

Soggy rains had seeped through the mountain and valley for over a week. It slowed down the logging and Eli's orders. It also put a damper on the spirits of those who thought that spring's sun had come and winter's grayness gone.

Eli was in a hell of a mood when Elias met him in the woods. "I'm going into Frederick now because now I heard that their talking again and it's not going to be on Virginia shore. Don't know how long that's gonna take. And when this rain does stop, everyone and their uncles will be on me for wood and such, and I gotta make my livin, too. I done told Donnie and Dell not to muck about. But they ain't talkin to me. They don't like to be this busy."

Eli headed east opposing the sun and Elias went on to the mill. He heard a clopping sound behind him and realized that one of the Jenkins' boys was on him way there, too.

"Don't you repeat none of that. No need for more trouble," Elias slowed down and told the boy.

"No, sir. Course, not," the gray-eyed Tom said.

The next morning, with no Eli or Elias in sight. Dell made the decision to take the order for Mr. Hughes on up to Zittlestown because he felt like a ride. He would bring Tom with him. Donnie could mind the mill. They down a ways and took the main road up the valley.

"What is that boy?" Dell said trying to make bit of conversation.

"What Mr. Duncan?"

"It is spring Tom. It is here. Though the halmanac says it won't be for another fortnight or so. It's here. See the ? and the robin.

"My mama says it's pneumonia weather."

"Yes, that too." Dell laughed as the boy took the glory out the moment.

Mr. Hughes was a good customer. Paid on time, helped to unload, never hemmed and hawed about the poplars, oak, chestnut, whatever it may be. Mrs. Hughes bade them stay of dinner and Dell obliged. Their farmstead was cut out of the mountain up on the next highest ridge in the county and a great sight on a such a gorgeous day.

"We're gonna go down the mountain this time, not on the road. We'll make a loop of it," he told Tom as he harnessed the horses.

"I ain't never been down that holler before," Tom said.

"Oh. Well, it's haunted," Dell carried on

Their pace was a bit more rapid since the load was gone.

"Where's it haunted? What haunts it? Tom asked after they had made one ascent.

"Well," dell breathed in, trying to recall the story told to him by his da. There was a boy and his da gone out trappin many days ago. And a fog as thick as any set in. And the boy and his da were separated from each other and

The horses wailed as if they had come upon the haint. But, it was their feet that could not find a footing on the washed out mudded road that led down the mountain into the holler. They tried to back off, but the weight of the wagon behind them wouldn't allow it. The horses fell and soon did Dell. The wagon bench flung Tom out to the side with a thud on the soft mud. He had never taken such a fall. He struggled for breath, but it hurt. He tried to move himself up, saw his elbow bone sticking out of his muddied shirt which had been scraped open by the rocks which stopped him from rolling down the mountain.

"Mr. Dell," he moaned miserably. "I'm over here. I can't see you," he faded out.

How do they find them?

When they

The commotion has jostled the attention of the pikeman.

"Helloaa?"

He saw a dead horse, an almost dead horse and man with broken neck, most likely dead, tossed up amongst the reigns. He looked at the tracks in the mud and followed them up a ways. He then saw a boy.

"Are you awake?" he questioned as he peered over the boy and sighed with astonishment and relief he the boy's eyes fluttered. He heard a ragged raspy breath and said "Don't move- I will be back!"

Tom was carried down on a gurney carefully. He saw Dell dead amongst the horses. In their haste to help him, no one had bothered to cover him up or move him away from the animal carcasses and this bothered Tom.

How does eli get notice of his son's death- tell the others.

No! He cried, slamming his book upon his desk. No! That don't make no sense. He wouldn't have died by tumbling off the wagon. He's hurt, but will get back up. No. Where is he? I will fetch Dr. Lewis in Bennet's if I have to. Where is he? he gripped Ebb Jenkins' shoulders as if he insulted him.

The pikeman is making his way to your house. No one has yet told your wife. Donnie is at the mill. Someone is on his way there, too.

"Get Doc Lewis or I'll rip the head off your shoulders!"

Eli whipped his horse to beat the darkness that was beginning to creep across the valley. Upon that fifth mile, he slowed down. Almost crept along as he rounded the grove of beech trees that hid his home. He stopped and listened. He did not hear wailing. He looked around for a wagon, other horses, but no one else that was out of place.

He opened the door. Supper was made. His wife lighted a few more candles and placed them by table.

“C’mon. Wash up,” she bade him as she walked to the hearth for hot scrubbing water.”

Eli went over to the door and opened it. He sat and listened. He moved a chair outside.

“Are you to have your supper outside then?” she asked, looking up from a heaping plate on the table.

“No. Do not eat yet,” Eli said.

“Why? Are you expecting Donnie, too? We don’t need to wait for him,” she noticed the queer silence of her husband. “Did things go bad in town? What is wreaking havoc on you Eli Duncan?”

She started toward him and heard a rider in the distance.

“Who’s that coming up here?”

Eli hearing only one horse guessed right that it was Donnie. Donnie too slowed down as the house came in sight.

“Eustachia, bring a chair and sit down by me.” Fear froze her body. The solemnity of the matter was sealed with Eli calling her by her right name. No one ever called her that nor probably knew that it was her Christened name.

“Call me Mercy, Eli. Mercy,” she said softly as she took his hand.

Donnie stood silently beside his brother.

“Donnie, tell her. As I still do not believe. And remember that Mercy when he tells you. I don’t believe,” Eli puffed his chest so as to prevent a wail of grief.

“Dell fell from the wagon, broked his neck, and is gone.”

She squeezed her husband’s hand and looked into his eyes for confirmation. Eli was looking down and shut them and looked away.

She squeezed his hand again and then looked to Donnie, who also looked away.

“Will neither of you men help me?” she cried as she released a flood of tears to rival the recent rains.

Eli grabbed his wife and cradled her against his shoulder and chest. The weeping and wailed endured a half hour and grew as the wagon which carried the body arrived.

“Is that Polly?” she asked, not moving her place.

“No,” Donnie replied softly.

“Where is Doc Lewis?” Don’t look at him until he gets here. Eli commanded.

The pikeman stayed up on the wagon. He knew not what to do. Especially with it being the Duncans. One false move and they'd blow him away. Cut him up in saw-mill.

Donnie walked over and told him to take a horse from the stable and saddle up. He was sorry they could not give his hospitality this night, but to tell the Markell's, the house he saw just afore them that he had sent him and what had happened, and they would take him for the night.

Someone else comes. Asks if they should tell Polly. No wait for Doc Lewis.

She needs to know. Dell always comes home. He always comes home. He ain't a good man to always be around but I taught my boy to always come home.

You would leave me grievin. I would leave you. To tell my daughter that her husband is not coming home. To tell her..." he looked up to the sky which was clouded over. No moon in sight to ride by.

"you can come with me."

"I'll sit here with the.." Donnie almost said body. "I'll sit here and wait for you Elijah to come back. I'll look for Doc Lewis."

"Well, his ribs is broke and his arm. Head's fine. Don't think his lungs' punctured," Doctor Reeves told Clyde and Lavignia Jenkins outside their bedroom on the first floor of their house.

Lavignia wringed her hands while her husband looked out into the hallway.

"Oh, poor Polly Duncan. And Mercy. Oh. I just need to sit. I need to sit," Lavignia made her way back close to her boy. The house was uncannily quiet. No one pulling each others hair or yelling at each other, or arguing over more supper. No. Otho sat at the table. Mary boiling water and cloths. Eu by Tom. Clarence was in the boys' room upstairs crying quietly.

"Get your mama, some sassafrass tea. And some brandy," Clyde ordered Mary.

Tom Jenkins lay on the bed with his head propped up, reddened, blackened, blued, and full of pain, and wreaking of whiskey. He drift in and out of his sleep. It was a frightful sight and Eu's stomach was full of knots seeing him like this. Her mother sat in the chair on the other side of the bed, sighing and bent her head again to pray. Eu bowed hers, too.

"It would be good to have the preacher here now. It is dark,"

"I think he is a ways in Craddock, Ma," Eu said softly, " would you like me to call Otho to fetch Deacon Reeves. But he is likely on his way," Eu stopped from saying the Duncans. It would upset her mother to think of the loss of her cousin.

Polly DUncan blew out a candle by the table and stirred the stew by the fire again. She moved the remaining lighted candle to her chair by the fire and sat. I should boil the water for him, Polly thought but her tired feet told her not to move just yet. The children were almost asleep in the bed and cradle and she felt she would be too with the soothing of the hearth.

A knock on the door slowly nudged her out of her half-dream. It was the sleep in which you know you are not awake to the world, but not completely thinking.

“is that knocking?” she said aloud. She turned her head toward the sound with a sudden snore grunting out of her nose. She realized she was in her chair by the fire. Not beside Dell in the bed. She realized she would have to get up to open the door, even though it was not barred.

“Polly it us,” her father-in-law said sharply through the other side.

“Get in, get in,” Polly opened the door for them, letting the night air in. She was still not fully awake and seemed to move slowly. She did not yet realize it odd for them to be here this late at night and for husband to be gone.

Mercy was leaning against Eli for dear life.

“oh my! What has happened? Mercy are you hurt?” Polly’s senses had now arrived out of slumber and mania filled her.

“Please lie down Mercy,” Polly tried to coax her out of the arms of her husband, but Mercy cried harder into her husband’s chest.

Polly looked at Eli confused- “What is it?”

“Dell has died Polly. Dell has died.” Eli said, barely able to get the last words out in a breath. He gasped as one does when they enter a cold creek. They know it is going to be cold, but it still evokes a shudder and a shock.

Polly pulled her shawl around her tighter and looked at her children asleep on the bed. Her hand reached out for the mantel above the fire, but hit a pot, dangling there instead. It clanged against the stone chimney softly, clanged again, and again, before Polly regained her footing and stopped it from clapping again.

She stood there not knowing what.

“Why are you not crying for my son?” Mercy asked; she had burrowed herself out from her husband’s shoulder to look meekly at her daughter-in-law.

Polly’s scared, doe-like look did not change.

“Quiet, Eustachia. The poor woman’s had a fright. You can’t tell people how to act all the time.”

His wife got up still sobbing and threw herself across the bed.

“Don’t wake the children, woman!” Eli’s raised whisper hissed at her.

“something happened and he is lost from my life? Polly asked looking up to the ceiling joists in their penhouse”

Eli, now seated at the table, took out his handkerchief and dabbed at his nose, and stared at it.

“He fell. He fell out of the,” his throat crushed his voice and he tried to swallow, “fell out the wagon going down the mountain near Zittlestown. He fell out the wagon. The horses must have slid down the hill. He broke his neck, Polly.” Eli explained for his own sake rather than Polly.

“I don’t want to know no more. Bring him to me. Bring me my husband,” Polly insisted through hot tears and vehemence.

“We can’t Polly. He is gone. Dell is not here,” her mother-in-law called from the bed, as a sick man calls for water.

Polly put on her shoes and went out the door to stand. It was a cloudy night. The night afore had been clear, but for a slight haze across the moon.

She was not sure whether to walk to her mother’s house that night.

Eli followed her out. “ I will take you to the body. If you wish to see it,”

“Where is it? How far?”

“He is at my house.”

“I will go myself then.”

“Not on this night. You really shouldn’t” Eli tried to change her mind half-heartedly.

“Just leave me alone. Leave me alone,” Polly started to weep again, shaking her head.

She took a horse to go faster. She would see Dell again and then go to her brother, Jed’ house which was closer to bid her mother come to her.

Her horse trotted through the meadow, over the ridge, down the quiet valley. She had a notion to turn west and escape her fate and start off on an adventure all on her own or follow the ridge to the cliffs. But she did not.

He came to the house where her husband grew up. There were candles in the window. Donnie must be there. She saw two wagons and three, maybe four horses. She didn’t want this company. So she waited by the sycamore tree awhile and rubbed her fingers against its gnarly bark. She placed her head against a bough and cried. The horse neighed and shook its head forward. She sniffed back her tears and went on.

She alighted off the horse without tying it. She opened the door and saw Dell lying on the table. She looked around to see who else was there. Donnie, Pastor Heinz, and a couple other boys, probably Jenkinses.

Donnie tried to help her into a chair. She would not, but went closer to the table. The others left the room. She tried to look closer, but the flickers of the light from the candle did not help her. A rooster crowed off in the distance and the fire cracked.

“I need a lamp.”

Donnie looked about and lit one and held it above Dell’s head.

“His neck is squashed so badly Donnie,” Polly said without moving her lips; her voice trapped inside her mouth. She ran her finger across the circumference of his face, past his temples to his sideburns, through the whiskers on his cheeks, down to his soft chin which did not jut out like his father’s did; to his narrow lips, up the ridge of his angled nose, to his widow’s peak, over his black eyebrows, up to his forehead, through his chestnut hair.