

Acolytes

“**T**he guy who’d owned this house was a dentist,” Blake said, “and he went nuts and gave his cows root canals.”

We’d left our fire burning and walked beneath the walnut trees lining the tennis court.

“I heard there was a town up Monteaagle Mountain,” Danny Price said. “But everyone left. Some of them died. There’s a kind of post office, still. Lot of theories about what happened and none of them good.”

Danny Price—he was the oldest acolyte, and just *loaded* with knowledge.

“In McDonald,” McCall said, “a rich college boy and a cheerleader from Notre Dame High School lay together on the train tracks, middle of the night, *hugging*, and got run over. Lot of people thought it was an act of love.”

This is *so much fun*, I thought.

Last Labor Day there’d been a hayride. Last Labor Day I’d seen McCall get hot and peel herself down to a sports bra, and then I got hot too. Last Labor Day I’d stuffed myself full of hot dogs with chili, and Danny Price told Blake and me ghost stories beneath the gnarled oak tree. But the ghost stories then were not true.

Back in the spring, Allen and Susanne Whaley’s six-year-old granddaughter engaged herself with a loaded rifle and the thing went off. The adults this Labor Day drank more now, seemed to stay quite separate from their children.

This Labor Day, we cooked our own hot dogs, even built our own fire.

Tonight you could feel autumn gaining early. Step outside and feel like you’d emerged from a good bath and dried yourself off, threw on a set of new clothes. Dark poured in from the eastern mountains, and a burst of crows flung out of the pine forest, shot skyward, curled and nosedived and vanished into the forest again. The last sunlight threw itself over the tennis court. I was paying attention tonight. My senses were *loaded* in me like a bag of needles.

This rental house—the dentist’s old house—was a sprawling, one-story ranch-style sitting on thirty-some acres. The adults stayed fixed to the veranda, dancing. The veranda was a horrendous brown thing canopied by a ’70s-style vinyl ceiling.

On the veranda, my father was falling all over Marie Lupton, the church receptionist. She'd put on *The Big Chill* soundtrack. My mother, she plucked deviled eggs off Jack Hatcher's plate and sung along with "I Second That Emotion." They'd all made a punch with a healthy ratio of Jack Daniel's, and plenty more straight stuff shone in bottles on the picnic table.

"That was in the '70s, after the dentist and his wife built the house," Blake said. "That's why they rent it out. Hasn't been bought in thirty years. He killed the wife, gave her root canals till she bled out in the bathtub. The big fancy one in the master bedroom. They say the bath's haunted. They say you turn on this faucet looking like a swan head and old blood comes out."

I was barefoot, and the hard, fat, green walnuts were scattered all around the tennis court like tiny tennis balls, pretty harsh underfoot. I winced, I cursed inside my head, but I didn't say anything. When I'd step on an actual tennis ball, it was much softer, and like a gift being given.

"He's making it all up," McCall told me.

"But I love the story, the idea of it," Danny Price said.

He wore a faux mechanic's shirt with the name *Elvis* on the breast-patch. Danny Price, I thought, was the coolest human being who'd ever climbed out of a mother. And McCall was the most first-class girl in my life. She would never see the nickel-sized mole, right side of my ass. She'd never know about *the bad toenail*. When McCall was nine, her dad took her out shooting with an old muzzleloader and bent to get a beer out of his cooler, and the muzzleloader discharged, spraying black powder in her eyes.

I leaned into McCall and said, "I heard the Whaleys are getting a divorce on account of their kid getting shot."

"Don't *talk* about that," she said.

"So how could lying together and getting killed on some train tracks be an *act of love*?" Blake said.

"Nobody ever found out why they did it," Danny said. "Probably drugs."

"Pot?" I said.

"Please don't talk about that. Are you listening?" McCall said.

And Danny said, "It was *his* gun. He'd left it out with the safety off. He'd been turkey hunting at their cabin in Liberty. I mean, it was definitely an accident. But my mom says marriages are tough. Not her and my dad, but some marriages. Christine didn't even like having it in the

house. Mom says you really can't blame her, and my dad's sympathetic to *him*. But the guys, they're all going to be sympathetic. I guess I am too."

McCall picked up a large walnut, or was it a tennis ball? Anyway, she was crying, and she hurled the thing at Danny. You could hear the big smack it made against his chest, but he didn't move or say anything.

She screamed—something like *mean shitting bastard*—and ran all the way to the house.

Blake said, "She's not allowed to say that word."

But Danny Price, already in the eighth grade, was the oldest acolyte, and burdened by knowledge. He hadn't made a face when the tennis ball, or walnut, had walloped him. You could see then that people got burdened in a big way early, just loaded already with some pretty sorry news.

And Blake said, "How can she just run all the way to the house? And knowing just where it's at?"

"They're all like that," Danny Price said. "They've got an extra sense. They can *feel things out* better."

"Talking about blind people or girls?" I said.

"I'm shocked those eyes even know how to cry," he said.

We wondered if McCall would come back and stared off toward the house. Past the tennis court, the fire we'd built blazed in flickering miniature. But it was so dark out you couldn't see the grass, just the tiny, throbbing, apricot-colored light.

"I heard it was a cult up there on Monteagle Mountain," Blake said. "That's what happened to those people. They all got sacrificed."

"Do you believe in the devil?" I said.

"We're lucky in our church we don't have to talk about Hell much," Danny said. "The redneck churches, that's all they talk about. Those people, they just can't get enough Hell."

We watched the fire awhile, then walked to the veranda, where the adults were rollicking and spinning to the Stones' *Through the Past, Darkly*.

My mother, she'd brought that CD. A later greatest hits album would've been better to dance to. But the adults were liquored up now, so they'd try and dance to just about anything.

Over the mountains, heat lightning flashed like we were having our pictures taken from faraway distances.

McCall sat at the picnic table, encircled by tiki torches, talking with D'Arcy Middleton. D'Arcy was a high school junior, and surely she'd

told McCall some of the ugly things she'd heard about. I pictured D'Arcy Middleton and Danny Price in a duel of exchanging horrible knowledge.

Then I looked at the adults and thought: I can't *even imagine*.

I leaned toward Danny Price and said, "I bet they wore capes."

"They *who*?" he said.

"That cult up on Monteagle Mountain. I bet they wore capes."

And then later I said, "I can kind of see it. How it could be an act of love."

On the veranda, the adults danced to "Mother's Little Helper," and my father slipped through the French doors into the house and bumped against a toddler-sized wood carving of a black bear. I crept past the dancing crowd, stuck my head through the door, and said, "I could stand to sleep in my own bed tonight."

"You'll be all right staying here," he said.

"I'm scared of this place," I said.

"Just don't go queer on me," he said, and then vanished into the hall.

I went back out. My mother was asleep on an Adirondack chair. Bald-headed Charles Lupton peered into a casserole dish of green bean salad as if he might kill it. A few grown couples held each other in dance as though they feared sudden mortal collapse. Someone had thrown on another CD. "I don't like you, but I love you," the singer told me. Down at the picnic table, McCall was still sitting with D'Arcy Middleton and the jeweled Jack Daniel's bottles. The tiki torches cast her face the same color it was on Sundays, when we'd light candles together for the Eucharist.

"Will you see that bathroom with me?" I asked her. D'Arcy Middleton got up and walked away.

"Why'd she leave?" McCall said. "I'm not interested in any bathroom."

"I want to know if any of these stories are true," I said. "The swan-head faucet—that one we can solve right now."

"The Whaley granddaughter," she said. "That's true."

"I thought you didn't want to talk about that."

McCall uncapped a Jack Daniel's bottle and turned it up, pulled an impressive slug, and then thrust the bottleneck into my chest. "I'm over it," she said.

"You can't drink that," I said. "You smell like my dad."

"Take a drink with me and we'll look at your weird bathroom."

"You're cockeyed," I said.

"That's not fair," she said.

She was right. I took a drink.

We slipped through the French doors and into the house. My face felt all downslung from that liquor I'd never had before. McCall stopped stiff and pointed at the toddler-sized black bear carving, then felt its face as if to knead it into a different creature altogether. The bear wore red lipstick and smiled with long, painted, piano-key teeth.

"It's a carving of a black boy," she said.

"It's a bear carving," I said. "A lot of people have them. Why would anybody carve a black boy?"

"They think it's okay because it's an *antique*."

I couldn't stop looking at those teeth. I was distrustful of them. I was so distrustful I could hardly take it. And I said to McCall, "How in the hell do you give a cow a root canal?"

Together, creeping along the hall, I said, "The dark doesn't make a difference for you." But she said she knew everything, could feel every shadow and even feel color, but I told her that was impossible. She told me to be quiet, the spirits in the house are hearing. So I told *her* to be quiet, if that's the case, and that I wanted to believe in such things and did not look forward to the day I stopped believing.

The door to the master bedroom was open a crack, and a bar of yellow light burned into the hallway.

"That's the bed where they slept," she said. "The dentist and his wife. I wonder what drove him crazy."

"There's someone here," I said. "The light's on, if you don't know."

"I've already explained to you that I know."

"The bathroom light's on, too."

"I know," she said.

I eased open the bathroom door. The enormous bathtub was empty. A gold swan-head faucet curved like a swan's neck, and the hot and cold handles fanned out like wings. "So, go ahead and turn it on," she said.

I eased the door wide open, and in front of the mirror stood Marie Lupton, touching up her red lipstick, hair piled in a bun now, but her eyes were closed, and behind Marie Lupton my father was squatting, his hands hoisting the hem of her skirt, his face buried into her rear end, his mouth working and nodding his head as if to say: *Yes. Most certainly*. And even though I knew I didn't need to, I covered McCall's eyes. I watched Marie's face in the mirror. She was really enjoying herself.

In the mirror, her eyes met mine and she dropped her tube of lipstick on the tile floor, and I grabbed McCall's hand. "We've got to run," I said.

Out on the veranda, my mother stood leaning over the banister and smoking a cigarette, peering out into the distance where flickering heat lighting took your picture.

“See anything?” my mother asked me. “You done yet?”

“Done with what?” I said.

She turned again to the lightning.

Charles Lupton still stood threatened by the green bean salad. No music played. Blake lay sleeping in his mother’s arms on an Adirondack chair, and D’Arcy Middleton and Danny Price stood engaged in what looked like that duel of exchanging horrible knowledge, Danny’s hands flying all over the place. D’Arcy Middleton looked over at McCall and me. “You’re going to hell,” I told her.

Why did I say that to her? I told McCall, “Let’s get that whiskey bottle.”

Down at the picnic table, I knocked over a tiki torch getting to the bottle, and then I took McCall’s hand again, but she took the bottle from me, and I followed her.

The fire we’d made still blazed out beyond the tennis court, and we ran toward it, fat walnuts underfoot. I could feel every walnut crumbling beneath me, my feet not as tender as they’d been just a few hours ago.

“You didn’t see it,” I told her. “You didn’t see anything.”

“You’re out of breath,” she said. “Must’ve been scary. See any ghosts?”

“I’m not scared of anything.”

“So you like this stuff?”

“I think so,” I said. I stole the bottle from her and took another pull.

“You didn’t see it happen.”

I’d had no idea that later we’d fall asleep there, by the fire. That the next morning my father would drive my mother and me home in his topless ’67 Bronco, swerving all the way home on a residual drunk, not a word shared between them. And that on Sunday, I’d be in my red-and-white cassock, with McCall, as acolytes, lighting the candles up on the altar, and the adults would be kneeling at the communion rail, hands held out for the Eucharist as if begging for the sweet port wine, the unleavened bread. Everything would appear to be as it had been before.

McCall slung her arm around me, and I thought: if I had to get married early—too young, but at gunpoint—I’d be all right with marrying her.

“If we weren’t so young,” McCall said, “we could have *sex*.”

“I really do like this stuff,” I said, and took another drink. “Danny Price says we’re lucky we don’t have to talk about Hell much.”

“The Catholics have confession,” she said. “That’s the big difference with us and the Catholics.”

“I’m surprised this thing’s kept burning as long as it has,” I said.

Over beyond the mountains, the heat lightning had ceased, and someone had turned off all the lights on the veranda and snuffed out the tiki torches, and it was just me and her and our fire, and for a moment there I didn’t feel any fear for anything.

“Can you imagine?” she said. “Having to do a confession?”

But I sat staring into the fire as if it’d burn out at any time, last one I’d ever see.

“Did you hear me? I asked you: *Can you imagine?*”

“No,” I said.