s too far down in the well. Besides, the answer belongs to her. Everything’s coming in at different angles and depths . . . the catgut sliding through her hand, the *ssntt-ssntt* of the scissors, her eye looking back at her from the shard on the tray . . . The intern doesn’t pursue his question, too rapt in his skin tailoring. Good.

She notices that the mirror piece broke roughly into the shape of an arrowhead. Fancy that. She used to collect arrowheads, had brought her favorite with her when she came to New York. On the bus she’d sat by the window, watching the highway unravel: leafless trees repeating themselves; flying crosses on flying churches (of God, of the Nazarene, of the First Baptists, Southern Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, on and on forever amen); a polecat carcass; the N&W coal trains; the New River; Harless’s filling station; the Kroger’s; the Celanese; the tannery; Orange Crush signs nailed to gray barns; the big electric Christmas star up on Ferguson Hill; houses; porches; beagles; trailers; the frost; the fences . . . and the mountains, stark with winter, sliding by in a great chain of earth bells, holding their tongues as always and taking miles to relent. Her mind had wheeled on while the road kept running away, while everything peeled off and left her naked but for the arrowhead she held awake in her hand. . . .

A touch of breeze blew that morning. The same one, she believed, that had led her to him. Outside the Price Creek town Trailways station she stood next to her suitcase, shifting from one foot to the other to keep from freezing. Although she knew that she’d be

able to stand the cold for only a few minutes, she stuck it out, trying to keep from being noticed too much. Already, when she'd come in to buy a ticket, the clerk had asked, "You any kin to Lawson Spangler?" She'd said no, but wasn't sure she'd lied. Now, looking out at the mountains that rose from the railroad tracks on the other side of the New River, she flexed her toes over the money in her left shoe, standing intermittently on three hundred dollars.

The other three hundred lay under her mother's coffee cup on the kitchen table. In front of the cup lay the note she'd written. The latter was useless, she supposed, since she couldn't even explain to herself why she had to run—now, after all that had happened—but she did it anyway, somehow the gesture being more the point.

Except for her leaving with the intention of not coming back, this morning had been the same as any other. The banty crowed before light, as he always did, and then on and on as the dark drained away. And while Paula dressed in her heaviest clothes and quietly packed the old suitcase she'd decided to steal for a while, Ruby never once woke. This was no different either, and Paula was grateful. Hilled up tight under her quilt in winter, as she was now, or sprawled coverless in summer, Ruby could be depended on to sleep deep, her breath taking long strides from her refuge of fathoms. Before Paula left the room, she touched her sister's hair. "Good-bye, Copperhead," she whispered.

Asa was a light sleeper, so when she reached her brothers' door, she touched the wood and thought their names through it: *Asa. Clay*. She touched her mother's door, too, but there she allowed nothing else, either whispered or silent.

As she was writing in the kitchen, she remembered that he had done the same thing before he left. Her mother had found the note later—after Paula had found him. "Row, don't read it now," Ma McCoy had said. "You got all you can stand." But

Roweena, not to be stunted on or denied her grief, was already reaching to the windowsill for it. His wedding band—the only gold he’d ever owned—dropped from the envelope into her palm, as if to remind her of that first promise he’d made when they were young and the future seemed to stretch long and green. Then she pulled out the note and read his second and final promise: “I’m gone,” he said.

She’d had a story in case she’d needed one: The truck broke down this morning, and she was heading over to the Ganoes to get a ride with Will. The suitcase, that was empty. A while back, Janie Ganoe had wanted to give Roweena a bunch of Bettina’s outgrown clothes for Ruby. There had been too many to put in the paper bags from Kroger’s, so she’d just sent them over in the suitcase. Now Roweena was sending it back by Paula. The part about Janie Ganoe was true, but Paula was taking the suitcase. She’d mail Janie money for it when she could, but right then all she’d wanted was to get down the mountain without getting caught.

Punching her boots through snow crust and calluses of ice, she tried not to think much past her next step. But she didn’t count on the breeze. At first, she ignored it, even though it chattered her ears and made them sting. Then it tricked her into drawing her eyes toward the hickory behind the barbed-wire fence on her left. From one of the tree’s limbs, a branch dangled by a strip of bark and began to sway. Just a little, but it was enough. Enough to pull the hair trigger in her brain and start the creaking in the orchard. Next, the light snow, flakes drifting down like feathers on the small ill wind leading her on. Next, no. Yes, next. Next, the ground clenching her feet, she can’t lift them, can’t move. Again, the creaking. Can’t move. The snow feathers on the small ill wind. Next,

no. Yes, next. Next, his feet, Sunday shoeshine, swaying softly, slowly. Next, no. Yes, next. Next his body, wedding-funeral suit, rocking. When the bough breaks. Next—

Down she fell, the road proving to be kind. If it hadn't made her slip, her legs would be walking but she would still be trapped in the orchard inside her head, unable to stop the procession of Next. Nothing seemed to hurt when she got up. There was only a mild ache in her hands, and, after her trembling ebbed, she was able to brush the snow off her clothes and pick up the suitcase. She tried a step. Another. Yes, she could still move.

As she walked, the motion and rhythm calmed her so that she could distill herself to the act of just going, taking respite in the mantra of her feet. She made her way like this for some time, until finally the road began to tilt. With hope and fear climbing inside her chest, she descended warily, and then distraction came again—this time as a relief. This time, the thought came to her that her people must be kin to the road, that she, too, must be related to it, since she was kin to her people. Her people, she thought, tilted just as the road did here, slanting like tipped scales whether they moved up the mountain or down. What, she wondered, would come of her carrying that slant with her to a place of new dimensions?

“You gonna freeze out here, little girl.”

The voice's owner offered her a stained grin as his lips pulled back and revealed some of the Red Man sitting in his cheek. The bulge of chew was the only fat thing about him. Life had whittled on and paled him, it seemed; his clothes hung on him like wash draping a dead pine, and the colors of the tobacco pouch that poked up partway from his left coat pocket gave his appearance its only brightness. Where had he come from? Paula

hadn't seen him in the station. He was at once a stranger and someone she recognized. He could have been any one of her Spangler uncles or a familiar sent to beckon her back. Either way, when she looked at him she saw two things: He meant kindness, and she would have to be hard against it. Knowing that made her feel lonely as a bone, flesh-cleaned and marrowless. And yet, she did what she had to do. Unsmiling, she told him that she needed some air outside for a while, then looked down quickly at her money shoe, hoping that would be enough.

“Well, it's your frostbite, sister.” A little bit of hurt in his tone and a long spit of juice to the ground, but he turned away and went into the station. Now what? How would she avoid him? She'd have to go in, too. Not yet, but soon. She didn't know how much longer she could take the cold. What if he got on the same bus as she did? To ward off the stiffening in her hands, she flexed them in her coat pockets, and, in doing so, her right hand grazed the arrowhead. She held it in her fist, and the edges pressed against her skin.

She was eight when she'd found it pointing out of a furrow in Ma Spangler's field. *Most likely Cherokee*, he'd said. *Probably from a camp here or somewhere nearabouts. Used to hunt and fight in these woods. Lived in Narrowland long before it was Narrowland.* She'd taken the arrowhead home, washed it carefully, and put it on the windowsill in her room so that it could dry in the sun. Later, in the evening, she'd put it in the box that her Sunday-school Bible had come in.

That first arrowhead had not begun the romance, however; it had simply vectored it on. Paula had been in love with her idea of Indian people ever since she could remember. And though she had yet to meet or know any of them, like most good

romantics, she hadn't let that come between her and how she imagined them to be. She would sit cross-legged on the floor, in front of the small portable TV with its tin-foil-tipped rabbit ears and two snowy channels, and watch the movie *Indians meet their fate* in black-and-white. Ready to fight, they would appear on horseback, lining the horizon of a hill with their silhouettes. Then the chief would give a signal with his lance, and the warriors would cascade down as their tremoloed cries shivered up. She'd pretend she was riding with them and always pulled for them to win, regardless of plot, and always she would be disappointed. Often, he watched the movies with her. He, too, would be disappointed when the movie made the warriors lose, despite his knowing better than she what to expect.

Still, the real Indians had won sometimes, and—perhaps to console or warn her, perhaps to do both—he'd told her about one particular victory. *At Little Bighorn*, he'd said. *Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and them other fellers—they won the battle but lost the war.* She wouldn't understand what he meant till she was older. Had no idea of the carnage involved. After all, reports of real dead soldiers came nightly from the same screen the movie Indians died on. What had mattered to Paula then was that, at least on one day, despite what they might have known or guessed about their darkening future, the warriors had fought anyway. They had won, and they were not movie Indians.

Not long after Paula found the first arrowhead, her class had gone to the school library. Usually, she would look for a collection of fairy tales or horror stories, something with plenty of monsters to redeem, outtrick, or outrun. But this time, she'd chosen a book about the Cherokees. It said that they used to live in places from the mountains of Narrowland County, Virginia, all the way down to Alabama. But in 1838 the president forced most of them to leave what land was still theirs and go to Oklahoma in the middle

of winter. They walked a road called the Trail of Tears to get there, and nearly four thousand of them died along the way.

She'd shown him the book, too, and watched him as he read a few pages at the kitchen table, taking long drags off his Viceroy. The tips of his forefinger and thumb were stained a yellowish brown that reminded her of locusts. *Andy Jackson. I remember reading in a school book about him. Said he was so tough that people back in them days called him "Old Hickory."* *Your granddaddy Spangler used to cut switches and sticks off a hickory, called it the "whipping tree."* *Feller named after something like that must've been meaner than a snake.* Blowing smoke out through his nostrils, he'd grinned his best Johnny Cash sneer, then winked at her. *Not as mean as me, though,* he'd said. Paula had laughed. He could be like that. Once, when he was bantering with Asa, he'd told her brother, *Boy, I'm so mean I have to hold a gun on myself to keep from cutting my throat shaving.* He liked to play the boogeyman.

In just the past few minutes, the cold had turned glazier, so that any movement of Paula's seemed capable of shattering the air. Finally, she gave in. Picking up her suitcase, she went back inside the station and looked for a place to thaw. With relief, she spotted the Red Man chewer wringing a mop over a bucket. At least he would not be getting on the bus. When he looked up, she noticed his chaw was gone, which afforded him a slight smirk when he saw her.

Moving toward the waiting area on her left, she scanned the rows of benches flanking the central aisle. Long, dark, and pewlike, they underlined in wood how hard it was to get clear of church in Narrowland, even in a place where people waited to leave for someplace else. Just two other travelers that morning. A woman in a green coat sat on the near end of the right front bench, deeply involved in her *True Confession*. As she turned

a page, some ash fell from the cigarette between her fingers and landed on the black patent-leather pocketbook at her side. A little farther down the same bench an old man in overalls and a gray corduroy jacket dozed with his arms crossed on his chest, the brown paper bag next to him giving off the faint smell of potted meat.

Thankful that neither noticed her, Paula chose the opposite bench and sat down at the end farthest away from them. She could see the big clock above the clerk's window: It was eight-thirty; her bus was due to leave at nine. She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep so that the half hour wouldn't turn into a century. But shutting out the clock's face did nothing to stop her remembering eye from scrolling its litany in the darkness behind her lids.

She recognized the images from a dream she'd often had. It begins with a soundless coal train circling a mountain. Naked trees. Brown-gray brush. Each freight car filled with a mound of coal. The locomotive rolls over the rails and vanishes around a curve, and a seemingly endless number of cars follow, so that the mountain appears to be wreathed by a black snake. Black snakes are good for gardens, Paula remembers in the dream. When the caboose finally slips around the bend, the locomotive is already rolling into view again, except that, as it heads for its next disappearance, it shatters what lies before it. The tracks, landscape, all that would be within the scope of an engineer, breaks like a mirror, splintering what Paula thought was there. Then the locomotive disintegrates, too, so that it's hard to tell what is broken "there" and what is shattered train. Now the freight cars follow, but this time the coal is burning, so the fire shatters along with its carriers. As the caboose shivers into pieces, Paula sees that the mountain has changed. Bright green leaves flame on the trees. Blackberries shine in the brambles.



She wonders if she, too, was changed—changed by what she witnessed. Or, by seeing, did she change what she saw? She had yet to dream the dream long enough to find out.

“Nine o’clock’s here.”

At the sound of the clerk’s voice, her eyes snapped open, and in quick, nervous movements, she grabbed the handle of the suitcase and stood up. Not until she had boarded the bus and its wheels were mumbling to the road did she believe that she’d actually managed to get away. Looking out the window, she saw a Yield sign at the head of a side road and thought of yellow jackets, their buried hives. All that hidden sting, waiting to swarm. Perhaps if she opened her mouth, a swarm would spill from her into the rushing past of things beyond the glass. But she kept still; quietly enduring the dogfight of fear, sorrow, and giddiness inside her. The dive, buzz, and carom.

She’d been bearing this clamor a long while, when she suddenly remembered the arrowhead. Reaching inside her left coat pocket, she clasped it in her fist. In any other hand, the arrowhead most likely would have been just an interesting piece of flint, but in hers, it was solace, made of stone that came from the same place as she. And as she held it, she knew it also to be her compass, pointing in only one direction—that of being gone.