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He headed for his favorite spot, far beyond the cabin. Paw Paw had taken the boy there—only him—the year before. Danny learned the complicated way in one trip, never to forget. Just before reaching the last crest of his destination, he paused at the stacked stones just off the whisper of the trail. The marker. A shiver began at the base of his neck and rose to the peaks of his ears as he remembered what he and Paw Paw had buried beneath it:

*The creature had appeared suddenly, just ahead, in the middle of the path, materializing out of the opaque blankets of clouds drifting across the escarpment. Danny, while fearless of anything else with four legs of the woods, instinctively stepped behind his grandfather as a low growl gurgled in the beast's throat, an effervescent sputum dribbling from fangs showing within a quivering maw—its ears gnawed ragged and asymmetrical by things from the forest even more sinister, its otherworldly eyes, red orbs, with black centers. Danny shuddered, seeing into its soullessness.*

*Paw Paw stiffened and pushed Danny even farther behind him without saying a word. Shouts of warning or displays of aggression would do no good, Paw Paw knew.*

*This creature was different than its origin. Transformed from some deliberate cross of curs, the patches of mange that dripped from its haunches created a wraith of leathery rind and fur from what had once been a formidable bear dog, a Plott hound perhaps bred with something more menacing, abandoned or lost, but beset by viral demons.*

*Though it happened quicker than a primer igniting gunpowder, Danny remembered every detail: the mongrel lunged and Paw Paw stepped forward to meet it. In what seemed like one fluid motion, he unsheathed the buck knife at his side with his right hand, grabbed the dog by the scruff at the thick collar buckle welded into its neck, and plunged the blade deep into its sternum, slicing upward. He released his hold and backed away, feeling behind for Danny, who had not flinched, as the gurgling death-bays of the writhing animal subsided, its warm viscera emptying into the duff.*

*Confident that the creature would move no more, Paw Paw turned to Danny. "Always keep your senses sharp and your knife sharper," he had said, wiping the stained blade on his pants leg. "Nothing else you can do for that kind of evil. We need to bury it, though. Less it spread."*

Danny gazed at the stones a moment longer, remembering Paw Paw's words, but putting the memory behind him as he went on his way.

Using his one arm to balance, Danny scuttled over large rocks and continued up the side of the mountain. The grey, granite stones had been made smooth by time, enveloped with a patchwork of pale lichen after tumbling from ragged peaks, eons ago—victims of countless winter freezes, thaws and flowing rivers. Only trickling waters remained in the crotches of the long-settled mountains. And Danny knew every spring, creek, and crossing with firm footing to avoid soaking his only pair of hand-me-down boots.

After a while, he came to the familiar outcropping of immense boulders, set back into the hillside. To the untrained eye, they appeared to be freestanding and unfettered by the earth's clutches, but to Danny, they spelled deep comfort. This place, his secret.

He entered through a cleft in the rocks, stepping across the fine silt of its opening, like a welcome mat, worn thin from time and the footsteps of ghosts. This place had only known his feet, and Paw Paw's for a hundred years or more—and maybe those of the occasional bear.

When Paw Paw first showed the cave to little Danny, he did so with quiet reverence; he had discovered this place fifty years earlier as a child himself. Inside lay shards of tempered pottery and flakes from the working of arrowheads. That and black smudges from bygone hearths provided evidence of those who once called it home—a deep crevice in the old rocks leading into the earth, kept dry by its primeval walls.

After touching each side with the same respect his grandfather had shown, Danny stepped out again, returning through the front slit, and climbing atop the roof of the stone fortress. Thick forest prevented distant views, but to Danny, it was perfect. If he held his head just right, and focused his eyes on the farthest horizon through the widest crack between the towering chestnut oaks, he could see the peak of the next mountain.

He thought: *I can see Injuns comin' a mile off.* The isolation and protection of this sanctuary gave the boy great comfort, the troubles of home far away. He lay back with a broad grin on his small face, to take in the high canopy, and the blue sky beyond. After a suitable amount of gazing time, he sat up and opened the poke by his side—a cloth sack he made himself, just like the one Paw Paw carried to gather herbs—or as close as Danny could get to it, using his one good hand, his teeth, and one of his mother's few sewing needles.

Opening the sack, he pulled out the dull, maroon book. Paw Paw's journal. He had snuck it from the nightstand, as he did when he wandered the backwoods alone—just like his grandfather would. With the same care given to the walls of the cave, Danny caressed the cover of the ledger, then opened its stiff binding.

One by one, he examined each entry front to back. His eyes passed quickly over tracings of landmarks near the homeplace, the creek dividing the holler behind Paul's Peak, and the precipice of stone he sat upon. Every place Paw Paw had taken him, and many he hadn't, traced in graphite—rough-sketched images of peaks and forest rarely seen by man or his saws. Paw Paw's clues to the wilderness. They all meant something. Danny had sought out many of the hidden hollers on his own.

He flipped to the end of the journal, and stared at the one sketch he couldn't place, a big one. The details of the illustration stretched across the last two sheets. Danny's eyes crinkled. The image portrayed a cluster of trees drawn from a distant perspective, encircled entirely by a ring of what Danny thought to be shrubs, laurels maybe. However, the meaning of the faintly penciled numbers in the margin alluded him. He turned the journal sideways and upside down trying to figure Paw Paw's code, glancing up occasionally to get his bearings. In the middle of the drawing, in the crotch of the spine, the outline of a long, gnarled ginseng root stretched from the top of the book to the bottom. His grandfather's secrets whispered to him within its pages.

Danny ran his finger across the image and grinned. Then he stood up, put the book back in his poke, jumped off his perch and began walking. It wouldn't be dark for hours.