SKETCHES OF AUTUMN

A Thesis

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by

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The Prohibition Amendment was ratified in January 1919 and enacted in the United States one year later. *Sketches of Autumn* takes place in October 1919 and examines how Buck Caldwell -- a small, eastern Kentucky bourbon distiller -- copes with the changes. The Caldwells come from a long line of whiskey makers, and Buck must decide how to support his family now that the legal days of his time-honored profession are numbered.

Prohibition had a profound impact on the production and sale of whiskey in this country, most notably in the dramatic increases in prices paid for liquor. The introduction of automobiles and large-capacity moonshine stills made the illegal liquor trade highly profitable. Corruption spread into the art
of whiskey-making itself, and time-tested methods of producing quality moonshine were abandoned for second-rate procedures. 

Told from the point of view of 16-year-old David Caldwell, Sketches of Autumn explores how one family handles the upheaval brought about by Prohibition.

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Chapter One

Buck hauled arm load after arm load of liquor to the wagon, things that hadn't been moved for years, things that David heard him tell Molly he was going to dump. But why haul it away to do that? There was vodka, wine, brandy, and unnamed concoctions that had gone years undisturbed from the safe harbor of Buck's work shed; there were clear bottles with rich brown liquid, and jars full of white liquor topped by rusty lids. The bottles of strange brews were like a culmination and history of his craft. They rattled in Buck's arms as if their movement from the shed was a call to life -- a joyous awakening. Buck sat the bottles down on the back of the wooden wagon with a clatter and carefully placed them one by one with the other bottles that had already been loaded. He stopped momentarily to roll and light a cigarette, then jumped on the wagon and pulled away, bottles clinking as it passed over rough ground.
David watched Buck disappear over the hay-browned knoll. That shed must be getting empty, he thought, and wondered if the barrels would be left. And the distilling equipment, would it be gone? Or still there in the darkness, like a beacon for the shelved denizens, dim and firm; a sweet, yeasty smell, unmistakable, also holding on in the dark confines? What did Buck think about all of it? He hadn't said much about dismantling his livelihood into parcels to be hauled away in a gray, creaky wagon, that seemed a patient cohort in the endeavor. David asked him one day back in the summer when he was helping Buck cut some white oak for new barrels.

"How are we going to do it? I mean, what are we going to do for a living?" David asked.

Buck stepped away from the saw and the sawdust. "There's always a way to make a living. As long as we've got the land we can live, and don't ever forget that. I have seventy-five acres of timber, and a farm."

"It seems strange to me, Prohibition. I keep trying to make sense of it, and just when I think I've figured it out, I see something else that complicates the whole picture."

Buck smiled and wiped away sweat with his shirt sleeve. "Well, you can think about it while you hoe out the corn patch in the bottom. There's no reason to be confused, Dave. You just have to make up your mind and stick with it. I mean, you can let all the book learning and loud mouths confuse you about things, but a
little common sense goes a long way. Sometimes the books and the preachers and politicians get in the way of a man making up his mind, and that's not good. Look at Pappy Caldwell. He never read a book but was smart enough to make up his mind and do what he wanted to do. Bought this farm and half the land on this side of the county without ever stepping into a school house or worrying about what other people said. Taught himself to read. Even put one of his children through college. Now go get at that corn patch, and I'll send Danny and Becky down to help when I go back to the house."

Surely there wouldn't be another load of liquor to haul off, David thought from his perch; the shed must be empty now. He moved from his bedroom window, dug out a key from behind a book and hurried downstairs, ducking Molly and Danny. It wasn't that difficult. He'd out-foxed them before, escaped Molly's detection for quite some time, had always avoided his mother so he wouldn't have to tell her what he was doing. He didn't want to lie to her, but sometimes she didn't understand that it spoiled the fun of doing something when she knew about it. He darted into the building and lit a lamp. The still was gone. All that remained of it was a charred fire pit and a faint smell. A few plump barrels sat in attendance along the wall. They were capped and full; he scanned a government tax seal and moved away, searching the shelves for a bottle of beer or some wine. He picked up two mason jars of beer and took them to the back entrance, quietly unbolted
the door, sat the jars out into the warm, gray air and quickly re-bolted the door. As quickly, he emerged from the shed and re-locked the front door and was in the hayloft sipping from a jar with the fear of being foiled only an afterthought. He had a hard time lying to her, but if she knew he was drinking! Even at his age he knew he was not safe from her discipline. She caught him one time, when he was eleven, snitching a bottle of beer and gave him a fierce whipping. It didn’t make him cry, but he wanted to because it hurt so bad. Danny squalled from his iron cradle, and Buck got in trouble too -- because he’d chuckled about it. Then David got a lecture about not being old enough to drink, and she told him he was stealing; that it would cost his father in lost taxes and sales and that she expected him to repay his father by working extra on the farm for the next month. Buck didn’t disagree with her either, the way they usually did about drinking and liquor. He acted like it was fair, and made sure there was plenty of extra work to do. David finally asked him about it one afternoon as they rode across the farm to the sawmill. Buck had stopped, the way he always seemed to find a way to do at the same place, at the base of the hillside of ambitious pine trees that had erased their setback and were again reclaiming the turf for their own. Was it an admonishment? He never knew. Buck fished papers and tobacco from his shirt pocket and deftly rolled a cigarette and lit it, scanning upward along the patch of trees.

"Is it wrong to drink?" David asked.
"Well, that's a hard question to answer. The best way I can explain it to you is that sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't."

"When is it wrong?"

"Oh, I think you know that David," he said, taking another puff and starting the wagon along its path to the sawmill. "Surely you can figure it out by now."

David wasn't really sure, though. He asked Grandpa about it way back then, after Molly had whipped him. A man had come into his office.

As David sipped from the quart jar there in the seclusion of the hayloft, he tried to figure out why he even risked the punishment that would follow if he was caught -- the same punishment he'd received all those years ago -- but couldn't really explain it, could only think about the feeling in his head as beer filled his stomach.

The man in Grandpa's office had unkempt hair, two weeks of beard and smelled like a barn. He was holding his side and crying and begging Grandpa to help. Grandpa told him to lay down on the examining table and busied about his office looking at bottles of medicine and fumbling through a medical book. David could tell from the way Grandpa studied the pages -- like Brother Wells reading his Bible waiting for new information to divine itself -- there wasn't much he could do. The man's eyes pleaded after Grandpa, and David placed a cool hand on his forehead.

"Doc, ain't you got none of what ole Bert needs?" he coughed and reeled in pain.
Grandpa reached for the big bottle of aspirin powder and mixed some in a glass of water and handed it to Bert. "Drink this," he said, "it should help the pain."

Bert sat up and drank it greedily, and Grandpa looked him up and down through his bifocals, studying him like the label on a new bottle of medicine. "Now Bert, we've talked about this before, and you know your body can't take it. The next time could kill you. May do it this time."

"I know, Doc. Just like you said, but it's awful hard. Awful hard."

"Hmm," Grandpa said. He turned away and filled a small bottle with aspirin powder and gave it to Bert. "Take this like before, and drink lots of water. There's no charge this time, Bert. Just don't let me see you like this again!"

"Yes sir, Doc Caldwell. You won't have no more problems outta ole Bert. No siree." He eased to his feet and out the door, holding his side and gasping. "Gonna have to come in in a week or two to have a tooth pulled, Doc. Been givin me problems."

"Anytime," Grandpa said.

"What's wrong with him?" David asked, watching through the window as Bert hobbled to the street and climbed on a buckboard, where a young boy was waiting to drive him away, his frail body responding with pain as the wagon jerked to a start and bounced away.
"Drunken himself to death, or just about. Amazes me he's still living. Not even fifty and looks seventy. Let that be a lesson to you, David."

David looked down. Had Mom told Grandpa about him snitching the beer?

"Not much you can do to help the poor devils," Grandpa had said. "You can't treat them once they're that far gone. The only hope is to learn moderation first. He'll be drunk in a few days -- as soon as the pain lets up and the urge to drink hits him; he'll sink right to the bottom of a bottle again. He won't suffer much more, though. One or two more binges will kill him. Has to."

David watched Bert on the wagon as it turned at the far end of town, his figure teetering against the white background of Wells' Grocery store. Someone standing on the porch waved as the wagon passed, and Bert weakly lifted an arm up to wave back. Then he was gone.

"A lot of people die from too much of a good thing, I guess," Grandpa had said.

"Do you think he's ever drunk any of Dad's liquor?" David asked. "I mean, I never saw him buy any."

"Don't worry yourself about that, David!" Grandpa said. "It's not your dad's fault that people like Bert can't handle their liquor. There always seems to be something about it that's bad for everyone. Bert's been coming in here for the last twenty years because of his drinking -- has known it would kill him for that long. He's
had plenty of opportunities to do something about it, to save himself. But here he is twenty years later, close to dying for the very thing that he knew would kill him, and he just couldn't put it down; not even to save his life."

"What's it done to his body?"

"His insides are eat up. His liver is about gone and there's no telling what else. And it wasn't always that. The first time I doctored him he wasn't even thirty. He came in here all cut up and shot; got drunk and got in a fight in Mt. Sterling, got thrown through a window. He got shot in the leg. They hauled him all the way up here, and he'd about bled to death by then. He was too drunk to feel anything so I pulled the bullet out right there and sewed him up. Since then, it's been one thing after another. He went crazy with the DTs one time, and they locked him up in a corn crib for two days. About ten years ago he came in here complaining about hurting in his guts, and I told him it would kill him, but he never quit."

David recapped the jar and placed the half-full container behind a pile of hay. If he drank too much Molly would smell it on him and see that he was acting funny. He could grab a piece of peppermint from the cupboard to hide his breath, but if he got completely drunk, there wasn't anything to do but stay in the hayloft. David closed his eyes and in the lightly spinning darkness of his head saw Bert on that wagon again, making a turn at the edge of town, and no one was waving. Bert looked pale and quiet, then the
wagon floated away in the spinning along with a long procession of wagons making the turn behind him.

Chapter Two

David was halfway home from Grandpa Willie's office when he heard a team and wagon coming up behind him on the road and turned to see who it was. He recognized the big, white, draft horses and stepped off the road, waiting for the wagon to pass. Amos drew the team back with a precise movement and a muffled "Whoa!"

"Howdy, Dave. Headed up the road?"

"Headed home."

"Well, hop on, if you don't mind ridin with ole Amos. I'm headed that way."

"What you doing up in this neck of the woods, Amos?" David asked.

"Just headed over to see your daddy."

David thought back on his day for something to talk to Amos about. He glanced at him, just in case there was something different to notice. No. Still the same drab, blue coat that got washed once a year, stubbornly holding to its task of covering Amos, defying washing and weather, adorning Amos, never aware of the temperature, or the time of year.

Amos looked at David and smiled past his coarse, black beard, eyes like little sunken pieces of coal with shiny veins glinting in
the dull black. Amos turned to spit, then produced a black tobacco twist.

"Want a chew?" he asked.

David shook his head.

"Coming from school?"

"No. From Grandpa's. How's Benjamin?"

"Doin okay."

David watched the gloved hands as they delicately manipulated the thick reigns, the movement of his hands corresponding with another delicate movement in the wagon. Amos cracked the reins and the horses sped up slightly. David looked, expecting to see marks from those loud cracks Amos could make, but there was only shiny, well-curried, white, horse hide.

"You know, had a lotta luck with these bosses. Had em since they was colts. Paid thirty dollars and two gallons a whiskey for em." Amos laughed and elbowed David. "Could a got em for just the moonshine if I'd a got the ole boy drunk fore we traded! Wouldn't take nothin for em now. They's like family."

David nodded in agreement. Amos' coal-vein eyes shined at him and turned back to the road. David didn't remember Pappy Caldwell -- only had an old tin-type of him with Grandpa Willie and Uncle Delmus -- but Amos looked like that legendary patriarch whose name earned respect for even a third generation of offspring in the community. Even Grandpa said Amos bore the resemblance. Pappy Caldwell's eyes looked the same in that photo-
graph, like they could pierce to the very quick of a person's soul. There were slight differences in Amos. His features were saddened by the streaks of gray hair that intruded on the thick black domain of his hair, and by his dingy tobacco smile on the set of teeth Grandpa made for him.

David tried to remember the last time he had been to Amos' place, up there hunkered against the hillside, the smell of burning coal fouling the air around it, and the black coal dust staining the tin roof and smoking the tar-papered sides. His boys came to school for a while. David asked Ben why they quit coming, and he just said, "Hain't no sense in it."

Amos reached in his pocket, pulled out a pint bottle and took a drink. He offered it to David. "Have a drink boy. Hit'll put some fire in your gizzard."

David took it from Amos cautiously. It smelled like Buck's building. "Smells like bourbon?" he said.

"Hell no! I'll leave that to your daddy. Taste it."

David took a sip, and was surprised at how mild it was going down. He took a bigger drink.

Amos laughed. "Like it?"

"It's pretty good. Did you make it?"

"Well now, guess I have to own up to it. Now give it to me. A boy your age don't need no whole lot. Don't let my boys drink much at all, just a sip when we's runnin off a batch. No sir. Not good for you till you're grown. Even then a man has to be careful."
"Mom doesn't let me drink either. But I got bottle of wine one time and went up in the pine thicket and drank it. I had to stay up there until it wore off." After the pronouncement, David wondered why he had told that to Amos. He'd never told anyone else.

Amos laughed and slapped David on the knee. "Reckon ain't a boy your age what ain't done the same thing. One time when I was bout twelve, I snuck into Pappy Caldwell's stash and had me a big ole time. I was drunk as a skunk. Well, Mamaw found me and gave me a thrashin! Only thing, I was too drunk to feel it, an' cause I was laughin', she plum wore herself out whuppin' me."

Amos laughed and slapped David on the knee again. He held the open bottle in one hand and the reigns in the other. Amos spit, took another drink, and closed the bottle, returning it to his coat pocket.

"I hear you is goin' to be like Uncle Willie and make a doctor."

"Yep," David said, "Going to Louisville to school next fall. Got accepted a year early."

"That's real fine, Dave. Always knew you had it in you. Reckon you got the book smarts like your daddy and Uncle Willie. I never went to school you know, on count of Daddy when he came back from the war needed all the kids on the farm.

"Lost his arm at Perryville, and when he come home it was real hard on him and Mommy with all the work. When I was a little feller hit'd plum scare me to death seein' him with just that one arm, and him tellin' me the devil took it cause he was a bad little
feller. But we kids stayed home and worked; didn't have no time for schoolin. Daddy said he never liked school and wasn't goin to put his kids through it. Made Pappy Caldwell real mad. Preacher come round one time wantin to learn us readin and so forth but Daddy run him off, sayin all them scholars and preachers was what cost him his arm.

"How did he lose it?" David asked.

"Said he remembered gettin shot a couple times by some old ugly Reb that was right on top of him all of a sudden, and the next thing he knew he was in a hospital up near Harrodsburg. The doctors was standin over him with a saw, one a sayin 'shame havin to do it to such a young boy,' and another one sayin 'he'll live to tell his grandchildren bout it.'"

"How did he die?" David asked.

"As I recall you was just a baby, and hit was right after Mamaw Caldwell died. Daddy was gettin old and weak but was still too full of piss and vinegar to let anybody help him. Well sir, he took a notion he was goin to town and saddled up his hoss and took off while hit was pourin rain. His hoss was awful feisty and throwed him. He broke his leg and got tromped real bad. The ole cuss must of crawled a mile fore anybody found him. Jake Turner came cross him and took him home. Uncle Willie saw to him but said him being out in the rain and hurt like that was too much even for a young man. He was awful pitiful lookin there in bed, with that one arm. It was like he didn't have no spirit left in him the last few
days. Just laid in bed and slept. I was right there with him when he died. Woke up real wide-eyed and grabbed me by the hand and said, 'Reckon I'll be goin to look for that Reb what shot me.' Then he just closed his eyes and was gone."

Amos reached in his pocket and pulled out the bottle for another drink. "Aw, what the hell," he said, handing the bottle to David. "Reckon fellers ought to have a snort after a sad story like that." He forced a laugh.

David smiled meekly and took another drink.

The wagon rolled on and soon David's white house came into sight in a valley that spread out against a backdrop of timbered hills. Amos turned the team toward the valley, and David could see the two-story, frame house standing austerely in a jumble of fall colors. Buck's brown, weather-beaten liquor shed stood off to the side, below David's second-floor, bedroom window.

Why did Amos want to see Buck? He had been around more than usual in the past month. Must be something to do with the farm. Amos might need some corn. David looked at the tall house, defying a spray of colors. It looked spotless compared to the rich earth tones of autumn that protested against its presence. Even the thick stand of pine trees at the edge of the browning field had given in slightly to the force of fall, holding onto tanned needles that tried to rob them of their unseasonable autonomy. They had grown fast in the ten years since the fire. Buck ordered the seedlings, and made David do most of the planting, even though
he was only six. As they approached the house, David could see
the faint brown stain under his window where he had once
dumped a beer and claimed he had no idea what had messed up
the paint.

The wagon pulled to a stop, and Buck came out to greet Amos.
They went into his shed. David didn't intrude on them even
though he was curious about their business. A federal man was
coming in a few days, Buck had said, and that was about all the
information available on his business.

David watched from his window as Buck and Amos rode away on
the wagon. They seemed an unlikely match -- Buck in his clean
shirt and britches, and Amos with that old blue coat and sloppy
hat. In the distance Amos offered Buck a drink and he accepted.
David hoped Amos wouldn't tell Buck about him taking a drink.

Chapter Three

Dark, and hills breathe and creak. Dark, and crickets languish in
autumn air. A red coal cries out into an abyss of dark. A hoot owl
calls, chases its lonely cry with another, and there is silent dark. A
still moment and a lighter clicks and lights, glimpses of a cigarette
and the outline of Buck's face, then dark -- except for the glow of
a cigarette and a dark sky with pinholes of light fighting to break
in at the top of the trees. A few twigs snap and leaves crackle and
hooves clump to a stop.
"Bygod, Boy, why don't you just shoot that hoss fore it makes any more noise."

"Did you hear me hoot?"

"Yeah, I heard. Now get down here and get busy."

"It sure is dark out here," Buck said, his cigarette fire a tiny red speck in the distance.

"See anyone?"

"Who me?"

"Yeah, you. You better start payin attention, Boy."

"Didn't see no one."

A sizzle sang out and white flame popped and flashed suddenly from the top of the copper cooker. "Look's pretty good now, Buck. Good clean flash on it. Hold your lighter up here a second." Amos juggled a small bottle in front of the flicker "Got a good bead on it. It's ready. Go to it, Ben."

"Amos, I like the way you make whiskey and all, but I've been thinking about it, and I'm just not sure, now. The money's nice, and I've about got enough for what I need. Besides, you don't need me to make liquor."

"Buck, Honey, don't be sayin that! You know you got what Pappy Caldwell called the touch. Think what that bourbon'll bring this time next year. Hit'd be a shame for you to quit making it. Sides, the money don't matter to me. They's plenty for everyone."

"I appreciate it Amos, but I'm not used to doing things this way."
"I'll show you the ropes, Buck. Don't you worry bout the law. I been doin this long enough to know how to handle em."

"I'm sure you do, Amos."

"You know Buck, I been thinkin too. If we want to do this right, what we really need is a car. Only way we goin to keep ahead of the pack."

"Molly thinks I'm closing my operation down, and I agreed I wouldn't buy a car because of it. I think she's afraid of them or something. She'd know for sure something was up if I just up and drove one home."

"Well now Buck, I ain't a goin to tell you how to deal with your woman. Ain't none of my business, but I'll say this. Ain't no sense in sittin back and lettin people like Keith Pritchard make all the money. Forcin everyone to throw in with him, takin half their whiskey, and then tells everbody not to buy from anyone but him. Hit's a sure bet the law ain't slowin him down none, either. Hasn't so far. Fact is, he's sent Steve Wilson out to my house a couple times lookin to collect from me. You know well as me, only law in this county's what you buy. Way I see it, hit's just as well the Caldwells cash in as anyone. Caldwells can't just quit makin it, and you know what I'm sayin. As for Keith, hell, he don't have any idea how much I make. Oh, I throw a few dollars at them when they pen me down on it. Now Buck, we can go right on without you, but me and you both know you need the money, what with three kids and one a goin off to school. You may be fixed right
now, but what about in two years, or however long this new law lasts?" Amos paused. "Sides, the money's about too good to pass up. Shit, Buck. Take a drink of this, and don't worry your ass no more bout it."

"That's pretty damn good," Buck said. "You always did make the best moonshine I ever tasted, even Pappy Caldwell said it was the smoothest ever came out of this county."

"Got a man waitin up on the river to haul this off. He bout shit when I brung him all that liquor you had sittin in your shed. Told him bout your bourbon and he's real interested. Told him maybe we'd take a bottle up to tease him. Get him plum crazy for it."

Buck laughed. "I wouldn't object to that. You know; it's real funny what liquor's been bringing the last few months. A few years like this, and I wouldn't have to work for a long time."

"All I'm sayin is I need you, Buck. It'll pay real handsome for us both. Maybe you're right, in a couple years we can kick back and not have to worry. Sip on some of that bourbon ourselves."

"Man's got to do what a man's got to do. Let's get it loaded. Can't keep that man waiting. I'll think of something to tell Molly."

"Don't reckon I'd trade places with you there." Amos laughed. "Don't reckon anybody would want to."

They loaded the horses quickly and rode away, the noise fading into darkness. Creaky bugs raged at the cool air and trailed off into dark. David stirred and stumbled to the path leading out of
the hollow, hurrying to catch up with the sound of the horses so he could follow them to the road.

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Molly was sitting at the kitchen table reading the red family Bible when David got home. He stopped at the door and watched her from the darkness. She was moving her head back and forth, squinting, trying to read. She stopped and rubbed her eyes. Her cheeks were bright red and her pink hands rubbed softly at her eyes. She reached for the magnifying glass beside the Bible but sat it down impatiently and mouthed some words to herself. She placed her palms together in front of her face, but she wasn't praying, was just looking off resting her eyes. David hadn't noticed before, but she was a pretty woman, not wrinkled and haggard like most farm women her age, who'd broken early from the hard life of work. Her skin tended toward paleness and was smooth, except for a few wrinkles around her eyes and some slight lines on her forehead, probably caused by her squinting. Grandpa had told her several times to get glasses, but she always said "My eyes aren't that bad, yet." A few wisps of gray hair etched her face. He hated the thought of that head of brown hair turning gray; could see her shiny mane as she bent over to kiss him goodnight; could feel it tickling his face; could always smell the rainwater from the barrel near the house that she used to wash it.

She got up to look in the cupboard and retrieved a bottle of wine. She must have a headache, David thought, because that was the
only time she ever drank, said it helped ease the tension. She opened the cabinet and got a sparkling, long-stem, wine glass and filled it half full, the dark, red liquor splashing softly into the glass. It was from a batch Buck made before Becky was born five years ago, "especially for her" he'd said. Molly protested, saying she could never drink all of it, and it would just go to waste. Buck laughed at her. "It doesn't go bad, just gets better with age. Like you." Molly smiled and blushed a little. "Buck Caldwell. I don't know what you think you're going to gain by this. You know I don't drink." Buck laughed at her again and poured her a glass. "Try it. Maybe you'll change your mind. Besides, I've known you to have a sip now and then. This is special anyway. I made it just for you." Molly took a tiny sip and actually praised Buck on it, said it was delicious. "I even made it with a real low alcohol content. It's all your's, Molly. Not for anyone else," Buck said. "Well, if it's mine," she said, "I insist that you have a glass with me."

David sneaked a sip of it once and thought it was the best wine Buck had ever made. He remembered helping Buck pick the grapes one morning. They were about the fullest and richest color of purple he'd ever seen, with the dew dripping off them. He ate one and it was awfully sour. He squenched his face up and Buck laughed at him. "A little sour, huh Son?" he'd asked. Although Molly said she only drank it for her headaches, he suspected she occasionally had a glass just because she liked it.
She corked the bottle and sat back down to her reading and again tried to focus her eyes on the book. Danny and Becky came running into the room and Molly glanced at them, her chin resting on one hand, then took one child in each arm and hoisted them to her knees without effort, as big as they were. She used to do that with David -- lift him up on her knee and read a Bible story; or when David learned how to read, would let him read to her. Danny leaned over the Bible and began reading. He was entirely too big to sit on her knee, but she endured his weight with a smile. The healthy color in her cheeks, brighter now with the two youngsters in her lap, rivaled the glowing wine that she sipped.

David wondered if Buck would go through with buying it. He'd wanted to buy one -- even took Molly to look at one -- but she simply said "no" when it came time to make the decision, said it was too much money, and they really didn't need it. Buck conceded the point, but seemed to hold his argument in reserve for a more opportune time. He was like that, would say "okay" then just do what he wanted anyway, without explanation. And Molly generally tolerated that without incident. But this was different. This was a thousand dollars or more for a machine that she would deem a dark intruder in her home.

David walked inside and went to Molly, kissing her on the cheek. "I love you Mom," he said.

"Why, I love you too," she said. "Did you work late at Grandpa's tonight?"
"Yes," he said.

Chapter Four

The automobile had the same fumey smell that the book said it did. Grandpa's car smelled the same way, burned and raw gasoline warning of its approach. That same smell now wafted across the field and caught David's attention, a breeze picked up and the grove of pine trees mumbled, then fell silent. David heard it as it rattled over the rim of the hill up on the main road. It turned off the road and headed into the stillness of the rimmed valley.

Danny had picked a persimmon and was about to throw it at Becky when his head snapped to attention. "Hey David! What's that? Look Sis, it's a car! Let's go see it! Who do you think's in it?"

He bolted away.

"Look, it's Daddy," Becky said.

When David and Becky made it to the house Molly was scolding Danny. "Not another word about it! Now get in the house and get ready for dinner.

"In the house and get ready for dinner!" Molly said to David and Becky as they approached.

"Where did you get it, Daddy?" Becky asked.

"Not another word! In the house!" Molly commanded.

David did not dare a glance at either one of them. But heard them as he walked away.

"Molly, come back here!" Buck said.
"I have nothing to say to you right now!" she said.

"No. We're going to talk about this."

"Oh, we'll talk about it, Buck. After dinner."

When they sat down at the table Danny grabbed at the round cornbread pone and started to break off a piece.

"Daniel! Get your hands back. We will say a blessing before we eat."

"But Mom. It isn't Sunday." Danny said.

She glared at him, and he dropped his head.

"Lord," Molly began. "We thank you for this food we are about to eat and know that it is your gift which gives us life." Molly paused and David looked up at her unbowed head, her eyes closed. A few whisps of hair formed grayish lines in her forehead. Buck reached his hand out for Molly to hold, but she kept hers under the table. She continued. "And we also pray that you will protect us and help us do what is right. Lord, guide us along the path you have made for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

Buck looked at Molly and waited for her to pass the food to him, but she picked up the big red and white checkered bowl of potatoes and handed it to Danny.

"Mom. Why'd we say grace on Saturday?" Danny asked.

"Don't be silly, Danny. Your always supposed to thank Jesus for food," Becky said.

"No you're not. How come we only do it on Sunday, then?"
"Children! That's enough! Eat! And as soon as you finish, you will all spend the afternoon weeding the big garden. And Danny, be careful with that hoe! You have destroyed half my potatoes."

"But Mom, I only got a couple. Don't make me use my hands to weed, please."

"David," Molly said. "You just start filling that plate up!"

"I've got some things I need to read. I might just eat in my room."

"Oh no you won't! You will get your nose out of those books and march out to the garden with Danny and Becky, and not come home until I come to get you. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mom. Do you want me to wash the dishes?"

"Well, if you are that anxious to do them, I'll just leave them for you to do when you get home this evening. How's that sound?"

David did not dare to offer a "That's okay, Mom." and bowed his head to eat. No one ventured a word, except Molly, who interrupted the tense silence with brief scoldings and firm, understated slams of dishes and silverware. Buck said nothing, and Molly refused to look at him.

Chapter Five

David walked out into the backyard and looked across the field at the stand of green pines. Buck was probably there, where he'd usually go on quiet sulky evenings.
Danny came running through the back door after David. "Where you going?"
"Stay here, Danny. You're not going with me." David said.
"How come, David?"
"Please, Danny. Just do this for me, and I'll explain it to you later. Please!"
"All right. Can I look at your books?"
"Yes. But stay out of my other things." Danny ran inside, slamming the screen door.
When David got to the edge of the angular swath of tall trees he saw Buck sitting near the top, his back propped against a thick, smooth, white pine -- the only one that survived the fire. Buck's blue shirt jumped out from the layer of tanned needles covering the ground. As David entered the grove, browned needles swiped his passing body and fell to the waiting canopy. Buck noticed David and watched him walk up the covered knoll. David sat down and the two were silent.
Even in the windless still the pine trees managed a whisper, amplifying an imperceptible breeze to audibility, with green needles that stroked the air like tuning forks that had lost some of their resonance; delicate, browned needles made a dull tap as they landed in the soft canopy. And there was the world of other sounds that flocked to the pines -- Danny slamming the back screen door, Toby barking, a watch crow giving an alert on a far hill and the noisy flock responding in an uproarious cacophony. A
slight breeze turned into a small wind and the noises were gone, drowned out by the flat, toneless whistle of the pines; as the wind fluctuated, the tuning forks were called to use, and the pines sang their mumbly, whistley song. The wind died and from across the field he heard supper dishes being washed and the door slamming again. "Danny!" Molly's voice trailed.

"The trees sure have grown a lot, haven't they?" Buck's voice crashed through the stillness.

David bowed his head in embarrassment. "They sure do grow fast."

"Do you think you'll be able to make Mom understand about the car?" he continued. "I mean, I know we've been needing one for a long time."

"In time, David. In time. Your mother's a determined woman, and I know she's mad as hell about this. But she'll come around."

They sat in silence until David got up to leave. "I know it will work out. Grandpa says he can't imagine being without a car now that he's got one. Maybe he could talk to Mom for you."

"Thanks son, but I don't think it would be a good idea to say anything about it for a while."

"Can I drive it?" David asked.

"In time. But like I said."

"Okay."

Chapter Six
As David started downstairs he saw Buck hand Molly an envelope.

"What's this for?" she asked.

"To put in the collection plate tomorrow."

"You sure are throwing money around. First you drive home in a car. Now this! What's gotten into you, Buck?"

Buck clasped Molly's arm, but she pulled away. "You can't buy me off, Buck."

"Molly, you're not being fair. I've been trying to explain for a week but you won't listen."

"Well, we agreed. And you know how I feel about you breaking an agreement."

"Okay. I'm sorry about that, but you still haven't realized -- the money's no problem."

"What do you mean?" Molly asked.

"Just what I said. I made pretty good selling out my stock. You didn't let me tell you that."

"What about David's schooling?"

"What did I say? There's no problem. Besides, Dad has said from the day David was born that he would pay for his schooling. I know we've put away some too, and that hasn't been touched."

"Well, how much do we have?"

"Enough."

"Damnit Buck! Tell me!"
"I made three thousand on my stock, and another twenty-five hundred on a timber deal. Going to cut lumber at the mill for Jess Watson."

"Well, why didn't you tell me that! You know I'm not going to stand in your way if we need a car for the farm."

"I know that. So take that and put it in the plate tomorrow."

"That's what puzzle's me about you, Buck. If you would just tell me what you were doing it would save me a lot of worry. And I still haven't forgiven you completely for this.

"How about if I drive you to church tomorrow?"

"See. That's what I mean."

They went into their bedroom, and David heard the door close. After a few minutes David slipped downstairs and picked up the envelope on the kitchen table. "Mr. and Mrs. David Caldwell Sr." it said. He looked inside and counted the money, but couldn't believe the extravagance. A hundred dollars! And no one saw it but him (They were riding along in that rattly, clattery Dodge Brothers sedan, with trees rolling by moist and yellow; brown and bleary. David had told them they were leaving way too early, but Molly insisted they be ready at the usual time, and Danny was jumping in excitement in the front seat and Buck told him to sit still as David glanced at his pocket watch and saw her.), but Molly also contributed to the envelope, sticking in another bunch of bills. David tried to count the money as she placed it in the envelope and returned the parcel to her purse. He looked back out at the
passing ground, could imagine her completely cleaning out the flowered, pink, porcelain jar, taking it out of the dark, oak cabinet, dumping it out on the bed and counting it, fully intending to put her year's tithing in that envelope and give it to Rush Fork Church two months early.

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When the service was finished David went outside while Molly stayed inside to talk. He stood in the churchyard and listened for Buck's car. Keith Pritchard and his wife came out of the church, and were getting in their car when Buck drove up.

"Dad, do I have to keep going to church?" David asked when Buck got out of the car.

"I don't suppose so, but if you don't there won't be anyone to drive your Mother to church."

"Really! Well, Grandpa wanted to let me drive his car anyway, but he said I should talk to you first."

"I think you're ready for it," Buck said.

Keith Pritchard walked up and offered his hamy fingers for Buck to shake. "Good to see you, Buck."

Buck offered his long, hard hands and held Keith's hand tight, obviously overdoing it, smiling his best bullshit grin. "Damn glad to see you, Keith!"

Keith pawed at his gold watch chain and checked the time. "Nice car, Buck. I didn't reckon a man in your position, bout to lose his
license and all, would be able to buy an automobile. How much did you pay for it?"

"Got a good deal on it."

Keith chuckled and fitted his thumbs between his suspenders and white shirt. "Well now, I know they cost some money. Paid fifteen hundred for that one there last month, a Model T Roadster." He turned to admire the car, his wife sitting in it, unmoving, uninterested in the eyes now cast in her direction. "Thinkin bout buyin another one. I seen one like this up in Maysville. Dodge Brothers isn't it? They was asking twelve hundred for it new. What model is that one?"

"I don't know, Keith. I just bought this one because I've got all kinds of money to throw around. Hell, may buy me another one, too!"

"Well now, Buck. That would be nice if you can do that. Listen, I been meanin to see you. Would pay you real good to work for me. I mean, when a man needs a job I like to try and help him if I can. I mean, what are you goin to do when you close that distillery down? You know, I've never even seen your operation."

"Hmm."

"I guess you could make it farmin, but you'd be a lot more satisfied with the money workin for me. I could use you, Buck."

"Thanks, Keith, but I'll just pass it up. Give it to the church. That's what I'm doing with a whole lot of my money."
Molly came out of the church. "Get in, David," Buck said. He grabbed for Keith's hand and did his routine again, emphasizing it with a warm back slap, then got in the car and left Keith standing. They drove up to the front of the church.

"Keith wants you to make liquor for him, doesn't he Dad?" David asked.

"That low life son of a bitch." Buck said quietly, shaking his head. "How do you know about Keith?"

Molly and the children approached the car, and David got out to open the back door for her, jumping into the back also. He remembered the passages read in church and took Molly's Bible from her hand to skim through it. Steven the Martyr at the council, but that wasn't what Brother Wells had read from, his gray, dark gesturing figure, completely still, reading long passages that were hard to follow without a Bible. Acts Seven, Verses nine and ten, he had said. He turned to the passage and read: 'And the patriarches moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him. And delivered him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, King of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and at his house.'

But it wasn't that simple. Joseph had done a bunch of things to get there. And his brothers threw him in that hole and just kept him there. If I had brothers do that to me, David thought, I'd jump right out of that hole and fight them, not sit there and wait until they decided to sell me.
"Keep the faith!" Brother Wells kept saying, and, "It's all God's!"

He'd read from Genesis, Chapter Thirty-nine. David turned the pages. 'And the Lord was with Joseph and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand. And Joseph found grace in his sight and he served him: and he made him overseer over his house and all that he had he put into his hand.'

But what was interesting was about the dreams. I wonder if my dreams mean anything -- Annie Johnson and beers by the creek, and that one about Dad, what was it? 'And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said lie with me, But he refused...' "He kept the faith!" the voice had boomed. But Pharaoh's dream, that was something how it all happened like that. All that time in prison and a dream gets him out. Did he really think he'd ever get out? And why would God give Pharaoh a dream? Two years later and he was called from prison to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh himself. 'And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, In my dream, behold, I stood upon the bank of a river: and behold, there came up out of the river seven kine, fat-fleshed and well-favoured, and they fed in a meadow: and behold, seven other kine came up after them, poor and very ill-favoured and lean-fleshed, such as I never saw in all the land of Egypt for badness. And the lean and ill-favored kine did eat up the first seven fat kine. and when they had eaten them up it could
not be known that they had eaten them; but they were still ill-favoured, as at the beginning.' And from all that he predicted the famine and became wealthy and powerful. David looked up and they passed a new grave at Tackett Cemetery, dirt forming a neat, clay-brown mound beside the hole. I sure wouldn't want to get in that hole, wouldn't want to be like that grave digger in the play. And what would have happened if Joseph hadn't stayed in that hole? Would he still have been in the Bible? And didn't his people eventually become slaves to the Egyptians anyway?

David closed the Bible softly and handed it back to Molly, who smiled and put the black book on her lap. And no one had gotten saved today. Jimmy Walters said in school he was going to, but he didn't. His family wasn't even there. Brother Wells just stood up there by the pulpit waiting for an arrival, singing Old Rugged Cross as loud as anybody in the church. Then he dismissed the service after a final prayer. "Help us keep the faith," he had said, again, with Keith Pritchard holding those pudgy fingers over his brow, like he was making a great effort to pray, just like that king in the play. What was that king's name?

Chapter Seven

David continued to cry even as the cold creek water splashed on his face and washed at the stench. He couldn't stop the tears which mixed with cold splashes of water, cleansing the brown muck from his face. His cheek hurt but that was nothing. The
smell that was too strong to go away, emanating from his clothes and body, hurt more. He peeled off his grimy shirt and dropped it in the clear, cold pool. Chill bumps raised on his back and his nipples got hard as a cool wind whistled past his wet, bare skin. Hot tears fell and fell onto his chest -- felt humiliating as they made contact with his nipples -- and made runny brown splotches in the brown stink. Oh God the smell! He cried in a fit, unable to think about the cold water biting at his feet as he fell into it trying to pull off a shoe. His rage became an ally against the tears as his body plunged into the pool, and he finally quit crying.

And what he said: "Tell your daddy, you hear. Tell him bout this," the son of a bitch said looking down at him. And the laughter! They laughed and laughed at him as they walked away!

David pulled off his trousers and soaked them in the cold creek. What if someone saw him? His fury brought tall white splashes from the creek, and he stood nude and shivering, scrubbing desperately. And the stubborn smell -- refusing to quit, defying David's revulsion. God! Why did they do that to him? The bastards! Why was he fool enough to let them catch him and throw him into the back of the sheriff's car? The sheriff-slugged him! How could he? He knew he should have made a run for it, shouldn't have been so cocky.

"Got a message for your daddy, Boy," Keith said. "Tell him he needs to come see me."
He should have just run right then, but instead said: "Dad doesn't need your kind of business, you son of a bitch."

Keith flew into a rage and pointed at him. "Grab his smart ass and throw it in the car!" he yelled at the sheriff. David just stood there and when the sheriff came at him he started to move, but the sheriff sluged him in the cheek, and he fell like a dead tree.

"Where are you taking me?" David yelled, rubbing his cheek, but Keith just turned around from the front seat and smiled, his fat jowls resting on a bright red suspender.

"Nothin personal boy. You're a bright boy. Goin to college, I hear. Real nice. See you been workin with Doc Caldwell, too. Good boy. Maybe since you're such a good, bright boy you can explain to your daddy that he can't be goin behind my back and all. No sir, him and that wood rat can't be slippin round on me no longer. Tell him you can't mess with shit and not get it on you, Boy." He laughed at David, just laughed and laughed and the sheriff didn't let him go when the car stopped.

"Let me go!" David struggled as the sheriff yanked him out of the car and shook him hard when he tried to get away. "You fat son of a bitch!" David said to Keith. "Let me go, damn you!"

They drug him to an outhouse and the sheriff gave a push on its side and the flimsy building fell over, exposing the black, brackish hole. David struggled with Keith, who held them and the sheriff grabbed him and pushed him in the hole. The slosh and smell as he hit made him puke and he was crying. He couldn't stop and
they saw him crying. The tears fell harder and could be felt in the hot streams that hit his head and steamed in the shit all around him. They stopped pissing, and he looked up at the sound of Keith's voice.

"Reckon I ought to kill you boy, but ain't no need for that. Just tell your daddy bout this, and I won't hurt you. Tell your daddy what I said! You hear! Tell him you can't mess with shit and not get it on you. Tell him, Boy! And tell him he'll be down there with you if he goes behind my back anymore. And Boy! Don't ever cuss me again!"

David heard them laughing as they turned away and the car drowning out the painful laughter, carrying the torment away in a clatter and a chug.

He shivered in the cold creek as he wrung out his clothes and put them back on, still dingy and stinky. He couldn't go to Grandpa's like that, would wait and sneak home after dark, leave his clothes in the hayloft and walk in the house naked, would try to explain that to Molly before taking a chance on being seen wearing them. The smell chased him into the woods, kept cumbersome company with him, made his stomach ache in agony, and remained in the clothes that he forced himself to wear home. Didn't they understand that he could never tell anybody? Not Buck, not even Grandpa. He would walk naked through town before he would wear those clothes again. He couldn't tell anybody, even though his rage kept wanting to belie him.
Chapter Eight

When David came to Grandpa Willie's after school he was told that Aunt Maggie Wilkins had died up in Dayton. She'd moved there in 1915 to live with her two sons after Uncle Frank died.

When Uncle Frank died, nearly everyone in the county came to the funeral. Everyone seemed to feel a loss. Even those who didn't come to the funeral grieved, and the communal grief hung in the air like a stubborn spirit. Amos said he wouldn't go to the funeral because he "couldn't stand to think of him as dead." Amos nearly cried when David told him and went into a story about hunting with Uncle Frank.

David wasn't sure who Uncle Frank was related to -- other than his wife and two sons, who came from Ohio with their families in two shiny roadsters to attend the funeral. Probably everybody in the community could trace some estranged lineage to Uncle Frank.

"Sure precipitate you takin care of me so quick," he'd told Buck. "I know you got lots of customers waitin." Uncle Frank looked down at David as he stood beside him, one hand on Uncle Frank's knee, the other cautiously reaching for his horse. He chuckled. "That youngin shore is growin." He hoisted David into the saddle, and David looked down what seemed a mile, unsure if he was scared or not. Uncle Frank patted the big chestnut horse on the neck. "Do you like ole Mick, son?" Ole Mick. The words were calming, and
then there was no reason to be afraid. Buck helped him put the bottles in his packs while David sat atop the world.

"What do I owe you, Buck?" he asked, reaching into his checkered shirt pocket.

"No use trying to leave that here, Frank."

"Now bygod Buck, I ain't gonna let you do this no more. Take the damn money you sorry thing!"

"Bullshit, Frank. Get on that horse and ride your ass out of here."

"Buck, you're the best son of a bitch in this county. I ain't a lyin. But here, why don't you take this. Buy Molly a dress or somethin."

"She's got plenty. You know I ain't going to take it. Now put it in your pocket. Buy ole Mick a new bridle or something."

They laughed. Uncle Frank turned to David. "What're we gonna do with your Daddy? Reckon we'll just have to shoot him, won't we." He put the money in David's hand and lifted him off the horse and sprang into the saddle.

"Frank! Take that Back," Buck said, reaching for David's small hand.

"Now don't you be takin that away from the boy," he said, riding away.

Grandpa and David went to Uncle Frank's house when he took pneumonia, but he'd already been sick for more than a week, and Grandpa couldn't do much for him in the days that followed.

And just about the whole county turned out for his funeral. People were packed into the church so tight you couldn't scratch,
and Brother Wells preached at it even though Uncle Frank only came to church once a year at Easter. And it was the most beautiful sermon he'd ever given. Everyone cried, except Aunt Maggie, who just shook her head and occasionally called out mournfully for Jesus to hold Frank in his hands.

So Aunt Maggie had passed away. David asked how she'd died, wondering if she had suffered. Grandpa looked up from his newspaper and crossed his shirt-sleeved arms on the table.

"I couldn't tell you, Dave. All I know is they're bringing her down here on the train for burial. They're going to bury her with Frank."

Grandpa continued to read, sitting there in his white shirt; his clean, thick, silver hair picked up beams of sunlight and almost glittered atop the visor that held dark in the glaring light and gave some definition to his face. Sunlight vaulted inside and Grandpa was reading by it, sitting just aside of the window, paper unfolded on the examining table. He picked up the paper and scanned it at eye level.

At the funeral, people were actually managing soothed smiles through their tears, saying that Uncle Frank had a powerful send-off. Brother Wells said some beautiful words, and David could still hear the hymn.

"And he walks with me,
and he talks with me,
and he tells me I am his own.
And the joy we share
as we tarry there,
none other has ever known."

Sheriff Steve Wilson's voice lilted over the harmony. His eyes were closed like he was reaching up for the words and pulling them right down from the pearly gates. Everyone said it was the best he'd ever done, and he nodded his head in sorrowful agreement. Don't want him singing at my funeral, David thought.

"You're awful quiet, what's on your mind?" Grandpa asked.

"Nothing. Just quiet I guess." David said. "Were you and Uncle Frank friends?"

"Well now, I guess we were," Grandpa said and rose from his paper. "We were the same age, and he was related to us you know, through my mother, your Grandmother Stone. His mother and mine were first cousins. Anyway, I don't guess you want me to explain all that. Frank was a fine man, though. Never knew him to have an enemy. Of all the folks in the community who've passed away, I guess he was the hardest one for me to see off.

Grandpa pushed his black visor up and scratched his head. David looked out the window. At the opposite end of town loomed the three-story, store front of Wells' Grocery. It was bright outside, and the long row of buildings along the street was barely distinguishable in the glare. Grandpa didn't seem old at fifty-nine. He still got out to make his house calls, even rode his horse to places where the Model T wouldn't go.
"Hate to hear about Maggie, too," he said. "She was one fine looking girl in her day. Frank and I both were after her before I met your grandmother. I went off to college, and Frank up and married her. They came to Louisville, eloped, and asked me to stand up with them. By then, I'd met Clare in Louisville, and we both witnessed the ceremony."

Grandpa sat back down to his paper. "Where were you the first few days this week? I could have used your help. Jeramiah Hobbs broke his leg Monday, and I had to go down there and set it. Need to go today and check on him." He glanced at the paper for a few minutes, flipping through the pages. "Sure will be glad when you start driving for me. Boys up at the restaurant say they're going to take up a collection and hire me a driver, cause they're afraid I'm going to kill somebody. Asked me if I was trying to drum up business." Grandpa laughed to himself.

"David." Grandpa said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Grandpa."

"Got a girl on your mind? That Annie Taylor sure is a nice little girl. Have you taken her to dinner yet?"

"No, Grandpa."

"Okay, David. Have you asked your dad about driving yet?"

"Dad got a car too, has already let me drive once."

"That's good. Well, let's go check on Jeramiah, and there's a few other places I need to stop on the way there. Can you handle that car?"
"Yeah."

"I don't know what I'm going to do without you when you leave," Grandpa said. "Give me a few minutes to get my things together."

"How come they're bringing her all the way from Dayton to bury her?" David asked.

Grandpa turned his back and looked out the window, pulling his visor down, the white shirt bunched up around his dark suspenders. David looked away from the glare. "Well, when you get old I guess you just want to be home. I'm sure that's why. She wanted to be home. I don't think she ever wanted to go to Dayton, but the boys insisted, and it was good for her to have family around. But this was home to her.

"When I was a boy and went off to college, I didn't think I'd ever come back here, but the more I was away, the more I wanted to be here. I could've had a fine practice in Louisville, but it just didn't feel right. I always wanted to doctor my own people. When you get old, home matters, and that's why she's coming home to be buried." Grandpa walked away from the bright window and past a shelf of blue medicine bottles.

David had been with his family somewhere in the middle of the procession as it slowly made its way to the graveyard. Grandpa had said he never thought he'd see someone as strong as Frank go so quickly. "At least he didn't have to suffer a long time," Grandpa had said. The sheriff's car led the procession, with the hearse following, and Keith Pritchard (God knows why) right there behind
him with Aunt Maggie in his car; the two roadsters from Ohio followed him. The black hearse turned slowly at the edge of town and seemed to jump out as it passed the stark, white grocery store.

"What you so dreamy about?" Grandpa asked. "Sure could have used you when I set that leg. It's a pretty bad break; fell off a wagon in the cane field."

"Sorry, Grandpa," David said.

"That's all right. A boy your age has got better things to do than run around with the likes of me. But Jimmy Manns said he was going to write it up in the paper that the community ought to pull together and hire me a driver before somebody gets hurt."

"I'll drive you, Grandpa."

Everyone waved as they passed through town, and Jimmy Manns even came out of the paper office to point and grin at Grandpa. David kept his eyes forward, driving toward the white store front. He wondered if it was true, what Grandpa had said, that Uncle Frank didn't suffer for long. David and Grandpa were right there with him when he died, standing right at his bedside. David had watched him carefully for a week, looking for signs of his strength coming back, but he just got paler and paler, and finally turned a shade of pasty blue. His lungs wheezed as he fought for breath. All that time, Uncle Frank strained as he shook his head back and forth on the white pillow, even in his semi-conscious sleep. Grandpa would look at him hopefully and say softly, "You can
whip it, Frank." And when Grandpa was done examining and
doctoring he'd sit by the bed quietly with his head down until he
had to leave. Then the day Frank died, the shaking had stopped,
and in his final hour was replaced with a gentle nod that the
white pillow softly absorbed. He murmured with his final breaths
and David strained to hear the words. He said something about
fetching him a piece of salt pork from Wellses and "Maggie" and
"the boys," and he faded off with a final, soft nod. The procession
had stretched to the other end of town, with single riders on
horseback and people on foot stringed into a tiny thread that
appeared to have no beginning or end. Maybe Grandpa was right,
maybe Uncle Frank didn't suffer much, but so many did.

The grocery store towered above every building in town except
the courthouse. As David drove closer, it shimmered in the warm,
noon sun like it stood ready to absorb all that approached. David
turned at the end of town.

"You only drove once and doing this good," Grandpa said. "Guess
Jimmy won't have to write me up in the paper after all."

Chapter Nine

David sat motionless on the wooded hillside, watching the barn
through half-fallen leaves. Keith and the sheriff drove up to the
barn entrance. He heard talking and soon the same car scurried up
the road and out of sight. Three more men left on horseback and
the barn and hillside were silent. David creped cautiously toward
the barn, which was tightly squeezed into a wooded draw. He took
great care in his approach just as he did hiking across the five
miles of trails to Keith's farm. It had saved him some walking by
driving Grandpa's car part of the way. He'd said he was going up
to call on Annie Taylor and Grandpa laughed.

"Don't you want to drive up there to see your gal?" Grandpa
asked.

"She's not my gal. I'll get out at Pretty Ridge and walk from
there."

"Got me a pretty gal up on Pretty Ridge," Grandpa sang.

"Please don't tease me about her, Grandpa."

"All right, David. Are you sure you're okay? You can always tell
me if there's something wrong," Grandpa had said.

"I know, but nothing's wrong."

Grandpa got in the driver's seat and pulled away, swiping a tree
as he drove off.

David walked to an open vent door and peered inside the tall
barn, which looked to be fifty feet long. No one was there. A
whiskey odor caught David's nose, and so many barrels -- he'd
only seen that many at the big whiskey plant in Bardstown. And
they were all full, except for the ones stacked three high in the
corn crib. But what was most unusual was the huge contraption
occupying a hole across nearly one whole side of the barn floor. It
even had stair steps down to it -- a sunken world of pipes, tubs
and pans, big enough to run three times what Amos could make in
his own still. He scouted the barn, cussing Keith and the sheriff. After a few minutes, he stepped through the barn vent and looked up to see the sheriff's car emerge. David hadn't even heard it. They pulled up and stopped the car and both of them got out and looked at him. They didn't try to catch him, only stood a few yards away and stared at him.

"Little far from home, Boy," Keith said.

"What are you doin up here? Do I need to kick your ass again?" the sheriff said.

"No. No, Steve. Leave the boy alone. He's a good, smart kid. Just needed a little linin out. Got a message from your daddy, Boy?

"You know, Steve, we forgot to give the kid some money for takin the message to his daddy. What did your daddy say? Steve, give him twenty dollars."

The sheriff took out a roll of bills and pulled one off. "Come here and get it," he said.

"Well, do you want the money or not?" Keith asked.

"Maybe I ought to kick his little ass again," the sheriff said. "Hell, let's feed him to the hogs. They'd love his smell." The sheriff raised his nose to the air and sniffed. "Shew wee. Smell that. Don't that just smell like shit. The hogs would love it. Smell that, Boy. You like that smell, don't you?"

"Now Steve, leave him alone. Don't you want the money? You earned it. Can't you talk, Boy? What did your daddy say? Did you
tell him he can't be bootleggin on his own in this county? Did you
tell him he owes us some money?"

"Where's the money, Boy? Don't make me whip your ass again,
you little shit eater," the sheriff said.

"Now Steve, the boy may have it with him. Don't tease him bout
that no more. Look Son, come here and Sheriff Wilson will give
you twenty dollars for your trouble. You don't owe us any money.
It's your daddy we got business with. There's twenty dollars in it
for you, pure and simple. Just walk over here and get it, and tell
us what your daddy said."

David took a step forward then stopped, unable to say anything.
He looked around for a rock or a stick to attack them with but saw
nothing except the dim, gray ground. He looked up and smelled
the car fumes and raw gasoline, which penetrated through the
odor of whiskey from the barn. "I'll kill you!" he said, knowing
there was nothing else to throw at them but words.

The sheriff laughed and slapped his knee, while Keith shook his
head and snickered.

"I don't know why I even try to be nice to him," Keith said. "Now
let me tell you something, Kid. You better start puttin those brains
to work, or it might just be some wise ass school boy who winds
up dead. You little whelp, I'll beat your brains out and deliver
your ass to the devil in the bottom of a shit hole."

"Then Keith, I'll shake your hand in Hell, you son of a bitch!"

"Get that little son of a bitch! Kill him right now!" Keith yelled.
Bullets whizzed into the thick woods and were absorbed immediately by trees that helped in David's escape as he disappeared into the dark sanctuary of creaky, hooty noises.

And David, squelching his fear, returned to Keith's barn the next evening with a slop bucket, but had to wait until late at night to make his move. He stayed with Grandpa that night and had to give Grandma Clare an explanation about why he was out so late.

"He's courting, Grandma," Grandpa said.

"Well, it's awfully late to be courting, David," Grandma said. "You better get to bed, you've got school tomorrow. Have you eaten?"

***

David sat and watched from his bedroom window. Buck was saddling a horse to ride out. Tomorrow he would load that car down with whiskey and take off to who knows where. Didn't he know they weren't going to let him keep doing it? Weren't going to tolerate such an intrusion. Buck pulled his shiny, silver lighter from his coat and lit a cigarette. A few red ashes fell on his coat, and he brushed them off, but probably not in time to keep them from doing their damage. How many times had Molly fussed at him for ruining his clothes with those cigarettes? It seemed to him, as he watched his dad prepare his horse for another nighttime journey into the woods, cigarette in his mouth, that Buck did what he wanted anyway, only made the pretense of following Molly's wishes. That had always been there in him -- a dark, inner side that showed itself only through the pride in his eyes and the
way he seemed to always have a hidden plan that, if necessary to use, would resolve any problem that slowed him down. Now, that proud, taciturn man prepared to slink off into the woods to do what he'd once done openly. Was it a blow to his pride to steal off into the night, leaving his wife who could only worry about her husband? Buck disappeared over the rise of a brown hill, riding into the crimson evening sky, a black figure defying a sunset that overindulged the clouds with color. And Molly was the only one who believed what she did; she'd consumed Buck's lie just like her special bottle of wine. David looked at the thick, leather-bound book on his bookshelf. He'd gotten it in Louisville when he visited the medical school with Grandpa. He went to a bookstore after the play because he wanted to find it and read it, and Grandpa had bought it for him, saying he was pleased David liked it so well.

Molly knocked on the door and entered.

"David. I was wondering if there's something wrong. I mean, I haven't seen you much this week. Where have you been?"

"Just the usual."

"Are you all right?"

"Fine, Mom."

"How come you didn't eat your supper?"

"Wasn't hungry."

She seemed to be pleading with him, begging him to soften his silence. "Are you going to be able to drive me to church Sunday? You don't have to go in if you don't want. Dad said you asked if
you have to go. It's your decision. But I'd still like for you to drive me."

He studied her; her asking him if he wanted to go. It hurt him to think of her being wronged by the injustices carried on in the dark woods and in the bright church building. Was there no end to, no sanctuary from, the shame that had swooped down on her family like a fat vulture which didn't fear the living? She didn't deserve it, didn't deserve to have to don her best Sunday cloths like a soldier and march unknowing and alone into the foulness.

"I'll go to church with you," he said.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, Mom."

And maybe he wasn't sure. He shuddered at the thought of seeing Keith at church, but still someone had to go with her, to shield her from the harsh truth that threatened to taint her goodness. But Keith wasn't there, not that Sunday, or the next one. Three weeks went by and the sick feeling slowly left his body. Shame was replaced with rage; rage that welled up in him at each visit to the barnful of whiskey barrels; rage like he felt in the creek that day; rage that carried him off in the night to Keith's farm to face whatever danger might be there; rage that could not be placated, rage that roared in silence from the pit of his stomach and demanded audience.

Chapter Ten
"Only God's," Brother Wells asserted, and the words seared into the congregation, catching power in a horseshoe shaped spotting of members that opened back to him and amplified his pronouncements. "Only God's!" he shouted again. A Bible passage or a thunderous appeal from the pulpit would burn through David's unbroken stare, held steady by something in his stomach that made him imagine Keith in every form of ridicule and abject torture. David tried to think of a way to barb him, cut him to the marrow; or maybe not. Keith had been too stupid to put two and two together when they saw him up there. Something else might set him off. David chuckled. Jack Conners didn't care for their whiskey.

"Goddamn, Keith! I believe the hog got in this batch." Jack sputtered and coughed. "Goddamn, Keith! I killed the last son of a bitch that gave me something like this to drink."

"What are you talkin about?" Keith asked.

"What the hell is this stuff?"

The sheriff took the cup from Jack and drew another one. "Keith this smells awful." He tasted it. "Must've spoiled or somethin. It's not scorched."

"Give me that damn cup!" Keith said, and walked to another capped barrel. He drew a cup and tasted it. "Shit!"

David chuckled there in church, but remembered how scared he was of being found with Jack Conners there, and him drinking that whiskey, too! Keith kept his face forward, showing David a pudgy
profile and half-smile against the background of a red, padded pew -- downstage left, in a small gallery of four pews he'd padded "out of the goodness of his heart" as Brother Wells called it.

"Matthew Five, verse forty-four," the preacher said --. probably for the third time -- and began reading. Had Keith talked to Buck? David hadn't heard a word. He would have to go help Grandpa all this week. He couldn't keep using him as an excuse for being gone. Besides, Grandpa needed him. What's he going to do when I'm in Louisville? Oh, Grandma will take care of him. Keith, you son of a bitch, I'm going to get you. David felt a tap on his leg and heard his mother whisper to listen to the sermon and quit staring.

"It's the Lord's domain, Brothers and Sisters! Don't doubt that!" Brother Wells said.

David looked at Keith again, downstage left. How could a man as good as Jesus be treated so mean and someone as mean as Keith sit there in sanctimonious elegance, claiming he could understand the message, praying like King Claudius unable to get his thoughts beyond the ceiling? Have to get him one more time, just to let him know he's been had. Boy would he like to see his face then. I ought to blow up his still. What was that Amos and Dad were talking about. Maybe he'd ask Amos. Pappy Caldwell would have known. And he imagined Jesus enduring the crucifixion, the whip marks, the cruel progress to Calgary. Did he really forgive Pilate and the multitudes that sent him to his painful death? And there was Keith, (pompous ass!) holding out that stubby hand and
dropping a fat envelope into the collection plate, watching the plate pass from usher to usher, seeing Molly take the plate and David there, staring at him cold and mean. Keith turned his head and looked away. He hadn't confronted Buck yet, and David could sense it, the big coward was afraid to face Buck. It was there, the yellow streak, sneaking out right there at the top of his starched collar, rimming his eyes. Keith was scared of Buck. They would never have confronted Buck first. You big shit-eating coward! I'm going to blow your operation to high heaven. There was some gas in that barn. And the way he gloats over his donations, and the padded pews and new songbooks -- only some of the ladies, including Molly, said they liked the old ones better and that there really wasn't anything wrong with them. Molly just dropped her offering in and passed it like it was a hot bowl of mashed potatoes. Buck didn't even go to church when he gave the hundred dollars.

They stood to sing. He is actually going to get saved! David protested to himself. Ask forgiveness for his sins again? How many times was it now? Three? More? David laughed and Molly looked at him disapprovingly.

"Keith Pritchard has come forward to rededicate his life to God," Brother Wells pronounced at the end of the song. "I invite everyone to come forward and congratulate him."

Many got in line to shake his hand again, while another contingent -- mostly families of Molly's ladies group, who seemed to
recognize the impiety -- made no other gesture than to softly talk in corners or politely leave the building. David looked at the line and could not escape it's attraction as it snaked around the pews and to the waiting Keith, who accepted hands heartily. David moved with the noisy line and offered his hand.

"I'm so happy for you Brother Pritchard," David said. "And I'm sure you're not finished reaping your rewards for all the things you've done!" David gripped the heavy hand and squeezed tightly. He gave Keith a firm slap on the back. "As you reap so will you sow, the Bible says." David gripped the helpless struggling hand harder, pulling Keith closer for a confidence. "And you will Keith. I promise you, you will." David felt a flush of relief as he dropped the hand and rushed into the dry noon air. He'd walked right up to him and sneered, shook his hand and looked him in the eye. And that slap on the back; he just about choked. Buck would be proud.

He got in the car with Molly as Keith came through the church door. Didn't he just need to be killed? No, it was almost too good for him. And it was there, the fear, showing itself in the flush of that over-skinned face. Justice will prevail my friend, he thought. He'd get even, and the yellow bastard knew it -- feared it -- now.

David looked up the steps at Keith, standing amid a fan of bright dresses and linen coats. David waved. "God bless you, Brother Pritchard!" he shouted and drove off.

"David! What's gotten into you?" Molly said.
What was that verse? David thought, but the preachers words escaped him. It was Matthew something. Guess I'll have to read it all. David drove, imaging a tribunal, with him at the head, staring down hard on Keith, calling due all his debts. "You pitiful hypocrite," David told him in flat, vindicated rage. "Do you think we can clean the shit off you? Do you really think God would admit such foul-smelling vermin into heaven? And Keith, on his hands and knees, looking all pastey yellow. David reached out and pulled Keith's chin up to look on him. There was that same fear, unmistakable, and no longer subtle. "Send his soul right to Hell." There was a unanimous affirmation from for the tribunal, and David stood with the ultimate decision, lording it over Keith. "Are you ready for your atonement?"

Chapter Eleven

David's first thought was to get a gun when Keith and the sheriff pulled up in front of the house, but he stood silent at the top of the stairs and listened as Molly talked to Keith.

"I'm sorry to bother you at home Sister Caldwell" he said.

"That's all right, Keith. We'll be having dinner shortly, you're welcome to stay."

"No. No. Can't stay too long. Listen, I hear your boy's goin to college. If there's anything I can do to help him, just ask. He's a good boy, and I'm always willin to help."

"Thank you for the offer, but I'm sure we can manage."
"I was wonderin if I might have a word with Buck, if he's home."
"He's outside. I can get him for you."
"No. No. I'll show myself out."

David went to his window to watch. Buck came out of his building as Keith and the sheriff approached.

"Buck, how are you?" Keith began, offering his hand to Buck, who shook it in ceremonious welcome. "Never seen a man so hard to get hold of. Didn't the boy give you my message?"

Buck stood in front of the shed door, a pistol tucked in his belt. "Didn't hear anything about a message. But since you're here, why don't you just tell me yourself, Keith."

"The sheriff here is pretty upset with you. Says you've turned to bootleggin right here as Prohibition's about to start. Course I told him that your family goes to my church; that you always give money to the church, and that you just weren't the kind of man who'd turn to bootleggin."

"Damn straight about that, Keith."

"You see now, Steve. Just like I told you. No use in searchin this man's operation. He's on the up and up. Course, he's got to pay his taxes, and he knows that."

"Oh yeah," Buck said. "It's a real dirty son of a bitch that doesn't pay his liquor taxes. I've always said the only liquor worth a shit is legal liquor."

"Why don't we just cut through the bullshit here boys?" the sheriff said. "I hear he's bootleggin, and I aim to find out."
"Now hold off, Steve. Give him a chance to explain hisself."

Buck said nothing.

"Well, Buck, we're waitin," Keith said.

"Now bygod Keith, I suppose you'll just have to wait. Molly will have dinner ready shortly. I know it smells good, but she won't hurry it up for anyone."

Keith tried to laugh. "Okay, Buck. I know you're a tough man to deal with, always heard that about you. Look, I've got five thousand dollars out there in the car in a satchel and it's all yours, no questions asked, no inspections. I can't make you a better offer, and you know damn good and well I can't. Take it and save the sheriff a lot of worry."

"Well now, if Steve is worrying so much, let him have that money. I'm sure it'd ease his mind some."

The sheriff moved toward Buck, who held his hand up. "Steve, do you want to live? Because I'll drop you right where you stand if you come any closer. And if you don't think I'm serious just reach for your goddamn pistol right now!"

The sheriff stood motionless.

"Keith," Buck said, "I've done told you what you can do with your offer. Now that I've explained the matter to you, you worthless son of a bitch, I want to see you and this shitty excuse for a sheriff to get in your car and drive off. Maybe if you're lucky, Keith, I won't plug one in that wide ass of yours when you're running to the car." Buck drew his gun.
"Buck," Keith said, trying to stay calm, "all you got to do is take the money, and we'll forget all about this. I know you're goin behind my back. Don't try to deny it. Word get's around, you know. Take that five thousand now and you and that grungy cousin of yours can make all you want. Fifty percent, that's all I want. And I'll even give you six thousand. But that's all I can go."

Buck cocked the trigger of his revolver, pointed toward Keith and shot a hole in the car. "The next one's right between your eyes, and that goes for both of you if you're not gone by the time I cock this trigger again." He cocked it and they ran to the car. Buck shot two more holes in their car as they drove away.

David knew he'd have to blow up Keith's still that afternoon and took flight to the barn. As David sneaked out, he heard Buck sputtering a plausibility to Molly about why Keith and the sheriff were there, and that he was just shooting at a rabbit.

Keith would pay Jack Conners to kill Buck and Amos, just like the Peyton boys, who'd crossed him over a few hundred dollars. That'd been two weeks ago, and David wondered how long it would be before someone actually missed them. But Jack would be after Buck now. The same five thousand dollars that was offered for his services, would now be used to buy his death. Buck could handle Keith and Steve, but Jack Conners didn't scare. He was too pure black. Keith and the sheriff stood in awe of him and offered up their cut like it was a privilege to give it. They'd paid him five
hundred dollars to kill the Peyton boys, and he took it like it was barely ample compensation for stamping out their meager lives.

"I want the sons a bitches dead," Keith told him. "I don't care if they do have the money. Take it and kill them!"

Jack hulked over the two men as he counted the money. He smiled and put it in his coat pocket. "Lot of trouble just to kill a couple hillbillies. How much have they cost you?"

"Cost me plenty, Jack. Always holding out on me, and I've fronted them two or three hundred that I'll never see. Heard they was down at Wellses, buying a bunch of supplies to make moonshine. Told me they could barely afford to buy corn."

"Stupid hillbillies," Jack said, standing there in a fancy suit.

"Jack is that enough to take care of them. I mean, nobody will ever miss them."

"We'll see, Keith," Jack said, like he might've just walked out with the money and forgotten all about the Peyton boys.

"I'm sure you'll take care of it, Jack. I mean, whatever it takes that's all right."

Jack just smiled at them again and walked out of the barn, strolling past the sprawling still in its pit. "Can't make any money with that still cold," Jack said.

Keith and the sheriff chuckled. "That's a real rig. Makes three times as much as the old kind," Keith said.

And now David was headed there to resolve his matter with Keith. David wasn't exactly sure how to do it, but there he was
again, the smell of whiskey and discarded mash hanging thick in the air as he stuck his head through the open side vent into the dimly lit barn. The air in the barn was nearly intoxicating, and it made David think of the moonshine Amos let him drink that day on the wagon. He zipped his fly and walked away from the barrel, enjoying the feeling one last time, then began hauling slop bucket pails of gasoline from the barrel where Keith refueled his car. He stood at the side of the pit and splashed bucket after bucket onto the still. He drained the last bucket of fuel and carried it into the pit and sat it down at the center of the jumble of distilling equipment. David stood in the center of the barn, devising a safe method to ignite it, and retrieved the bucket of gasoline, pouring a small stream from the still to the vent door. The pail was still half full, and David replaced it in the fumey pit. He kneeled outside the barn and struck a match. He lit the tiny wet spot on the ground and fire crept up in a circle of flame, slowly finding its reach and progressing along the wet path and into the barn. A small spark flew up as fire touched scatterings of dry hay.

David looked up. It was them. The car sped up and stopped at the barn door. The car shut off and Keith and the sheriff got out and walked into the barn.

"He's got to go. Both of them," Keith said.

"I'll take a lot of pleasure in it."

"No. That's not how we operate. Can't have the sheriff gunning down citizens. We'll let Jack pay him a visit."
"Where those boys at?" Keith asked. "Don't they know we've got a batch to run."

"Said they was goin' to the spring for more water. Said they wouldn't be long. What about my money?" the sheriff asked.

David watched the trail of flame as it scampered unnoticed across the center of the barn. He ran to the back of the car. "Get out!" he yelled into the barn at them. They were standing beside the pit and looked back startled. "Get out!" David yelled and ran. He heard a woosh and the top of the barn trembled. He looked back and red flames shot out. There was another explosion. Fire grabbed at the barn and it was consumed in flames that licked hungrily past the boards. He ran back and saw them falling in flames. He stood near the car and felt the heat. It pushed him away, and he saw the satchel in the back seat. He opened the door and grabbed it, then ran away from the roaring barn. He could hear the flames popping behind him as he ran. He didn't feel the heat anymore and the burning was an eternity away, with Keith and Sheriff Steve Wilson still there. He tried to warn them, didn't want to kill them, just wanted to see their faces when they drove up on that pile of ashes. David looked back. The flames were brilliant in the cool, clear autumn evening, and nearby creatures seemed to sing to the bright, promising brilliance there in the chill. Though red, not white, it rivaled the fire in the pines ten years ago. He was just looking in the shed to see what Buck was doing, just peeked his head inside and Buck got splashed on the
hand with some pastey goo and cussed loudly. He fumbled around the steaming, hissing tank and looked up to see David. "Get out!" he yelled, but David just watched Buck pick up a small piece of wood from the floor. He hurled it and hit David in the side. Piercing pain took his breath for a moment, and he ran from the building crying, with the sound of the hissing still and Buck cussing chasing him. David couldn't explain why he did it, why he went up to the pine trees and lit the needles on the ground. He even tried to put it out before it got too big, but he just stood in the field crying as the flame ran up the volatile needle bed and consumed the green patch in white fire.

They deserved it, and he didn't mean to kill them. They deserved it, and no one would ever know what happened; just like no one would ever know exactly what they'd done to deserve it. He could see them looking down into the hole, and they were washed away in white fire, along with that smell. He turned and ran as fast as he could, ran to escape the smokey, singed, smell that intruded into the woods. The heavy bag flapped against his leg -- would never be used for it's foul purpose. He tried to remember if there had been screams in that instant when all three of them realized it, knew the exploding sound of retribution. He didn't want to do it, but Keith would have just had Buck and Amos killed. The heavy sack of money silently attested to that. The pine trees had grown back, hadn't they? Had covered up the fire's black scar. He would go home and hide his money in the hayloft
along with the stash of elixir that he knew could silence any questions about his responsibility. He turned and looked at the barn again. The fire raged to the full extension of its vengeance and subsided a little. Creaky denizens of the forest took the cue and all fell silent for what seemed like it would be a full season. White flames emerged through the roof and the barn collapsed.

David breathed deep and calmed himself. Images flitted though his head like tin-type photographs floating in the smoke: Keith praying hard and dropping a ridiculously thick envelope into a shiny bowl; the sheriff singing, eyes closed, head uplifted; their faces looking down at him as light poured around them; himself naked and crying in a creek, fire blazing at the creek’s edge; fire raging on a hillside full of pine trees and consuming the air above them in a bright ring. Then, there was only a black spot on the ground, and it was covered with rich greens and browns floating from the sky like a soothing gospel hymn. In the middle a white figure arose and stood serenely, waiting for him, calling him past the noise and confusion of images. The fire was receding and the barn bellowed a final buckle and crash. David turned and ran toward home, thinking the fault was theirs, believing in his blamelessness.