

Long About Ten Years

Truth Be Told

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1

Decisions

The light had gone out of Sylvester's eyes. His Sarah had passed long about ten years ago. He struggled alone all that time, working out in the fields feeding and tending to his animals. But in reality, to him that meant nothing more than raising them up until they were fat enough to draw him a profit or more straight up, fat enough to die. But as the years without her crawled by, neglect and apathy saw to it that each year his livestock just got thinner and thinner as they neared their time to visit the slaughterhouse.

Sylvester looked down at the past ten years of cracks, creases, and calluses on his hands and thought; "Time and age sure have an unkind way of creeping up on a feller."

Every crack in his hand or furrow in his brow could have told its own tale of his struggle without her there. But it'd be a lie to say that he missed her. A better-told truth would be to say that he missed, no, he outright resented her not being there to keep doing all those things that she used to do for him. Things that he believed that she dumped on him, things that he now has to do by himself since she up and died on him. Seemed to him like no matter which way he turned everything just kept working hard and fast against him.

He kept thinking, "Nobody seems to care how hard it is on me being the one a havin' to do everything day after day. Instead, all they talk about is her and how hard it must have been on her at the end! I been the one who's been tryin' for ten long years to rebuild some kind of

existence out of the remains of this miserable, empty life she left me with, but naw, all they want to talk about is her!! Her!"

In the hollow darkness of Sylvester's mind, unconsciously, he gritted his teeth and thought in a growl, "Sarah!!"

Sylvester recalled all the times she rode him about gettin' right with the Lord and how she kept using that word, "sinner" nearly every time she opened her mouth. True enough, he never much thought of himself as a godly man but he sure as Hell didn't see himself as the Devil's man either. Still, to him, it seemed like Sarah never missed a chance to remind him of every little thing that he did wrong and how all those things just made the Devil smile. He got sick of her constant badgering and all those continual reminders of how ungodly he was even if she did end up by saying that there was always hope for his soul. Truth be told, he knew deep down that her hope was all that he had.

But now, with her gone, he reckoned that he had probably come as close to the Pearly Gates as he would ever get, and as such, he would just have to make do with that. But then, that was all right by him. Sylvester sometimes wondered though why he even bothered. Without her there the whole damn thing didn't amount to a ruddy hill of beans or even a dirty pot to cook 'em in.

On towards twilight he would oft find himself sitting up on the hill, *their hill* as they used to call it. A place, in happier days past, where they'd go up and cuddle between the Marigolds and the Daylilies and spoon under moonlit skies while counting shooting stars. In their younger days, she would pack a picnic lunch, and he would play hooky from his chores and she from hers. And that was alright by them. After all, it was their farm to run, or let run down, and a day here or there wouldn't matter one way or the other.

But now, he sat up there on that hill looking down at the little house they once had shared. That old Applegate shack that they thought was so great and that would change their lives. And the more he thought about it, the more his anger rose. Before long his fury just seemed to swell up inside until a new feeling came over him or maybe up out of him, one that he wouldn't admit to having before. As he stared down at their little house he realized the feeling he was feeling was hate; deep, pure, unvarnished hate. He hated the farm, he hated the animals, he hated the house he stared down upon, and most of all, he hated her! Immediately he realized that had Sarah been there, how hurt she would have been at that thought, and for just the smallest instant it hurt his heart but then at the same time...

"Gives you some relief though, don't it?"

Sylvester jumped back like he'd been kicked square in the teeth by a mule but then quickly set himself aright as if nothing had happened. He hadn't heard anyone coming down the hill, let alone the thought of anyone walking up behind him! And looking up, he saw a tall man with black burning eyes he reckoned, he couldn't really tell, the setting sun just about blotted him out. Instinctively, Sylvester raised his left hand to shade his eyes which gave him a better view, and he realized that either the man's face had changed or his imagination was working on double overtime.

The man was an unusually tall man indeed, but now, rather than having black burning eyes, his eyes were softer and looked more the color of hazel or the hue of a fine batch of Chestnut Shine. And he had a reddish, ruddy beard and was wearing a dark Fedora pulled low to the left eye.

And that tall man took a step forward and sat right down on the log next to Sylvester just where Sarah used to sit. Then he reached down and casually pulled a blade of grass from the

ground and stuck it in his mouth to chew on. Perplexed, Sylvester studied on just the right words to say to this bastard who had some nerve coming up behind him up there on his hill. He rehearsed them in the privacy of his mind so as not to reveal his desperate need for a nerve-calming shot of shine.

"Looky here son, this here's private property - mine to be exact, and I don't rightly recall havin' sent you an invite to be on it! That ought to set him straight," he thought to himself. Then deciding to speak it, Sylvester hoped his voice wouldn't tell on him or give him away because something about this feller just didn't set right with him, something set his nerves on edge. But then before he could utter a single word,

"Why I don't know why that is Sylvester, you ain't got a thing in the world to fear from me." The man spoke right into Sylvester's thoughts and never even moved his lips as he sat there staring off into the distance.

"What the Hell?" Sylvester's jaw dropped because he heard those words with his mind instead of his ears, and he knew good and well that he hadn't yet said a word out loud to that stranger.

"You didn't need to. I have this way about me, I can sorta read folks. 'Uncanny,' I've been told by more than a few, and I can *read* you. I can hear your thoughts, so-to-speak and you needn't even make a peep." The sound of stranger's voice tore against the silence of the gathering darkness as he spoke out loud, "But if it makes you feel any better, we can talk out right like common folks and not cause yourself any further distress, if you'd druther."

Sylvester sat upright and thought about this odd man, his eyes fixed on the stranger, and then he nodded slowly, trying to regain whatever composure he once might have had. Then

clearing his throat, Sylvester said, “I reckon that might be better, but you're still on my land without an invite feller.”

“Am I?!” the stranger asked sharply, his nostrils flaring. “It seems to me, you all but hollered for me to come up this way! Just sittin' up here on your high hill, chewing on and contemplating on all that hate you're carrying around. Hell son, that's my invite! You'd be surprised how many folks call for me in their hatred. ‘Cause when they begin to hatin’ that's when I come a-runnin'! But now you Sylvester, your kind of hate was a slow burn, it took you a spell to lean into it. And I figured I might have to wait on you to come around, but then I got the luxury of havin' time, and I knew could afford to wait on you up to a certain point.

Now don't get me wrong, once I saw it starting to brew I knew I ran the risk that it might fizzle out any given day, or week, or month if I waited on it too long. That is, depending on how many of them sickening sweetheart memories of her tried to slip in. But I wasbettin' on ya Son, and you came through, sure as your name's what it is. I mean, look around you, don't no bank have a mortgage on this place, land's yours free and clear, same with your animals and such. You get your crops out in a timely fashion, your stock to market, and you ain't yet all broke down in your body. Boy, you really ain't got too much to complain about! And I could have easily wandered on through to the next county.” The tall man chuckled. ““Cause you know them folks up there keep me hoppin’ that's for sure. But then, I kept hearing it a-callin' and a-callin.’”

“Hearing what?” Sylvester asked with a throat so dry, he thought he'd heave wheat any minute.

The man sighed somewhat impatiently. “Hatred, Sylvester! That beautiful unadulterated hatred and loathing that you've built up for her. And it was far too good for me to pass up. So I've stopped up here on your hill to make you a little proposition.” The stranger turned and

looked right at him, looked straight through him more exactly. Smiling, he said, “I reckon by now you probably got yourself an idea about who I might be, don’t you old timer?”

Swallowing a lump, Sylvester nodded his wordless answer. Wasn’t no use pretending this was all a bad dream. Sylvester knew. Sure as the world he knew, but how could it be?

Then invading his thoughts once again the stranger said, “Because it *is* as sure as the world Sylvester. The world is where I walk; it’s where I live. But now never mind all them stories and lies you might’ve heard about me, ‘cause it ain’t so much **who** I am to you, as it is what I can **do** for you that really matters.” He extended his hand for a handshake. “Now, what’d ya say? You ready to do some business?”

Sylvester wanted to listen to that small voice whispering in his ear telling him to just get up, say his farewells and not let dark beat him back down the hill, but there was something insanely irresistible about this odd visitor, something vile yet compelling. There was just something repulsively appealing about that old man sitting there with his hand stuck out.

Presently, with a look somewhere between contempt and disgust on his face, the stranger continued. “Now son, let me tell you something about all them voices a-whisperin’ in your ear. These old hills are full of voices that somehow always seem to get louder ‘round nightfall.” The stranger said. “Sometimes that old night wind echoes across these hills and flies up thru the branches just a-crying out one dark melody after another until one of them finally stabs you in the heart like it was a needle sharp ice pick. Then the next thing you know its wrapping all the way around your spine like one them boa constrictors just looking to squeeze the life right out of you from the inside out.” The Devil said in a whispered growl.

Grinning now through green gaped teeth, the stranger leaned in way too close to Sylvester for his liking, and said with a heavy noxious poisonous breath, “Well I say, pay ‘em no mind Slyyyyy!!”

Again, Sylvester jerked sideways falling backwards, this time, by the stomach-turning sickening stench of the old man’s toxic breath. And as he was trying to recover Sylvester said, “Sarah called me Sly durin’ our alone times, but not never ‘round other folks. Said it was only ‘tween me and her. Ain’t nobody knowed I was called by that name!! You ain’t got no right a-usin’ that name!!”

Still grinning, the stranger said, “Looks like we got something in common old timer. Folks all over call me by different names. Some out of hate, others out of fear, but when it comes right down to it, unlike with you, they *all* call me Slyyyy.” Just then he reared back and roared out a laughter that sounded like three mountain lions a having their way with a baby lamb caught in a thicket with nowhere to run. Then quicker than a sidewinder strike, that Devil was on Sylvester blowing his hot, biting venomous mind-numbing breath deep into his lungs hissing out; “SSLLLYYYY...”

Immediately Sylvester’s gut heaved and rolled like he’d been kicked by the south end of a northbound mule as he inhaled the strangers’ poisonous sulfur-laden breath. And just before he saw the stars ‘Do Si Do’ around the moon taking away the last of his consciousness, he realized that maybe; just maybe, he shouldn’t have emptied that extra mason jar of 200 proof shine.

2

Sweet God of Fire Full Gospel Canebrake Apostolic Church

Sylvester's head was pounding as he opened his eyes and was startled as he suddenly found himself walking hand in hand up the dusty road toward the old Foster place with Sarah Sue. Gone was the stranger on the hill, the sickening stench of sulfur, and the bitter hatred that had filled his heart. These were replaced by the clean, fragrant scent of her innocence and the warm, tender feeling of Sarah's hand in his.

Sylvester struggled, trying to get his head around why this was or how it could be, but there she was, young and as absolutely beautiful as she was the very first day he laid eyes on her. She however, seemed oblivious to the fact that she was walking with a man at least twice again as old as she was. But then, Sylvester caught a glimpse of his own hand and was surprised to see that the time-etched wrinkles and calluses were gone. His skin was full and tight, and he was mighty confused as to how this could be.

“Was it a dream Sly?” Sarah asked squeezing his hand.

Sylvester shook his head as if to clear cobwebs, “a dream?” Sly asked back.

“A dream Sly, was I dreaming last night when you asked me to be your wife?” Sarah asked.

Sylvester had to think quickly. All this was so familiar to him, but he would have sworn that it happened back many years ago when they were much younger. Yet there she was, and here he was, and the smell of honeysuckle from her hair and the way her eyes sparkled as she looked up at him, took him back to the day, or rather brought him into the here and now and he went with it.

Sylvester turned around and took her up in his arms and began spinning her round and round, up and down until they both fell off the road tumbling into the tall soft grass. And looking into the beautiful eyes of his forever, Sly said, "This ain't no dream Sarah Sue, come the Ides of March when you turn eighteen, I'm taking you for my own and kaint no force pull us apart. I love you, Sarah Sue Foster," Sylvester said as he stole a kiss.

"I love you too, Sylvester Adam Decker," Sarah said as she playfully smacked away his groping hand. Then she jumped up and ran down the road toward home. Sly rose up on one elbow and watched as she faded away, the setting sun swallowing her lovely figure to where she looked like an angelic shadow dancing against the light.

Sarah Suzette Foster was the older twin daughter of Willard and Nadine Foster. Now Sarah was all of six minutes older than her identical twin sister Sophia Lynne, and truth be told, Sarah was the favored one. When the twins were born Doc Whitehouse told Nadine that Sophia was slowed down on delivery because she had the nuchal cord. That is to say, her umbilical cord was twice twisted around her neck, and he reckoned that it had cut off her supply because he had to breathe the "life breath" into her as soon as she was born. He called it anoxia.

As the girls got older, Sophia always accused Sarah of trying to choke her to death before she was even born. She often blamed Sarah for the night terrors she frequently had about a long pinkish umbilical cord slithering its way up her leg and wrapping itself around her throat until at

last she would awaken, clutching at her neck, coughing and gasping for air. City doctors would have called it sleep apnoea if they ever had the chance to examine her.

The girls had the usual rivalry that kids have except Sophia always seemed extra jealous of her sister for not much other reason than Sarah always looked out for her like she was some kind of baby, that and Ma was constantly doting on Sarah for always being such a good big sister.

As Sylvester recalled and lived or better yet re-lived these things he just couldn't shake the feeling that something was horribly out of place, something was definitely not right, but it felt so good, and he didn't want it to end. He had been here before, but this was just too real to be a dream. Then, as he started to get up, he caught a glimpse of something large moving in the tall grass and then suddenly and simultaneously he heard the familiar snapping rattle of dead buttons swaying in the air and was close enough to feel the wind from a strike that had just missed his hand.

The air around him quickly began to thicken with the sickening smell of sulfur, and he knew this wasn't good. From somewhere just behind him, Sly heard a voice whispering,

"Don't move boy, that's a venomous messenger of death and he's a-carryin' an invite from the Almighty to cross the River Jordan if you so much as twitch a muscle."

It was Buford Elrod Applegate who was Parson down at the Sweet God of Fire Full Gospel Canebrake Apostolic Church. Down there where folks got so worked up in the spirit that they felt like they ought to take up snakes and then sing and dance while waving them poisonous devils around all up in the air over their heads and such. I hear-tell that sometimes they'd even take to drinking strychnine just to see if the man upstairs would keep them from dying from the poison. Hell, even if He did, that stuff still has to taste like hot rotten eggs, and burn like blue

flame moonshine going down. Folks used to say that old Applegate would drink that poison and then spit it in the eyes of those rattlers so they couldn't see where to bite him.

"Steady now boy," the Parson said, "I'm gonna ease past you and take up this vessel of the adversary." And just as soon as he finished saying "adversary," Old Man Applegate had that timber rattler up in the air a-dancin' and singing out words Sylvester never heard before in his life. Then with the speed of a viper, Parson Applegate tucked that hissing, slithering, coil of fanged death into a white cloth bag that had "Signs and Wonders" written in red along the front of it.

"Boy," Parson Applegate said, "do you think this slithering servant of the Sinister Minister just happened on you by chance? I say nay!! Thus saith the mighty one of the high hosts: 'If you look upon a woman and lust after her in your heart you are already guilty of adultery!!' And you had enough lust in your eyes a-watchin' that young gal walk away to send ten men to Hell!! Now say, Aman!!" But Applegate continued on before Sylvester could raise a defense or say anything at all.

"Son, I was a-prayin' in the midnight watches when suddenly the whole room got a-lit with the glory of heaven, and an angel stepped out and said, 'Go ye forth for tomorrow nite ye are to save my servant from the mighty hands of the Wicked One. And when ye have done it, lift up your voice and sing out praises in the tongues of angels Aman!! Then preach the fire of condemnation to that sinner lest he be consumed by the wicked lust that fills his heart!'"

Sylvester hadn't realized that he was on his knees as the parson brought down fire on his soul; he only knew he was glad not to get bit by that snake.

Applegate said, "Boy, the place to be on yer knees is down at the Canebrake Apostolic Church Sunday morning to repent of your sins and pray you not go to Hellfire!" And with that, he turned away, cloth bag in hand, and quickly faded into the yawning darkness.

Sylvester slumped back on his haunches and shook his head at what just happened. With his hands shaking and his nerves tingling from head toe, he reasoned that it was well past time for a shot of old Bill Eversoll's Slop Trough Green-briar Chestnut Shine which he kept in an odd shaped leather skin he had fashioned from surplus mule hide that he got down yonder at Bad Eye Johnson's tannery. Had a sawed-off hollowed out Buck-horn twisted around and tied off at the top to drink from.

Old Sylvester didn't drink all that much in those days and never let Sarah lay eyes on it cause her daddy was a slobbering drunk. Her old man used to lay up by Eversoll's still, sucking down poorhouse mash till he got frog-legged drunk and then he'd skulk on home where he'd commence to whaling on Sarah and her sister Sophia until they either got away or he passed out.

Now everybody knows it, but nobody talks about it in the open, but not long after Sarah and Sophia's momma died, one night old W.T. Foster came down the mountain from working at the sawmill all drunk and lathered up a-cussin' nine ways to Sunday about how he overheard Sammy Whitehouse say that him and Sophia was gonna run off to her Granny Hatfield's place over in Logan county to start a new life. Well, old W.T. laid into Sophia so hard that some folks said they heard her screaming all the way down to the Crawdad Creek General Store.

"Ain't no daughter of Willard Thaddeus Foster gonna whore up with no Whitehouse boy as long as I got breath to stop it!"

Some say he'd still be beating on her if Sarah, her twin sister, hadn't tripped him causing him to fall headlong right into the pot belly stove. Sylvester tilted that mule skin back and sucked

down the rest of his Chestnut Shine hard and fast as he recalled that story about W.T. Foster and his girls. The lightning tore at his throat and tilted his mind as he screamed out loud into the rolling fog and descending darkness saying, “Foster, you sum-bitch, I'll see you in Hell before I let you lay another hand on my Sarah Sue!!” You bastard!

And as he stood up he turned to start up the hill but he spun around way too fast and that 200 proof shine rose up and caught him right square between the eyes with all the punch and pain of a full on snake bite that sent his head a spinnin' like he was bound for glory land. On the way down, Sylvester's head managed to find the only sharp rock in the dirt where it bounced once and then promptly used that rock as a pillow. Ain't no telling how long he laid there before he woke up.

Dancing with the Devil

The next thing Sly knew, he was brushing dirt from his eyes trying to wake up from either the past or the present, he really didn't know which except that whichever it was, somebody had Hell to pay!

Gradually the world around Sly slowed down its spinning and things began to come into focus. As he rolled over, he found himself staring at a size 13 snakeskin boot with a big old silver skull head on the toe that had what looked to him to be, dried blood around the edges. He rolled back shaking his head trying to focus on that tall image that stood before him, back-lit by the light of a full terror moon.

Now if Sylvester had any senses to come to, he would have noticed the putrid scent of Sulfur in the air and the inevitable breakdown, blackout headache that follows it and got the Hell out of there, but well, he's Sylvester. There before him, stood what looked like the tallest feller

he'd ever laid eyes on. "Ain't post to be nobody up this time a night on an old country back road," Sylvester thought to himself. "It's a nightshade for shore."

Then with one fluid motion that Dark Specter melted like molten lava right down to where Sylvester was kneeling, hovering so close to his face that he could feel the heat and smell the smoke of its rancid breath as it said, "I ain't no nightshade you stupid old timer, you're just shine-faced again that's all. If I was you, I'd get to gettin' on home, 'nother hour or so and it'll be daybreak. Sarah has cried her eyes out worrying about where you been all night, you backwoods inbred bastard! The way you constantly beat on that girl it's a wonder she don't wake you up some morning with an ice pick straight thru your heart you broke down, humpback, wife beating sum-bitch."

Sly raised himself up to one knee, leaned back then spat on the stranger's boots and said, "Them there's fightin' words feller! You ain't got no business a-knowin' nothin' 'bout my Sarah or callin' me out my name. You best get your prayin' done 'cause I'm a-fixin' to send you to meet your maker!"

Then quicker than a cottonmouth strike, Sylvester pulled a knife from his boot and slashed that stranger right thru the center of his belly. With a look of deathly disbelief, the tall man clutched his blood-gushing open gut, wobbled a bit then fell to his knees right within arm's reach of where Sly was kneeling so that they were just about face to face. And though the man fell to his knees, Sly still had to look up at him because the stranger was a full head and shoulders above him.

Suddenly the stranger's eyes went from pained to gleeful and then got blacker than midnight in Fowler's cave and twice as empty. He looked down on Sylvester and said, "Since we're gonna do this, let's do it for keeps. Remember that proposition I wanted to make with you

up on the hill? Here it is; my life for your soul you wretched boil on the ass of humanity. Winning means, if you take my life, I'll leave to you the wealth of my world, my power, my endless knowledge and control, indeed the vastness of my eternal kingdom. But losing means, you forfeit your wretched hillbilly, shine suckin' soul to me."

"No matter," Sylvester said. "I'm a-fixin' to make your neck smile ear to ear!" Sylvester swung his blade again but this time the Dark stranger quickly caught his blade in mid-air and twisted it right out of his hand, spraying gushing blood from the tall man's hand all over Sly's face. Now, what happened next is probably just mountain folklore, but here's what they claim happened; Sylvester started scrambling around trying to get blood out of his eyes and couldn't really see too good at first, but after a spell, he focused dead in on the tall man's eyes. And it's said that the Dark stranger calmly stood up and stuck his right forefinger straight up in the air and then began waving his right hand back and forth left and right at old Sylvester almost like he was scolding him like some damn kid.

All of a sudden, a hush came over all the night creatures, and the whole world fell as silent as the bottom of a grave. Then with a crooked grin, that stranger took that same finger and drew it across that slice on his left hand, and when he did, **fire** came out the fingertip, and sealed that trench up just like it was never even there, right before Sylvester's eyes!

Then that feller's eyes got bigger than a blood moon, and he took to roaring and screaming and howling louder than three wolves in the hen house. And all at once, all the creatures of the night joined right in with him like he was a leading a choir straight out of the bowels of Hades. Then he commenced to tracing that gash on his belly with that fiery fingertip, and inch by inch that sum-bitch closed up tighter than Dick's hatband.

The combined shock of watching that, plus inhaling that wicked, god-awful, poisonous stench of sulfur, was all it took for old Sylvester's eyes to roll back into his head and he fell straight backward on the ground hitting his head on that same damned old pointed rock again. Then thru foggy eyes, the last thing Sylvester Adam Decker saw just before his lights went out was a size 13 snakeskin silver tipped boot headed straight for his jaw.

3

Descent into Darkness

Buford Elrod Applegate's farm sat just a stone's throw downwind from W. T. Foster's place about halfway up Bluetick Mountain. When they were younger, Sarah and Sophia walked right by the Parson's place on their way to school every day, and they used to giggle every time they saw the hand written sign above his cabin door which read:

Venom Retreat Holy Unto The Lord

Sophia knew that Sarah and her beau Sylvester, whom Sophia called Sillyvester, wanted to get married and buy the Applegate spread someday, but she too was drawn to this mysterious place in a way she could neither explain nor resist. Their daddy, W.T. Foster, avoided Applegate every time he got the chance and absolutely refused to let his girls go anywhere close to that place anytime near to dark. It was this forbidding that set Sophia's mind to racing until one night after supper she decided it was time to make her move.

Sophia waited for Sarah to clear the supper table and leave to put the plates in the wash tub over in the kitchen. Then she quickly poured her daddy another jar of shine knowing he wouldn't get up until he wasted it. W.T. was in the habit of whooping on his girls if they so much as took a breath wrong and Sophia knew full well that the drunker he got, the more likely he'd want to beat on them. But she figured the risk was worthwhile if she could just get him to

pass out first because her mind was set in stone to sneak down to Applegate's place that very night and finally have herself a look around.

Sarah came back into the room and saw his jar half full again and knew they were in deep trouble as she watched as her daddy's head a wobblin' left and right. He was already cussin' about that Whitehouse boy a-tryin' to use his daddy's influence as the town doctor to get him off of hand saw duty down at the mill. He figured his daddy could get him transferred up to the hauler wagon where all he'd have to do then, is drive them mules on up to the threshing machine so those boys up there could mix the sawdust with horse grain to make watered down feed.

W.T. got up from his chair, stumbled back a step, and took a powerhouse swing at Sarah, yelling "I'll kill you Sammy Whitehouse." Good thing he missed too, because had he connected, that Kentucky hay-maker would have taken off the top side of her head. Instead, it sent him spinning round and round until that shine stole his balance sending him face-first to the floor right where Sophia was standing not far from the pot belly stove, an object with which his head was previously well acquainted.

Clutching at Sophia's feet, he began to pull himself up which is exactly what she thought he might do. Crying out she said, "No daddy, please don't beat me, please don't!" And then as if on cue, Sarah came up behind W.T. grabbing on his arm begging him, "Daddy no! Please daddy, she's not Sammy and neither am I."

"There she is, big Sis to the rescue again!" Sophia thought.

Old man Foster locked onto Sarah's arm and slung her head-first right into the ice-box. He was so drunk he didn't even notice or care that the handle ripped a deep gash in the back of her head causing Sarah to blackout. Though Sarah's injury wasn't exactly part of the plan, it would make it easier for Sophia to slip out as she planned. Old W.T. nearly pulled Sophia's

sundress clean off trying to pull himself up from the floor. But Sophia backed up kicking and screaming, and as she did, she tripped and fell up next to the pot belly stove where she saw and quickly laid hold of the stoking poker, and with one downward swing, she parted old W.T.'s hair with it.

Kicking herself free from his grip, she put another boot upside his jaw for good measure because she still remembered the first time he pulled off her dress not long after her momma suddenly died. Though trying hard not to remember, Sophia fought back angry tears remembering that awful night her daddy, smelling of Chestnut Shine, stumbled into her room threatening to kill her if she screamed and woke up Sarah.

She had no idea that he'd already tried Sarah once before but was too glazed to force her and far too wasted to remember the Scriptures that Sarah prayed aloud until he passed out. From the rage and fire of that memory she let him have it with one last stomping kick, and going limp, he released her ankle. Sophia jumped up quickly and ran from the house as if it were on fire. Down the hill a ways, a shadow passed behind the flickering light that swayed back and forth on the front porch of Applegate's cabin.

Wiping tears from her eyes, Sophia paid no mind that the swaying light went out and worse yet she was totally aware of the footsteps and presence coming up behind her. Suddenly, lustful excitement replaced the tears as she came up near to the house, and with her heart beating as fast as a hummingbird, she cautiously stepped up on the porch right underneath the "Venom Retreat" sign.

Then looking around to see if anybody was watching, she inched forward and tried the doorknob, and instantly the door swung inward without a sound as if buttercream coated the hinges. Inside, the room was pitch black, and even though it was a midsummer night, Sophia still

felt the chill of the fog that rolled out onto the porch like an icy negligee of the darkness waiting to envelop her. Behind her, the grimacing moon only partly lit up the old rugged porch, and the darkness beyond the door refused to allow any more than a sliver of light inside.

Still, she was determined to peek in and see what her daddy knew that she didn't. She simply had to know what it was that he was keeping from her. Then leaning in as far forward as she could without going in, she put her head the tiniest bit inside the doorway and saw what she thought were the eyes of a cat reflecting the moonlight. But then out of that darkness came such sorrowful sounds of begging and crying and mourning so much that they pierced her deep inside her chest, almost taking her breath away.

Stumbling back against what she thought was the post on the porch, still gasping for air; she turned around only to look into the dead eyes of Buford Elrod Applegate dressed in his dark priestly attire. With one hand, Applegate quickly wrapped a long thick, slimy, pink umbilical cord around her neck. Then with his other hand, he began shaking a vicious angry rattle-back in her face that he finally threw at her feet, causing her to fall backward into the frigid cabin. The last thing Sophia saw and felt just before the wicked door slammed shut was Applegate pulling hard on the hideous, pink umbilical, tighter and tighter until the clammy flesh colored cord around her throat left her with nothing more than choking darkness and a voiceless scream. Inside the black void, a cold hand slowly began moving up her leg, and as her eyes were rolling back into her head she heard a voice say; "Welcome home Sssophia, I always knew you would come."

Separate Ways

Sarah remembered crying when she first heard that Sophia had run off with that Sammy Whitehouse boy, or at least that's what she wanted to believe happened that night Sophia ran out

of the house nearly a year ago. Truth be told, Sarah lost everything in the world that really mattered to her that black night in the Foster house. But she also understood the greater truth which is this, *things that matter in the world, or to the world, are not the things that last forever, and one such ‘forever thing’ was her soul.*

Sarah never spoke of it much, really if at all, but later on that night when her daddy died and Sophia disappeared, the whole world was laid at her fingertips. For deep in the black bowels of the midnight hour as she prayed to be free of all the misery, drunkenness, conflict, and blood, she remembered that the Dark One came to her offering comfort, consolation, and peace the likes of which could only be found on the Heaven side of Eternity.

Indeed, he offered so much more than that. Hers for the taking was a loving marriage, precious children, grandchildren, abundance of laughter, gladness of heart, yes, even vibrant health and wealth for all of her days. Things she couldn't begin to imagine or conceive. There was only one thing he required in exchange, and that was, that one part of a person that no one has ever seen or needed; that one part that the heart protects and the mind forgets. All he wanted was for her to abandon her soul, nothing more, nothing less. But there in the darkness of her mind and even in the soil of her present torment, Sarah said “no... no... they needed to go their separate ways,” and with that, the Dark One was gone.

Sarah always had a special gift, an enhanced intuition about knowing things, and getting anything by her was harder than counting bees in a hive. Everyone knows that there are no secrets in small towns, but sometimes you can know something and not want to believe that it's true. She always wanted to see and believe for the best in folks and believed that God worked in ways we oft times failed to understand. A lot of folks around Bluetick Mountain figured this was

the case anytime *that night* came up in conversation over at the First Primitive Baptist Church or down at Claude Miller's Five and Dime.

The talk about that night that crept up and down the mountain grapevine, was that Old W.T. Foster went on a drunken rage like he'd never been on before, and he took to beating on those poor girls again, and this time laid into Sarah so much that he bashed her head against the ice-box 'till she passed out. And then, well, some folks say that W.T. tried to take liberties with Sophia and that was the last straw for her.

Word down at the Crawdad Creek General Store is that Sophia had to beat him back with the poker from the pot belly wood stove just to keep him from stealing her dignity. By the time Doc Whitehouse got there that night, W.T. was long gone from that cavern Sophia left in her daddy's head. Old Doc didn't even try to pull out the poker, just left it there sticking straight up in the air, looking like a needle on a compass pointing true north. Said he used up all his gauze and tape working on Sarah's bleeding, and had to have a shot of Laudanum for himself when he got done.

Never was a night like that before, up on the ridge.

Soon after, some of the church ladies came and cleaned up the blood for Sarah, tended to her wounds and stayed with her until she was able to fend for herself. Sarah's beau, Sylvester, showed up not long after, said he was out hunting deer up around Little Mook's Place.

A lot of folks don't care much for Sylvester; say he's a born drunk like old W.T. Foster was. He and Sarah got hitched back in March and took over Applegate's place not long after the parson lost his Audrey Ann during childbirth. Audrey had been with Buford, who, at the time, was holding a tent revival up until a couple of nights before she died. Buford saw fit to send

Audrey home to rest since she was getting close to delivery and revival only had three nights to go.

Doc Whitehouse said that Audrey laid up in that house for two days before Applegate got back from his preaching and found her lying dead on the kitchen floor over near the back door. Said she left a trail of blood and water across the floor from the bedroom all the way into the kitchen like she was scooting backward, either trying to push that baby out or trying to get away from someone or... something.

Since she was there all alone and the parson allowed for neither medicine nor midwife, all Doc Whitehouse could say was that Audrey Ann died from *complications*. It's supposed to be a secret, but some say that Audrey Ann really died of snakebite and not during childbirth like the parson told everybody. They say that she got nipped putting away one of the vipers, and Buford sent her home so that if she died, it wouldn't look like she didn't have faith. It's also said that Applegate's own snake, "Lula," which he later named after his unborn daughter, is milked every night before service just in case he gets bit.

After Audrey Ann died, Applegate said he heard a voice from out of the Heavens telling him he'd been set free to "Go out and evangelize the world." The last anyone saw of him, he was headed up toward Dry Lick or maybe Dixon's Branch, snakes and strychnine in tow.

Looked like for a while Sarah and Sylvester were gonna do alright up there on the hill. They had transformed Applegate's farm from not much more than a rundown snake den to a respectable crop producing farm. Folks would ride up there regular just to get that sweet yellow corn, those ruby ripe tomatoes, and especially her homemade, secret ingredient, window sill, jealous pie. Sarah toiled right along with Sylvester in the fields when she had to, and saw to it

that he had his dose of Bible learning down at the First Primitive Baptist Church or at least some Bible reading at home when he wasn't too tired or busy sitting on his hill daydreaming.

Sylvester didn't spend a lot of time in town, which was fine with most folks. He was known to be a hard man who thought everybody ought to cater to his wants. Somehow Sylvester got the crazy notion that because he turned out good crops and worked a profitable farm, that he was a man to be respected. But more to the point, he always bragged about how he was the one who rescued poor Sarah from being alone the night her daddy died, and her sister ran off, that he was somebody folks ought to look up to.

Truth be told, it wasn't any secret that all Sylvester really ever thought about was himself. It also wasn't any secret that when he took to drinking, that he was as mean and hateful to Sarah as old man Foster ever thought about being.

More than once, Sarah came into town wearing extra scarves around her neck, wearing her hat pulled down low, so to keep her hair down over her black eye, and you hardly ever saw her but what she didn't have long sleeves on even in the summertime just trying to hide her bruises. Some of the ladies from church kept after her to get away from him while she still could, but she loved him, and all she ever wanted was to be loved back, to be treated like a lady, she just wanted to matter to him.

She used to say that Sylvester was a good man when he wasn't on the shine. But even then, he more or less saw her as a means to an end. As long as she met his purpose or filled his need all was good, or at least until he drank again. She half-heartedly joked that sometimes she believed that if her hair was shorter or a different color, that Sylvester could pass right by her on the street and not even know it was her.

One day, Sarah and Sylvester came into town to get sundries and supplies, and while Sylvester ambled about town, she slipped down to Doc Whitehouse's office. When she came out, you didn't need to be told what the Doc told her, because she wore it in her eyes. Any mother walking down the street knows that look. Yet though excitement filled her eyes, if you could have seen her heart you would have seen that it was consumed with anguish and desperation.

For deep in her heart Sarah knew that this would be the turning point for the rest of her life. She knew that everything had to change and that if it changed, she would have to be the one to make it happen and see it through. Just then, she looked up and saw Sylvester coming out of Claude Miller's Five and Dime with a big ole stupid grin on his face holding a brand new fishing pole. Folks in town don't know that he broke his old one over her back a week ago Sunday when she wanted to go down to the church, but he wanted her to stay home and satisfy him. Instinctively, she reached back with her left hand and rubbed across the disappearing whelp on her spine that, she hoped would not become a new scar.

She didn't know how just yet, but she knew she had to get away from him, and she also knew that he could never find out what Doc Whitehouse had told her. Time was not a friend to Sarah those next few weeks. In fact, a month and a half had come and gone, before she knew it, and even though she went way out of her way to do as Sylvester said, and did her very best to stay out of his way trying to keep him happy, the beatings still came. She was deeply concerned that he might begin to notice a little bulge and she knew that wearing loose clothes would only work so long before he eventually found out. What she needed was, was a miracle.

Without any money, she could not leave town, all the family she had was gone, and sometimes it seemed like she didn't have a friend in the world except old Doc Whitehouse. But what could he do? Sarah lay back on the sofa, letting her head fall against the throw pillow, and

wished that she'd never married Sylvester Adam Decker. She wished hard that he was dead or better yet that she was dead. Immediately, she felt a churning inside because she knew that it was wrong to hate and even more so, to wish that someone were dead.

She began to cry while subconsciously rubbing her belly wondering and worrying, what could she possibly do? Just then, Sly came through the front door instead of the back door, as was his habit, and Sarah panicked. Did he see her rubbing her belly? Did he see the tears in her eyes? Has he seen the growing bump in her waistline? Without another thought or a second's hesitation, she closed her eyes and took the deepest breath she could take and held it, hoping against hope that as he walked by he'd just keep on walking by and think that she was asleep, and maybe just maybe this once, he'd leave her alone.

It seemed like an Eternity, but she finally heard the screen door slam on the back porch. Slowly, she opened her eyes and at the same time exhaled "Thank you Jesus" in a whisper. A glimmer of the light of her miracle was beginning to shine. She didn't need to *be* dead; she just needed Sylvester to *believe* that she was dead. Closing her eyes again, the slightest smile tried to escape as she watered the seed of her plan with hopes and thoughts of a new life, and it occurred to her as she again stroked her belly, a new life was coming.

Surprisingly, she awoke the next morning covered up, still lying right there on the sofa where she fell asleep the night before. Sylvester let her sleep? And even more, he covered her up? For an instant, the thought crossed her mind that maybe he could change... but then, no!! No, she had to do this, she had to somehow make this happen so he could never hurt... and as if her thoughts were interrupted, it came to her, she finished, so he could never hurt... Becky. The smile on her face was pronounced now. Her baby had a name! Sarah realized that life and love was bigger than the small confines of this dark, haggard, loveless, hollow house.

She didn't know how yet, but her mind was set, she was going home where she... where they belonged. The words of Granny Hatfield were ringing in her ears; "What gets your mind, sets your path." The door had been opened. Sarah knew that what she needed to do was die. Die to this miserable marriage to a man who loved the liquor more than her. Die to the horrible cycle of being beaten like an animal, and die to the life idea of being thought of as weak or inferior to anyone. And there was only one person who could help her make this happen. But would he go along? Sarah arose to see if she was alone, and then it came without warning, suddenly she heaved and lunged forward and out came the first visible evidence of her body's new condition.

Without thinking, Sarah quickly threw the quilt on the floor that Sylvester had used to cover her in the night. It wasn't a big mess, but she could not afford to let him find out about it. Thankfully, Sarah was alone, and in a short time, there was no evidence of anything in the living room. She got by with this one, but what about the next time? What about when Sylvester wakes her up in the morning like he sometimes does and he's in the mood? What if she gets sick and he finds out? What if he feels the rounding of her stomach, what if...?

As Sarah's mind raced with these thoughts and fears, another voice inside her began to command her attention, a voice of comfort gently reminding her that she must think of someone other than herself now. And once again Granny Hatfield's words helped her back to a calmer reality... "What gets your mind sets your path." Sarah cleaned up, got Sylvester's supper ready, and waited for nightfall, hoping it would be a quiet night. It hurt her heart just a little that things had gotten to the point that she had to hide Becky from Sylvester, but it would literally be over her dead body before she let him lay a hand on her.

The good Lord was kind to Sarah because when she awoke the next morning, Sylvester was already gone, the sun was shining, and she wasn't at all queasy. Patting on her stomach, Sarah said, "Mommy loves you Becky, time to go see Doc Whitehouse."

What Gets Your Mind, Sets Your Path

Along the way into town, Sarah got the notion to go up to the Hatfield homestead, the old place where Granny lived before the government agents came and made her relocate over to Logan County to live on the Reservation. Tracing old footsteps along the water's edge, she remembered playing down by this stream with Sophia as kids, poking at crawdads with tiny sticks, trying to see who first could get the crawdads to grab the stick with its claw.

Swatting away at the morning mosquitoes biting at her ankle, she walked on up next to the old cabin and was saddened to see the doors and windows worn away by time, but did not linger with that thought. Looking inside, she could almost hear Granny singing and playing her banjo next to the fireplace which still stood mostly upright, reminding her that structures may decay, but memories don't have to.

She remembered the delicious smell of hot biscuits and homemade apple butter coming from the cabin, and the anticipation of the sound of Granny's voice saying, "Come and get it children!" There were a lot of memories in this old place, good memories. A place where there were no beatings, no moonshine, no fears of any kind, nothing but love and laughter and the soothing sound of Granny's voice reading from her Bible.

Sarah realized that she didn't just happen by here by chance, but was maybe drawn here by the memory of Granny Hatfield to get her own path set straight. To learn from her past what she must do for Rebecca's future. She would give Becky all the comforts and safety and love that

Granny Hatfield gave her as a child and nothing or no one was gonna stand in her way. Sarah couldn't remember a time when she felt this calm and peaceful and thanked God for the time with her Granny, for the joy of the good memories, and for the confidence and direction she needed to walk on down that path and to keep on walking until she and Becky were home free.

4

The beginning of the End

Sarah walked calmly and was careful not to draw any unnecessary attention as she came near to Doc Whitehouse's office. People in small towns tend to talk and gossip and mind one another's business, and Sarah was counting on that very fact to help her out when the time came to die. Inside the office, Sarah waited patiently for her turn to see the doctor and there was no rush. Over in the corner sat Gentleman Todd Conner, as he was called by friends. He was no doubt there to follow up on that broken toe he suffered at the hands of "Lady" Conner who "accidentally" dropped an anvil on his foot last Saturday night after he returned home late, smelling of perfume and Chestnut Shine, from the shindig put on by Della Barker down at the Livery Stable; he wouldn't be very long. And second ahead of her was Jolene Marshall Simmons who just needed Doc Whitehouse to refill the bottle of Laudanum she took for headaches.

"It shouldn't be long at all." Sarah thought.

Carefully and methodically she worked out the details of her plan, rehearsing them in her mind, hoping and praying that Doc Whitehouse would understand and agree to help her. She watched as Gentleman Todd limped out of the office and Jolene floated back into the Doc's room for her turn. Moments later, the door opened and Jolene wafted on out into the street.

As Sarah got up to go back, the doorway where the Doctor stood widened, the walls began to move and circle around her, she tried to take another step and then everything went dark.

“What’s wrong with her?!!” The gruff voice just outside the darkened room where she was lying demanded.

Sarah tried to say something but couldn’t speak, she wanted to get up, but her legs would not move, seemed all she could manage were the tears that ran down the side of her face and into her ears. The harsh voice outside the door was an irritated Sylvester who apparently was dragged away from his do-nothing, so he could come all the way into town, to find out why his excuse of a wife was lying in a doctor’s office costing him money.

“I said, what’s wrong with her?!!” Sylvester demanded.

Doc Whitehouse spoke in a lower tone that was harder for Sarah to hear, but the one thing she heard was him talking about her “condition,” and it was that word that freed her voice, and she screamed.

“I’ll need to tend to my patient now Mr. Decker. You’ll do well to get back to your own affairs. And medically speaking, I advise you to watch your intake of spirits,” Whitehouse said none too kindly.

“You don’t need to advise me of a damn thing. You just pack her up and send her a-steppin’ quick, fast, and in a hurry. Oh, and tell her I said she better not make me burn the porch light neither!” Sylvester growled as he slammed the doctor’s front door behind him.

Doctor Whitehouse could see the anguish and fear in Sarah’s eyes as he stepped back into the room. “It’s gonna be alright Sarah,” Doc said trying to comfort her. “He’s gone now. You’ll be safe here until I think you’re well enough to go home. There’ll be no porch light deadlines for

you tonight young lady.” Sarah watched as the doctor pulled a small glass bottle from his cabinet and her eyes got even bigger when she saw the needle he retrieved from the drawer.

“Now there’s no need to be afraid, Sarah. This will help you to relax so we can talk. You’ll feel a little pinch and cool tingle in your arm, but after a minute or so you’ll begin to feel much better.”

Sarah closed her eyes before the needle went into her arm and would have flinched, but she couldn’t feel a thing. Then slowly but steadily, she began to get feeling in her fingers and hands and then all throughout all her body. Then as she opened her eyes all she could think to say was, “My baby?”

“No need to fret none about the little one darlin’, the baby is fine, and you’ll be fine too.”

“What’s wrong with me Doctor, why did I black out, and why did you tell him!?” Sarah broke down crying her heart out. Instinctively, old Doc Whitehouse just sat quietly and let her get it all out. After a few minutes of silence, Sarah whispered, “I am so sorry Doctor Whitehouse, I shouldn’t have shouted at you. What happened to me, why couldn’t I move or talk, Sylvester’s gonna kill me for sure this time. Doctor, please...”

“Slow down now Sarah, it’ll be alright. Let’s take a breath. You’ve been through a lot today, and I’ll do my best to help you make sense of things.” The doctor’s voice was slow and rhythmic and had a soothing effect on Sarah, and both were glad. “Sarah dear,” the Doctor began, “before we get into why you passed out, do you remember what brought you to my office today?”

Sarah began to tear up again. “I can’t go home, I can’t ever go back there again, Sylvester will kill me and now that he knows about my baby, he’ll kill her too!”

“Whoa, Sarah, did you tell him you were pregnant?”

“When I was lying in here in the dark, I couldn’t move or talk, but I could hear, and I heard you tell him about my condition, and now that he knows, he’s sure to kill both of us, and he might even come gunning for you too doctor. Why, oh why did you have to tell him? I just want me and Becky to get away from him so we can go and live a peaceful life where he can’t hurt us.”

“I know about Sylvester’s kind Sarah. I know what he does, I’ve seen the bruises you’ve tried to hide, I can only imagine the kind of life you’ve lived, first with your pa, and now him. But Sarah I need you to understand that I did not tell him that you were pregnant. I believe that is a beautiful moment meant to be shared between husband and wife.”

“But I heard you mention my condition doctor.”

“What brought you to the office today Sarah, where were you before came here, what were you doing? The answers you give me will help you to understand what I meant when I used the word condition. Take your time, it’s important.”

Sarah thought for a minute trying to understand what the doctor wanted to know because there really wasn’t anything to tell. At least that’s what she thought. “I was up early, Sylvester was already gone and I went for a walk to talk to God, breathe in the mountain air, and, and...” She hesitated briefly, not knowing exactly how she wanted to tell him that she desperately needed him to help her lie, and deceive her husband, put on a ruse, and no doubt risk his medical reputation.

Dr. Whitehouse saw her struggle and intervened. “Sarah, you and your baby are going to be alright now and I don’t want you to be frightened, but somewhere, sometime after you left home this morning, you were bitten by a rattlesnake.” In one motion Sarah suddenly gasped cupping her mouth with one hand as she listened in disbelief. Whitehouse quickly raised his

hands intending to calm and reassure her, “It was most likely a baby rattler, probably not yet old enough to even have fully formed fangs, and I’m confident that you only received a very minimal amount of venom since there was only one envenomation point just above your left ankle.

Sarah, you are indeed, a very lucky, and or blessed young lady, because typically even a very young rattler carries enough venom to kill a person. But there was something else going on with your bite, something I missed on the first examination, something like I’ve never seen or heard of before in all my life or career as a doctor. And I cannot medically confirm that there is a connection, but located tightly around the injection site on your ankle, there were also at least seven tiny punctures that I am sure are mosquito bites, identifiable by the wheals or bumps they raise and leave behind. What I’m saying Sarah, is, the snake bit you and left behind a small dose of venom, and somehow, someway, near about the same time, a cluster of mosquitoes stung you right on the snake bite. Female mosquitoes draw blood when they bite, and in so doing, they may possibly have drawn from you a mixture of enough blood and venom to have saved your life.”

Sarah subconsciously was shaking her head in disbelief the entire time Whitehouse spoke. This all sounded like a tale in one of those dime store books she read as a schoolgirl. “But I was paralyzed doctor,” Sarah said both intrigued and confused.

Whitehouse nodded, “I know, I know, that was an unexpected side effect of the anti-venom I gave you when I discovered you’d been snake bitten.

Your immune system reacted to the anti-venom in a way that slowed your breathing and limited physical movement. Had you been asleep, the average person would have thought you were dead. But you were never in any...”

Sarah broke into laughter saying, “Thank you, Jesus, thank you Granny Hatfield, and thank you, Dr. Whitehouse. Oh Doctor Whitehouse, you don’t know what you’ve told me, you don’t know what this means, you have no idea how this could change my life!”

With his eyebrows raised and his head tilted to the side, Whitehouse leaned in and said, “Come again?”

Sarah realized she needed to take a more serious tone, “I am sorry for laughing, but I needed a miracle today, and I truly believe the good Lord saw fit to send me to you to find it. And you have Doctor, you have! See, I have been beaten on all my life it seems, and lately Sylvester has taken more and more to the shine and with that, he’s become more and more hateful to me and even though I might deserve it sometimes, I know I don’t deserve it every time he takes a notion to beat on me.”

Whitehouse raised his hand as if objecting, “You don’t ever deserve...” but she continued.

Seems the more I try to care for him and show that I love him, the more he just wants to hit me, and Doctor, I can’t take it anymore. I can’t go on living like this; especially now that I’m gonna have this precious little baby.”

Sarah swallowed a hard knot of fear at the thought of telling him her plan, but he had to know it, and she had to say it, praying that God would let him understand and that he would agree to help her. “Doctor Whitehouse, me and Becky, that’s what I named her- we have to get away from Sylvester for good and forever, and leaving town won’t do. He’d just find us and eventually kill us. ‘Sides, I’ve got no kin left, no place to go. And the only way I can really ever be free from him is if I’m dead... or at least if he believes I am.

I started down here this morning to see you, to ask you if there was any way doctor, any way in science at all that you could make Sylvester believe that I had died of something. To believe that he was free and could go on and find himself someone other than me, someone he wouldn't have to hate or beat on, someone he could love." Sarah hadn't realized that she was still loving Sylvester and feeling sorry for him in this thing, this plan, this, scheme to get away from him.

Doc reached inside his vest and pulled out a silk handkerchief for Sarah to wipe away her tears as she spoke.

Sarah thanked him, composed herself and said, "Sometimes what the Devil means for harm, God can use for the good Doctor Whitehouse. I ain't never been bit by no snake before and you yourself said I should have or could have died. But I believe that the Lord was gracious to me. All the things that happened to me, happened so that I could see, and hopefully that you too could see, that God was preparing the way for me to escape death, not just the death from the snakebite, but from being beaten to death by Sylvester, maybe even in my sleep.

Please don't make me go home tonight doctor. I'll die for sure if you do, and Becky will die too. Could you..." Sarah swallowed hard again, "would you give me some of that snake venom stuff and let me go to sleep; get paralyzed again, and then call for Sylvester to see me for the last time so I can, we can be free once and for all?"

The sincere pleading in Sarah's voice, the naked honesty of her appeal, indeed the plight of a life of being continuously battered, touched the doctor's heart. He saw firsthand the anger and explosive temper of Sylvester today and knew that Sarah and her baby would be in very real danger if he sent her home. But what sealed the decision for Dr. Whitehouse was something that

he had learned way back in medical school which rang out clearly in his mind, “First do no harm.”

“Come on Sarah, we've got work to do, daylights a-wastin.’ First, I need you to lie back on that table and be real still. The first dose of anti-venom I administered was a heavy dose based on the thought that you had received a lethal amount of snake venom in your bloodstream. I am hesitant to give you the same dosage as before, there's just no way I can predict your reaction to it now, and so I will start with one third the dosage that I initially administered.

To my knowledge, nothing like this has ever even been tried before, and I absolutely must guard against any possible error. I will closely monitor your condition and personally ensure that when Sylvester comes in that he will not touch you or get close enough to observe any breathing. Now I want you to drink this Laudanum, it will help you to relax and sleep soundly while he is here.”

Sarah was so excited that he was going to help that any risk she took here was just that, a risk. But going home tonight meant the certainty of a beating, a beating that she might survive, but might kill little Becky. She was fully invested and committed to this idea and live or die, she had taken her last beating from Sylvester Adam Decker.

Doctor Whitehouse dimmed the lighting in the room, filled the syringe, and took Sarah by the hand and said, “Are you sure about this, you sure there is no other way?”

Sarah squeezed his hand, pulled him down close and kissed him on the cheek and said, “I love you for doing this Doctor Henry Whitehouse, you are a good man, and a saint for saving mine and Becky's lives. When were on the backside of all this, you just name your price, and I'll find a way to pay it to the fullest.”

Old Doc just smiled and said, “Your payment young lady is to make sure this little baby grows up smart and healthy and still remembers this old doctor long about ten years from now.



Ten Years down the Road

Doc Whitehouse never lost a minute's sleep over his role in Sarah's "death." Sylvester was summoned and returned to town according to the plan and true to form, he showed no grief or sorrow at the news of her death. Instead, his focus was to try to enlist the doctor's help with the disposal of Sarah's body so he could get on back home. Sylvester said that he didn't believe in funerals and saw no need to waste all that money on a pine box especially if Doc Whitehouse could find some medical use for her body. The Doctor assured Sarah's, waste of flesh husband, that he needn't concern himself any further with such petty details and that he would attend to the proper disposition of her remains.

Sarah would never know that she needlessly worried about Sylvester getting too close to her body, being afraid that he would see her breathing and then just lay into her intending to beat her to real death for trying to fool him into thinking that she was dead. But truth be told, once

Doc Whitehouse informed him that she had “passed” Sylvester shook his head in disgust, took a long swallow of homebrewed Chestnut shine, and then said, “You had me come all the way into town at this hour of night just to tell me she was dead? You could have waited ‘til mornin’ at a civil hour when a feller’s had a chance to have his coffee. She’d still be just as dead.” Ain’t no reason for me to see her, if you got a medical use for her body I’d be willin’ to leave her here for you to tend to.”

And with that, Sylvester quickly left his office before the Doctor had time to think of any reason to charge him any kind of fee.

That was the last time that Doc Whitehouse and Sylvester saw each other. Several months later, Sarah gave birth to a daughter whom she named Rebecca Sue (Becky) Foster. It was the doctor’s idea that Sarah move into her parents’ old place which was just up the hill from where she and Sylvester had lived. She fought and resisted the idea at first because she wanted to be as far away from Sylvester as humanly possible. But Doc Whitehouse explained that Sylvester was a stingy and selfish man who didn’t associate with others and would probably care less who his new neighbors were as long as they didn’t bother, or want anything from him. Plus as an added benefit, Sarah would be able to keep an eye on Sylvester from a safe distance and not risk accidentally encountering him in town. As usual, old Doc Whitehouse was right.

Becky was about ten years old when Doc Whitehouse died. At his funeral, she cried as if she had lost a grandfather, and in many ways she had. Sarah had promised herself that she was going to attend his funeral even if it meant running into Sylvester. Fortunately, she and Becky got home long before dark and Sylvester was none the wiser.

That evening as twilight began to set in, Sylvester stepped out the back door walking at a slower pace than usual up the well-worn path that led to the spot that best overlooked the Decker

spread, formerly known as Applegate's farm. And once again he failed to notice that the shades that covered the kitchen window in the old Foster home further on up that same hill were being pulled back ever so slightly by an unseen hand which allowed for a better view of Sylvester's morning and evening habits and routines.

Nearly ten years had come and gone since his Sarah had passed and day after month after year after year nothing else changed in his miserable life except maybe the occasional laughter and noise he'd hear out of that brat in pigtails playing alone out in the side yard of the old Foster place. Truth be told, Sylvester never really saw or paid any attention to the family that moved in upwind from him, he cared less, long as they kept their distance and left him the Hell alone.

And so, Sarah did.

One day as Sarah made her way into the kitchen to grab her evening coffee and to make that day's final check on Sylvester's comings and goings, she stepped up to the kitchen window as had been her custom for nearly ten years. Then carefully, so as not to be seen, she pulled back ever so slightly on the curtain that had protected her privacy all those many years. It wasn't much more than a couple of inches, but there immediately on the other side of the glass were the bloodshot eyes of a totally wasted Sylvester Adam Decker, his head bobbing back and forth smearing slobber and 'shine across her window pane.

It took a lot to shake or to startle Sarah, but the sudden unexpected sight of this man's face pressed up against her window, whose hatred for all things decent and pure and whose repeated beatings had nearly killed her long about ten years ago, caused Sarah to stumble backward into the kitchen table which tilted over and fell directly on top of her.

Outside the window, rage and fear swept down upon Sylvester's drunken mind as he tried to make some kind out of sense out of what the Hell he had just seen. It took only a second

before Sylvester began pounding his forehead against the glass over and over until it shattered sending bloody shards into the kitchen sink.

But Sly lost his wobbly balance when his head breached the glass and before he could even take a breath to utter a profanity, gravity pulled him down into the remaining spikes of the window frame which then pierced his throat, breaking off into his neck as his body collapsed into a heap outside next to the house. Immediately above the house, there appeared turbulent blackened clouds which rolled and swirled together until they formed a menacing specter which quickly descended and hovered directly over Sylvester's dying body.

Inside the house, blood trickled from Sarah's left ear as she lie dazed on the cold wooden floor. Just behind the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, a frightened young Rebecca Sue cowered in the darkness taking in the whole scene. At once, just outside the shattered window, the dark specter descended over top of Sylvester's body like a cloak absorbing him into itself. Then, rising up from the ground, it began spinning round and round faster and faster until at last, it was a blur of dark light.

Sarah had just begun to stir from her fall, and looking up, she caught a glimpse of the evil black mass spinning, intentionally hovering just outside the window pane. As she arose, she watched as the mass began to drift away further and further toward the old Applegate / Decker place down the hill, until finally, it seemed to pause just under the old porch light which Sylvester had neglected to light before deciding to sneak up to her place to peep into her window. Suddenly, with a thunderous boom, the black mass exploded, along with every window in Sylvester's house; every window except one.

By this time, young Becky had quietly crept up next to her mother and stood on tiptoes to watch the unearthly scene unfold. As the dust from the explosion settled, Sarah and her daughter

looked on in horror as an image slowly began to appear in the one lone surviving window pane that faced directly toward the same window where Sarah and Becky stood. There in the darkness of the night, back-lit by the dying flames of his evening firelight, Sylvester's gaunt ghostly hollow image emerged within the window pane, trapped forever inside, always reaching to get out, or maybe reaching to pull someone inside.



To the left of Sylvester's window, on the far side of the house, a tall, dark figure looked on gleefully. His green gaped teeth glistening with 'shine in the moonlight. And as he unhitched his buckboard, he turned and looked Sarah directly in the eye, tipped his Fedora, then arrogantly rode off into the laughing darkness, whistling as he went.

5

Sophia and Ruby Dawn Foster

Ruby Dawn Foster, daylights a-burnin' thin, nighttime is headed your way and will be on you before you know it. Come along now, supper's waitin'." At the sound of Sophia's twilight warning, Ruby Dawn quickly jumped up from the log chair she had formed and positioned near the top of the rock which she called "Home Rock" that overlooked the vibrant mountain valley stream commonly known as Crenshaw Creek.

Ruby Dawn considered this her own private playground, a place where her imagination ran free. Where invisible playmates would gather to meet her after her chores were done. Sometimes she even imagined there were water fairies dancing in the sunlight who would sing along with her as she sang and played at the water's edge. More often than not, she would lose track of time playing until dark drove her home. Today was no exception.

Sophia Lynne Foster stepped down from the porch and made her way across the dirt lawn down to the edge of the creek path, watching as her daughter hopped and jumped across the stones of Crenshaw Creek until at last, she started up the slope that led to their home.

"I've told you time and again not to go so far across the water young lady! There are snakes all over the place down there and the last thing you want to do is to come face to fang

with any of them.” Truth be told, it was Sophia’s own soul-deep fear of snakes that drove the over-protectiveness of her daughter.

Ruby Dawn, being quick to see the fear and concern in her momma’s voice chose her words carefully as she answered, “I’m coming, momma. I didn’t know I was that far out.

“Mark my words young lady, those rocks are slippery and if you’re not careful, you’re gonna fall headfirst into that creek and that current is likely as not to carry you off clean into another county.” After thinking about it for a second and just as Ruby Dawn drew near, Sophia quietly added, “You know your momma can’t swim a lick, and if you was to fall in, what would I do, how could I get to you?” Seeing the anguish in her momma’s eyes, Ruby Dawn understood the love behind her words and joining hands, they turned to make their way up the slope and onto the main trail that led to their home which was only a stone’s throw from the creek and about a mile or so from the town of Dry Lick where she and her momma often walked to the Dry Lick General Store.

Ruby Dawn had been raised to pay no mind to the murmurs and sneers of the town folk as they passed by. She would simply square her shoulders and look straight ahead as she and walked with intent and purpose to get right in that store and right on out without even once engaging in a glance, smile, or even so much as a howdy or good mornin’ from anyone.

When Ruby Dawn was seven years old, School Officials from Dry Lick came to their house with an order from the law saying she had to attend the local school for her learning. Her momma didn’t like it none too much, but there wasn’t a thing she could do to put a stop to it. So Ruby Dawn started going regular three out of five days each week.

Day after day and month after month, her momma quizzed her about what she learned from those schoolmarms and heathen children she’d been cursed to sit beside all day while in the

Devil's clutches. Ruby Dawn soon learned to answer her momma's questions in as few words as possible knowing that the less she said the better off she would be. And she also discovered in two shakes of a rattler's tail to never repeat what all she heard townsfolk say about them, or the hurtful names they always called her momma.

Ruby Dawn really didn't know or understand why town-folk called her momma "Jezebel." Once or twice she got into a scrap when the kids had said her momma was a hell-bound godless, murdering, wicked woman. And though she genuinely wanted to defend her momma, she soon learned the hard way that she just had to leave it alone.

Apart from school and the occasional trip to the Dry Lick General Store, Ruby Dawn's whole world consisted of little more than her play-spot at the water's edge, and their old run down one bedroom shack which they had lived in for about the last ten years. This was the only home Ruby Dawn had really ever known. The only home she thought she'd ever need. Her momma had a home and a life somewhere else before she came to settle here, and even though Sophia tried to keep it hidden by never speaking of it, she did have dreams about it... bad dreams.

Bad Dreams

Ruby Dawn always used to cry whenever she was awakened by her momma who was also crying in the middle of the night. The handmade quilt that Sophia hung had up as a room partition did little to muffle or disguise the horrible deathly fear she heard in her momma's cracked and trembling voice.

As a young child, Ruby Dawn had no idea that it was the same wicked dream every time that tormented her momma. But as she got older and her "*gift*" began to develop, she realized

that all the sounds and screams and the way her momma clawed at the bedroom door were exactly the same. The part that bothered and scared Ruby Dawn the most was when she thought it was finally coming to an end, and she would slowly uncover her head and look here and there, only to find her momma curled up naked in the corner of the bedroom clutching a pillow so tight that her fingers dug holes into it.

And then there was the smell. Ruby Dawn didn't know how to name the smell except to say that it smelled like burned matches and it made her nose curl, plus it burned the inside of her mouth. When her nightmare was finally over, Ruby Dawn would pull the blanket from her pallet and curl up on the floor next to her momma until she woke up, or morning came. Usually, by then, the smell was gone.

Once when she was about nine years old, she was awakened by her momma who was having the dream, and she thought, "If I could just get into bed with momma and hold her as tight as I could like she sometimes does me, maybe she'll stop having the dream and wake up. Then, maybe she'd be happy enough about it to let me sleep in her bed instead of on the floor pallet."

Though it might seem strange to an outsider that Ruby Dawn slept on the floor, in the early days just before Sophia's night terrors began, it was not so. From the time she was born up to her third birthday, there was rarely more than an arm's length distance between mother and child. But then came the night that changed everything.

Sophia took her spot in the center of the bed as was her habit and then placed Ruby Dawn between her and the wall just as she had always done. This provided Ruby Dawn with a measure of safety and it gave peace of mind to Sophia knowing that her baby could not fall out of bed during the night.

It was an otherwise ordinary night as the two settled in and found their places in the arms of slumber. Sometime in the dead watch of the night, that is to say that period of time when dreams and reality are at their highest struggle for your sanity, Sophia suddenly bolted upright in the bed frantically feeling around for Ruby Dawn but not finding her. Immediately she cried out “Ruby Dawn! Where are you baby?”

In an instant, Sophia jumped from the bed as if it were on fire and in little less than a minute she had searched every inch of the cold bedroom floor but there was no Ruby Dawn.

Great fear and terror seized her heart and Sophia began to pant, struggling for every breath. Her soul-deep panic had triggered a severe asthmatic event. Suddenly, off to her left she saw Ruby Dawn rising from between the wall and the bed floating upward as if being drawn into the very heavens above. Sophia reached out to take hold of her daughter but her knees buckled and she collapsed face first into their sagging mattress, her lungs now void of oxygen.

Sophia’s lips quickly assumed a light blue tint and her eyes began to roll back into her head. Suddenly a tiny hand found its way into hers. And with her last vestige of strength she managed to look up and there before her was the face of Ruby Dawn, her black eyes gleaming in the night. And through a twisted crooked smile etched across her lips Ruby Dawn whispered, “He’s coming for you momma, and through me he will find and have you.”

Immediately, Ruby Dawn dissolved into a vapor causing Sophia’s eyes to complete their journey to the back of their sockets, and then the insatiable darkness swallowed Sophia whole.

Ruby Dawn had no present memory of that evil night but soon afterward, the vulgar nocturnal visitations began. And as Ruby Dawn began to age, there were many times when she had the thought to climb into bed with her momma but getting the courage to do it was another thing.

Eventually, hearing her momma scream was too much to ignore. So she quietly rolled onto the floor and crawled to the edge of the hanging quilt. Then very carefully, she pushed against the bedroom door cracking it just enough to see the covers on her momma's bed going up and down. Ruby Dawn fell backward screaming when she saw a dark figure emerge from the covers holding a gooey pink rope in one hand, and the other hand pushing down hard against her momma's neck. That sight, along with the awful smell of the choking smoke rolling around under the bed like fog, caused Ruby Dawn to begin to shake uncontrollably. And when she saw the fearful desperation in her momma's eyes and heard her broken trembling, voice saying, "not my baby...please..."Ruby Dawn let loose her water crying out, "Mommy, mommy," and then went into a jerking fit on the floor, biting her tongue and repeatedly hitting her little head against the cold wooden floor until she finally passed out.

That next morning the sun's rays filled the little one bedroom house announcing that a new day had arrived and a new hope was in the air. But over in the corner of the bedroom, a naked young mother lay quietly sobbing and shivering, fingers embedded in a pillow, all alone.

At the time, it didn't seem at all strange that the "Right Reverend Applegate," (as her momma called him), showed up that very morning to take Ruby Dawn outside to clear her lungs and to breathe in some fresh, clean mountain air. Afterwards he would apply a warm, soothing poultice for her bruised head. He even brought a specially brewed white honey cider for Sophia's headache.

Ruby Dawn was glad to see Parson Applegate but hated that he was called the Right Reverend. To her, it somehow made it seem like he was so much better than everyone else. It was like you had to be dressed up real good and be clean or be smart just to talk to him. She

wanted so badly to tell him what happened in the night to see if he could help them track down that awful, ugly man she saw hurting her momma.

As Sophia came out of the house, Applegate handed her the warm white honey cider, but before she even took the first drink, she looked at Ruby Dawn and said, “inside young lady, straighten up in there it’s a sinful mess.” Dutifully, Ruby Dawn disappeared back into the house.

Looking back at Applegate, Sophia said, “It seems like it’s becoming more and more real Buford. Last night I swear I was awake. It was too real to be a dream, and in my dream, I even saw Ruby Dawn taken by the fits. I think she saw something… I think, I think…”

Seeing her struggle, Applegate pushed the cup of cider in Sophia’s shaking hand to her lips and she winced and coughed as she swallowed the biting liquid. “Did you tell her how you knew to come by here today?” Sophia asked, wiping her mouth.

Applegate shook his head, “She don’t need to know any more, she already may be a-knowin’ too much too fast. I’ve been seein’ *“the gift”* in her now and again so I put the salve on her head and the glory root mixture ought to start working on her thoughts any time now. She’s a smart gal and her gift needs proper grooming.”

Besides his public persona as the local Fire and Brimstone snake-handling preacher, Buford Applegate was also known to be a worthwhile snake and varmint wrangler going from house to farm ridding the owners of undesirable critters in exchange for a “love gift” to Applegate’s latest undertaking, the Church of the Man of the Almighty.

Buford didn’t know it, and it really wouldn’t have mattered to him if he had known, but in his travels, he had left behind more than one “love gift” himself with some of the Cherokee housewives during more than one of those benevolent snake removals. If the maiden was especially handsome, and her chief man was at home, Buford would just soak her man with

liberal amounts of his special 200 proof “snake-shine” until he was so black eyed drunk that it wouldn’t even have mattered who the man of the cloth had his way with, the chief or his maiden, down on the Cherokee reservation. And there were times that it mattered not to Buford either.

In his travels across the region, he spent a great deal of time with the Cherokee medicine men learning ancient potions, remedies, and cures. One such potion Applegate used was his own concoction of Plantain, Sassafras root, St. John's Wort, Hemp, and Skullcap. He would mix these together and form a warm salve which he applied to Ruby Dawn's head when she had the “rolling fits” that Dr. Whitehouse would have identified as epilepsy.

Occasionally he would take these same ingredients and mix them with a mess of Ramps which they would eat at the Wednesday night prayer-meeting supper table. Usually he and Sophia got the larger portion of the Ramps.

Sophia began to tear up, “Make this the last time, Buford; please don’t put no more stuff on her head. I will convince her that I’m over my dreams and that what she sees only seems real ‘cause she wasn’t eating right, or sleeping right, or ‘cause she’s letting the Devil get inside her mind from not reading her Bible enough. I’ll make her read the Bible more. No more stuff on her head, Buford. Please.”

Applegate drew in a deep full breath and intentionally let it out slow, loud and heavy. “It’s been over ten years Sophia. I know you went into shock at what happened to your sister and especially when your daddy died back then, but I’ve told you over and before, that folks in shock imagine strange things - unbelievable things, that just ain’t real.

You were much younger and more fragile back then. Hell, your own daddy tried to have his way with you, and when you ran down to my old place, it would’ve been natural for you to think you saw me on the porch with a snake. After all, I do heaven’s work with ‘em, praise the