

CEDAR MOUNTAIN CAMPFIRE STORIES

DON JONES

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FOREWORD

The folklore of the Cedar Mountain area is intrinsically tied to its geology and climate. The Markagunt Plateau, which houses the Cedar Breaks National Monument and parts of the Dixie National Forest, is a region of "visions of grandeur and gloom." The extreme environmental conditions—sub-freezing temperatures for seven months of the year and the jagged, red-rock terrain—have historically fostered a sense of "environmental anxiety" that manifests in ghost stories.⁸

Folklorists categorize the hauntings of this region into three primary eras: the Indigenous Supernatural, the Pioneer Gothic, and the Modern Urban Legend.

The Indigenous era is dominated by the Southern Paiute concepts of *Puha* (spiritual power) and entities like the *Paakniwat* (Water Babies), which are regarded not as ghosts of the dead, but as a distinct, often malevolent, species of water spirits.

The Pioneer Gothic era arises from the traumas of the 1850s and 1860s, including the Quilt Walk of 1864 and the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857, events that left an indelible mark on the collective memory of the settlers.

Finally, the Modern era encompasses campus lore at Southern Utah

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University (SUU) and cryptid sightings at Panguitch Airport, representing a contemporary engagement with the "unexplained."

I've collected—and embellished upon—twenty of these stories, telling them in a family-friendly fashion designed for old-fashioned campfire performances. I've even included some prompts for the narrator, to help make each reading as spooky as possible.

For the benefit of parents and guardians: These stories are deliberately family-friendly, but they're still a bit spooky by design. You know your kids best, and my advice is that you read each story (they're short!) before deciding which ones are right for your family. I'll note that "The Slaves of the Old Spanish Trail" is the one you'll want to pay the most attention to, so that you can ensure it's appropriate for you and yours. "The Sobbing of the Meadows" is another one that's possibly most appropriate for older kids, as it's based on some pretty dark history.

I hope you enjoy!

Don Jones

Duck Creek Village, UT

MORE LOCAL STORIES

If you enjoy stories set in the Cedar Mountain area, check out *The Duck Creek Mysteries*, a series of “cozy mystery” novels set in Duck Creek Village, Utah, featuring some of our mountain’s favorite legends and lore. They’re 100% family-friendly and make for a great bedtime read.

You can learn more about that series, along with my fantasy and science-fiction novels, on my website: DonJones.com.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CAMPFIRE PERFORMANCES

TO TELL a story on the Markagunt Plateau is to participate in an ancient relationship between the teller, the listener, and the land itself. In these high-country woods, storytelling is not a solo performance but a communal ritual that preserves the "breath of being" for the cultures that have called these red rocks home. As the narrator, you are the bridge between the historical reality of the Dixie National Forest and the imaginations of those gathered around your fire. To maximize the impact of the twenty tales in this collection, you must master the following techniques of the dramatic campfire reading.

SETTING THE SCENE

The success of a "jump story" depends entirely on the atmosphere. Wait until sunset; the darkness provides a "black canvas" where the listeners' imaginations are less inhibited and more likely to see shapes in the shadows. Ensure the group is gathered close for warmth and light, as proximity increases the emotional resonance of the tale. Most importantly, keep the fire going—a roaring fire provides necessary illumination and a sense of safety that makes the eventual "scare" even more effective.

VOCAL MASTERY AND PACING

Your voice is your primary tool. Vary your tone and pitch to match the mood: use a soft, gravelly whisper for suspenseful build-up and a loud, authoritative voice for moments of action. Do not rush. Use dramatic pauses to allow tension to mount; silence can often be more unsettling than words. When a character speaks, give them a distinct identity—a high-pitched voice for a child or a deep, weary tone for a pioneer—to make the narrative feel realistic and lived-in.

PHYSICAL ENGAGEMENT

Stand up while telling your story. This allows you to project your voice and use your entire body to convey the action. Make consistent eye contact with everyone in the circle to create a sense of confidence and authority. Use your hands to act out key moments, and lean toward your audience when the tension peaks to draw them in. For an added layer of dread, use a prop like a flashlight held beneath your chin to cast eerie shadows across your face.

EXECUTING THE "BOO!" TWIST

The "jump" is a punchline. Build the suspense with sensory details—the smell of pine, the sound of a snapping twig, or the feeling of a cold wind—until the listeners are on the edge of their seats. The final "BOO!" should be sudden and sharp. You might abruptly increase your volume, clap your hands, or even lunge toward the group to break the tension with a fright. Once the scare is delivered, let silence reign for a moment to allow the impact to settle before the laughter begins.

THE LAST QUILT OF THE MARKAGUNT

GATHER IN CLOSE, now. Pull that blanket a little tighter.

[Narrator: Speak slowly. Let the silence breathe between sentences.
Keep your voice low — almost a whisper — until the very end.]

You feel that cold coming down off the plateau? That's the same cold they felt in the winter of 1864. Only back then, there were no cars to drive away in. No warm cabins waiting down the road. Back then, when that cold came for you — it came all the way.

The town of Panguitch sat at over six thousand feet above the valley floor. Seven months of winter. Seven months of wind that didn't blow so much as bite. And in the January of 1864, the snow had come down so hard, so fast, so deep, that the settlers could not get their wagons through. Their food stores — the grain, the dried beans, the last of the salted meat — had run down to almost nothing. Children were crying themselves to sleep hungry. Old men were chewing leather to trick their stomachs.

So seven men decided to do what needed doing.

They would cross the Markagunt Plateau on foot — eighteen miles through the deep snow — to reach the settlement at Parowan, where

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grain was being stored. Eighteen miles. Uphill. In the dead of a Utah winter. Those of you who've driven that road in July, you know how wild it gets up there. You know how the land opens up into something vast and lonely, like the edge of the world. Now picture it in January. Picture it white and silent and dark.

Their names were Justus Sevy, George Wood, and five others whose names the records only half-remember — because history, like the snow, has a way of swallowing things whole. They set out at first light, carrying what they could on their backs. By noon, they had barely moved half a mile. The snow was chest-deep in places. Every step forward cost them three. Their boots filled with ice. Their beards froze to their scarves.

That's when Justus stopped.

He looked down at the quilt wrapped around his shoulders — heavy, handmade, stitched by his wife through three long winters. And he had an idea.

He laid the quilt flat on the surface of the snow. He stepped onto it. And he didn't sink.

The weight of a man, spread across the wide surface of a quilt, wasn't enough to break through the crust. They could walk on top of the snow. They could actually move.

So that's what they did. One man at the front, stepping from his quilt onto the next man's. The man at the back would fold up his quilt, carry it forward, lay it down again at the head of the line. Like a slow, shuffling caterpillar, seven men walked across the top of eighteen miles of frozen wilderness on nothing but the quilts their families had stitched together in the candlelight.

They made it to Parowan. They brought the grain back. The people of Panguitch survived that winter.

Beautiful story, right?

But there's a part they don't put in the history books.

[Narrator: Slow down here. Drop to nearly a whisper.]

On the second day of the crossing, as the men worked their way up toward the high ridge of the plateau, the youngest among them — a

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boy of seventeen named Thomas, who had no wife, no quilt of his own, and had borrowed one from a widow in town — began to notice something wrong.

His quilt felt heavy.

Not the heaviness of wet wool, though the snow had soaked through plenty. This was a different kind of heavy. A slow, dragging weight, like something was pressing down on the fabric from below. Like something was riding it.

He mentioned it to the man ahead of him, a big, broad-shouldered fellow named Orson. Orson didn't look back. He just said: "Don't look down, Thomas. Keep moving."

But Thomas looked down.

In the surface of the snow, pressed against the underside of his quilt, he could see — just barely — the impression of a shape. The long outline of a body. Arms stretched wide. Face pressed upward against the fabric from below, as if it were trying to breathe through it.

Thomas told himself it was the wind. A drift of snow pushed up against the quilt. Nothing more.

He kept moving.

But as the hours passed and the sky dimmed to that particular grey that comes before a mountain dark, the thing beneath the quilt became harder to ignore. The weight grew. When Thomas would fold up his quilt to carry it forward, the fabric clung to the snow, reluctant, as if something was holding onto the other side. And when the wind picked up — screaming down off the ridgeline like something furious — he thought he could hear, buried inside that howl, the faint sound of a voice.

Singing.

A child's voice. High and reedy and thin, the way a sound sounds when it's been frozen for a very long time.

By late afternoon, the seven men had nearly reached the summit. The wind was ferocious. The light was failing. One more mile and they would begin the downward slope toward safety and warmth and grain and life. One more mile.

Thomas reached back to collect his quilt from the end of the line — and it wouldn't come.

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He pulled harder. The quilt stretched taut, then went rigid, like something on the other end had laced its fingers into the hem and was pulling back. He called for Orson. Orson came back and grabbed the quilt alongside Thomas and together they heaved —

And the quilt came free with a sound like a gasp.

Thomas stumbled forward, nearly fell. He looked back at the snow where the quilt had lain.

There was a hole.

Not a large hole. Not the hole a falling branch makes or a rock pushed through from above. It was the kind of hole a hand makes. A narrow, deliberate circle, punched up from beneath. And around its rim, in the soft powder, Thomas could see the marks of fingers. Small fingers. Child-sized. Pressed outward into the snow like someone trying to climb through from the other side.

Orson grabbed Thomas by the collar and told him to walk. Told him not to look back. And for a while, Thomas obeyed.

For a while.

The thing about dread — real dread, the kind that gets into your chest and presses up against your ribs — is that it doesn't let you look away. It turns your head for you. And so, at the very summit of the Markagunt Plateau, with the last grey light dying behind the volcanic ridgeline and the wind dropping to an eerie, breathless hush — Thomas looked back.

[Narrator: Pause here. Full five seconds of silence. Look around the fire slowly. Then continue, barely above a whisper.]

The quilts were moving.

All of them. Every quilt the men had laid down across the snow behind them, stretching back in a long pale line toward the darkening horizon. They were rippling. Slowly. The way a sheet ripples when someone rolls over beneath it in the night.

And from beneath each one, there was a shape.

Small. Still. Pressed face-up against the fabric, the way a child presses their face against a fogged window. Dozens of them. Dozens of

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small, still, freezing shapes, stretched out in a line across the snow, following the path the seven men had made.

Thomas could not move. Could not call out. He stood at the summit and watched as one by one, beginning with the farthest quilt, the shapes beneath the fabric began to sit up. Slowly. With the particular stiffness of a body that has been very, very cold for a very, very long time.

The nearest quilt — his quilt, the borrowed one, the widow's quilt — was still now. Flat. Nothing moving beneath it.

And then it began to lift.

A hand emerged first. Small. White as the snow around it. The fingers spread wide, feeling the air. Then a wrist. Then a thin, pale arm. Then the quilt fell back and a figure rose from the snow at Thomas's feet — the height of a child, wrapped in frost, its face the color of a January sky, its eyes open and glassy and fixed on his with an expression he had no word for then and had no word for for the rest of his long, long life.

It opened its mouth.

Thomas did the only thing a seventeen-year-old boy could do on top of a frozen plateau with the dark coming down and a line of rising shapes behind him and a thing with frost-white eyes standing three feet from his face.

He screamed.

He ran.

He left the quilt.

The seven men made it to Parowan that night. Thomas never spoke of what he'd seen. He married, had children, grew old. He never went back to the plateau in winter. Not once. And every year, without fail, he would donate a heavy quilt to the church charity box — always just one — and he would fold it himself, and tie it tight, and he would never, ever explain why he always made sure to fold it face-down.

People who hike the Markagunt in winter still find them, sometimes. Single quilts. Old ones, and not-so-old ones, lying flat on the snow in places where no one has been camping. Not torn. Not weathered. Just lying there, face-down, on the surface of the white.

The rangers chalk it up to the wind, to lost hikers, to coincidence.

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None of them have ever turned one over.

[Narrator: Long pause. Look around the fire. Then, very quietly —]

Smart, really. Because the ones beneath the quilts...

They're still waiting to be let out.

[Narrator: Wait until someone relaxes, looks away, or lets out a breath.

Then lunge forward and shout —]

BOO!

[Let the laughter and screaming settle. Then, if the mood allows, quietly add the final line:]

In 1864, those seven men saved the town of Panguitch. That part is real. You can read it in any Utah history book. The quilts. The snow. The crossing.

They just left out the part about what came back with them.

Sleep well.

THE MASONRY OF VIRGINIA LOOMIS

LET ME ASK YOU SOMETHING.

[Narrator: Begin quietly and conversationally — like you're sharing something you probably shouldn't. Keep your voice low and steady throughout. Save everything for the end.]

When you walk into an old building — a really old one, one that was put up by hand, stone by stone, brick by brick — do you ever wonder about the people who built it? The ones who hauled the rock up from the ground and stacked it, course by course, until the walls rose around them?

Most of us don't. We just walk through the door.

But in Cedar City, at Southern Utah University, there are people who have started to wonder. Students who press their hands flat against the red sandstone walls of the oldest building on campus — Old Main — and feel something they can't explain. A warmth that has nothing to do with the sun. A faint, slow pulse, like a heartbeat that's been running for a hundred and thirty years and has no intention of stopping.

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If you ask those students what they think it is, they'll lower their voices. And they'll tell you about Virginia Loomis.

In 1898, the fledgling college in Cedar City needed a building. A real one — not a borrowed church hall or a repurposed barn, but a proper hall of learning, something that would last. The founders decided to build it from the land itself: red Navajo sandstone, quarried from the ridges up near the Markagunt Plateau, hauled down on wagons and shaped by the hands of the settlers who had already given so much of themselves to this high desert country.

It was hard, dangerous work. The quarrymen would work the face of the rock with hand drills and black powder, splitting great slabs from the hillside and loading them onto flatbeds to begin the long journey down. The stone was heavy and unpredictable. Men were hurt. Fingers were lost.

And one day, up in the high quarry above Cedar City, something far worse happened.

Virginia Loomis was twenty-three years old. She was clever, people said — too clever for a woman in 1898, which was a thing that got said about clever women in those days like it was something to be embarrassed about. She had been walking out with a young man from town, a quarry worker, and whatever had passed between them in the weeks leading up to that morning had curdled into something dark and final. Their names appear in no official record, because there was no official investigation. It was ruled an accident.

But the women of Cedar City knew. The way women always know.

Virginia's body was found draped over a large sandstone boulder at the edge of the quarry, as if she had fallen, or been placed. By the time anyone thought to look for her, the morning's work was well underway. The rock had been loaded. The wagons had left.

The boulder that held Virginia Loomis went with them.

It was crushed and fired with the rest. Mixed into the slurry. Pressed into molds. Baked in the kiln until it was hard and red and rectangular and looked exactly like every other brick in the load.

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Virginia Loomis became part of the walls of Old Main.

[Narrator: Pause here. Let that settle.]

For the first few decades, the strangeness was easy to explain away. Old buildings settle. They creak. The sandstone of this region is rich in iron and minerals that can cause discoloration — dark patches, red streaks — especially in the lower courses of masonry. Nothing unusual.

But the sounds were harder to dismiss.

The first report came in 1911, from a night custodian who asked to be transferred after two weeks on the job. He said he kept hearing something in the basement walls — a soft, rhythmic scratching. Not a mouse. Mice are frantic. This was slow. Patient. Like someone dragging a single fingernail along the inside of the stone in long, deliberate strokes.

Then there was the heat. One corner of the basement — the northeast corner, near the old coal furnace — ran warmer than the rest of the building. Not the furnace's warmth, which was distributed through pipes and vents. This was contained to a single section of wall about four feet wide, and it never cooled. Not at midnight. Not in January. Not ever.

Students who studied late in the basement reported other things over the years. The smell of iron — of blood, some said, though they were embarrassed to say it. The sense of being watched from the direction of the wall, even when your back was turned to it. And in the silence between the hours of two and four in the morning, the very particular sound of someone whispering a name — not your name, never quite your name — just one syllable short of being recognizable.

Most people laughed it off. Campus legend. Freshman hazing. The kind of story that gets passed around every Halloween and forgotten by November.

But every so often, someone took it seriously.

Her name was Claire, and she was a junior writing a history paper on the founding of the college — the Iron Mission, the early buildings, the quarry operations of the 1890s. She'd been working in the campus archives all semester and had found, buried in a box of uncatalogued documents, a ledger from the original construction.

In the ledger's margin, in handwriting different from the main entries — shakier, rushed — was a single line:

"NE corner / do not build here / Loomis."

She took a photograph of it. She stayed late in the basement of Old Main that night to finish her paper, because the archive materials couldn't leave the building. She sat at the long study table in the northeast corner — the warm corner — with her laptop and her notes spread around her, and she worked.

At some point past midnight, she noticed the wall.

Not the whole wall — one brick. About three feet from the floor, roughly in the center of that warm section, there was a brick that was darker than the rest. Not discolored the way old mortar gets, grey and chalky. This was a deep, saturated red, almost brown. Almost the color of dried blood. And the mortar around it was crumbling at the edges, as though the brick had been slowly, steadily expanding — pressing outward against its neighbors — for a very long time.

Claire put down her pen.

She crossed the room and crouched in front of the brick and looked at it for a long moment. The warmth coming off that section of wall was real and specific and focused — strongest right here, right at this brick, as though something on the other side was pressing its hand against the stone.

She leaned forward and put her ear against the wall.

[Narrator: Barely a whisper now. Lean toward the fire.]

The scratching was very clear.

Not mice. Not pipes. Not the settling of an old building in the cold. It was a slow, continuous scraping — fingernails on sandstone — moving in long, patient strokes from left to right, left to right, left to right. Like someone marking off days on the inside of a cell. Like

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someone who had been counting for a hundred and thirty years and was not even close to finished.

Claire straightened up. She reached out and pressed her palm flat against the dark brick.

The scratching stopped.

The silence was so complete and so sudden that it rang in her ears. The warmth against her palm intensified — just for a moment — as if something on the other side had leaned into her hand. As if something had been waiting a very long time to be touched.

Then the mortar around the brick began to crack.

Not crumble. Crack — sharp, fast fractures radiating outward from the brick's edges like a spider's web, little puffs of red dust falling to the floor. Claire stumbled back. The brick shifted in its setting. Just slightly. Just enough to show a thin line of absolute darkness at its edges — a gap, a void, a space behind the wall that should not have been there in solid masonry.

From that darkness came a voice.

Two words, spoken without breath, without body, without any of the ordinary mechanics that make a voice a voice. Two words in a tone that was neither angry nor afraid — just endlessly, terribly patient:

"You found me."

The brick slid forward another inch. A hand was forming in the gap — not flesh, not solid, but the red dust of the sandstone itself, gathering and compressing and shaping into the outline of fingers, a palm, a wrist.

The hand reached toward Claire.

She did not move. She could not move. She stood in the warm northeast corner of the basement of Old Main at two o'clock in the morning and watched the hand of Virginia Loomis reach out from the wall, and she thought — in the way your mind reaches for something ordinary when it cannot process the extraordinary — she thought about that ledger entry. That shaky, rushed handwriting in the margin.

"NE corner / do not build here."

Someone had known. Someone had written it down. And they had built here anyway.

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[Narrator: Let the silence stretch. Make eye contact with someone nearby. Very quietly:]

Claire's paper was never finished. She asked for an extension. Then another. She transferred the following semester.

The basement of Old Main was renovated in 2003. New lighting. New flooring. Fresh plaster over the old sandstone walls.

The warmth in the northeast corner remained.

The brick is still there. You can't see it anymore under the plaster. But students who press their hands against that section of wall at night — in the right spot, in the quiet hours — say they can still feel the pulse. Slow. Steady. Patient.

And if you put your ear against the wall...

[Narrator: Stop. Count to five. Then, quietly, right into the ear of the person nearest you —]

BOO!

[Let the noise die down. Then deliver the final lines slowly, like an afterthought:]

The official history of Southern Utah University says that Old Main was built by the hands of hardworking pioneers from the stone of the land they loved.

That's true.

It just isn't the whole story.

Virginia Loomis has been part of those walls for a hundred and thirty years.

And she is still waiting for someone to let her out.

THE RITUAL OF PANGUITCH AIRPORT

OKAY. So. Show of hands.

[Narrator: This one starts casual — almost like you're letting them in on a secret. Friendly. A little conspiratorial. That's the trap. Keep it light until the moment it isn't.]

How many of you have ever done a ritual?

Not a séance, not anything weird — just, you know. The kind of thing you do on a dare. You go somewhere at night that you probably shouldn't. You follow the rules exactly, because the rules are the point. You tell yourself you don't believe in it. And then you do it anyway, because some part of you — the part that still checks under the bed before you turn the light off — that part wants to know for sure.

The kids in Panguitch have a ritual.

It's been going around for at least thirty years — passed from older siblings to younger ones, from the back of the school bus to the lunch table, from one sleepover to the next. Nobody knows who started it. Nobody can trace it back to a single source. It's just one of those things that exists in a town, the way certain stories exist in certain places, like the land itself put it there.

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The ritual happens at the Panguitch Airport.

Now — and I want you to understand this sets the scene — the Panguitch Airport is not a busy place. There are no international terminals. No departure boards. No coffee shops. It is a single paved runway, a small hangar, a weather station, and a chain-link fence, sitting out on the flat scrubland west of town where the desert opens up and the dark comes down in a way that makes city people uncomfortable. On a clear night, the stars out there are extraordinary. Beautiful.

But you won't be looking at the stars.

Here's how the ritual works.

You drive out to the airport after dark. Not late dark — this isn't a midnight thing, not necessarily. Just after sunset, when the sky is that deep blue that isn't quite black yet and the air has gone cold and still. You park on the access road outside the main gate — the gate will be locked, it's always locked — and you turn off your headlights.

You sit for a moment. You let your eyes adjust.

Then you get out of the car.

You walk to the fence. You face left. And you count exactly fifty paces along the fence line, keeping the chain-link close enough to touch. Not forty-nine. Not fifty-one. Fifty. The number matters — this is what the older kids always said, and they said it with the particular seriousness of people passing on a rule they didn't invent and couldn't explain.

When you reach fifty, you stop.

And then you listen.

[Narrator: Slow right down here. Quiet.]

In the silence out there — real silence, desert silence, the kind that has weight and texture — you'll hear something behind you.

A sound like dragging. Heavy and slow, like something being pulled across gravel. Not footsteps exactly. More like something that

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moves but doesn't walk. Something that closes the distance between itself and you without ever quite making the sounds a living thing should make.

You're allowed to look back. That's the thing about this ritual — unlike some, there's no rule against looking. You can turn around as many times as you want.

But every time you do, it will be closer.

Three feet closer, exactly, every single time. It doesn't matter how fast you look or how long you wait between looks. Three feet. Every time. As if the rule isn't that it moves toward you — the rule is that looking is what moves it.

The kids call it the Airport Monster. Nobody has a better name for it because nobody who's played the ritual through to the end has been in much of a state to come up with one.

Most people turn back before they've looked three times. Most people jog back to the car, laughing a little too loud, saying they didn't really see anything, it was just a shadow, it was just the fence post, it was nothing.

Most people.



There were four of them: Kasey, who was sixteen and had done the ritual twice before without incident; her younger brother Drew, who was thirteen and had been pestering her about it all summer; their friend Micah, who had driven them out in his older brother's truck without his older brother's knowledge; and a girl named Portia who had moved to Panguitch from Phoenix eight months ago and didn't entirely believe in any of this but was determined not to be the one who said so.

They parked on the access road. They turned off the headlights. The sudden dark was total and startling — no streetlights out here, no porch lights, nothing but the blue-black sky and the pale line of the fence stretching away into the scrub.

Kasey led them to the gate. She touched the chain-link with her left hand, turned, and began to count.

They walked slowly, none of them talking, the gravel crunching too loud under their feet. The fence hummed faintly in the wind — a low, almost musical vibration that Portia told herself was perfectly normal and did not sound, even slightly, like a voice.

Fifty paces.

They stopped.

For a moment there was nothing. Just the wind, and the fence, and the enormous dark sky pressing down, and the runway lights in the distance blinking their slow, patient red. Portia almost said something — almost broke the silence with a joke, the way you do when a thing isn't working — when Drew grabbed her arm.

They all heard it.

The dragging sound. Starting from a long way off — from somewhere out in the scrubland beyond the fence, or from the direction of the runway, or from everywhere at once, it was hard to say — and moving toward them through the dark with a slow, grinding patience that made the hairs on Portia's arms stand up one by one.

Scraaaaape. Pause. *Scraaaaape.* Pause.

Like something massive pulling itself forward. Like the sound a door makes when the bottom drags across concrete, except the door is very large and very heavy and it is coming from the wrong direction entirely.

"Don't look yet," Kasey said, very quietly.

They didn't look.

The sound got louder.

Then Micah looked.

He didn't mean to — it was involuntary, the way your eyes snap toward a sudden movement — but he turned, and he saw it, and he made a sound that was not quite a word.

It was dark. Just a shape. Tall — taller than it should have been, taller than a man — and wrong in its proportions, too long in some places and too short in others, as if it had been assembled from parts that didn't quite fit together. It stood at what might have been thirty feet away, maybe thirty-five, motionless now that it had been seen, the way the ritual said it would be.

"Three feet closer every time," Kasey said, and her voice was

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completely steady, which was either very brave or very frightening depending on how you looked at it. "We go back to the car. Now. We do not run. We do not look again until we're in the truck."

They turned and walked. Quickly but not running. The gravel scraped under their feet and Portia counted her own steps back and thought about nothing except the truck, the door handle, the seat, the lock.

Drew looked.

Of course Drew looked. He was thirteen.

He didn't say anything. He just grabbed the back of Micah's jacket and held on and didn't let go and walked faster, and none of them asked him what he'd seen, because they didn't need to know yet — they needed to get to the truck.

They reached it. Micah got the door open. They piled in — all four of them in the cab, Drew in the middle, nobody in the bed, nobody suggested the bed — and Micah got the key in the ignition.

The engine turned over once.

Clicked.

Went silent.

"No," Micah said, not to any of them, just to the truck, just to the situation. He tried again. Turn, click, silence. Turn, click, silence. The battery wasn't dead — the dash lights were on, the radio flickered — it was something else, something that felt less like a mechanical failure and more like a refusal.

Like the truck didn't want to start.

Like something didn't want it to.

"Don't look out the back window," Kasey said.

Three seconds of silence.

"Is it—" Portia started.

"Don't look."

Micah tried the key again. This time the engine caught — roared, actually, louder than it should have, loud enough that all four of them flinched — and he had the truck in reverse before the sound had finished, swinging back out onto the access road in a spray of gravel and dust.

He flipped the headlights on.

DON JONES

The road ahead was empty and flat and lit, and the desert on either side was ordinary desert, and the fence was just a fence, and there was nothing behind them but darkness receding in the rearview mirror as the truck accelerated away.

Portia exhaled.

And then Micah looked in the rearview mirror.

[Narrator: Dead silence. Five full seconds. Hold eye contact with someone across the fire. Then, barely a whisper:]

It was pressed against the back window.

Flat against the glass from the outside — the face, if you could call it that. Grey and wet-looking and too wide, the features pushed out of proportion like something seen through water. The eyes were open and level and fixed directly on the rearview mirror. Fixed directly, it seemed, on Micah. They did not blink. They did not move.

The thing was riding in the truck bed.

It had been there since before the engine started.

Micah had been accelerating down a dark desert road for thirty seconds with the Airport Monster three feet behind his head, separated from him by nothing but a pane of glass, and it had been watching him the entire time.

The face opened its mouth.

[Narrator: Lunge forward. Shout —]

BOO!

[Once the laughter settles, deliver the last lines flatly, matter-of-factly, like you're just stating facts:]

The four of them made it back to town. Nobody was hurt. Micah returned his brother's truck before morning, and to this day has never fully explained the three long, pale scratches on the outside of the rear window, the ones that go from the bottom of the glass to the top in slow, parallel lines.

CEDAR MOUNTAIN CAMPFIRE STORIES

Like something marking off the distance it had traveled.

Kasey still lives in Panguitch. She has never done the ritual again. But every year, without fail, she drives past the airport on a September evening and slows down at the gate — not stopping, never stopping — and she checks the fence line.

Just to see if anything is already standing at the fifty-pace mark.

Waiting for someone to start counting.

THE MIMIC IN THE REEDS

BEFORE I TELL you this story, I want you to do something.
Listen.

[Narrator: This one calls for reverence at the start — not fear, but the kind of quiet respect you use when you're talking about something older and larger than yourself. Speak slowly. Like you mean it.]

Not to me — to out there. To whatever is past the edge of the fire-light right now. The trees. The water, if there's water nearby. The dark.
Do you hear anything?

[Narrator: Pause. Let them actually listen. Ten full seconds of silence. Then, quietly:]

Good.

Now. Whatever you heard — or thought you heard — I want you to remember this: the Southern Paiute people have lived in this country for a very long time. Thousands of years, in the high lake country and the red desert and the volcanic ridges of these plateaus. And in all that time, through all those generations of people who knew this land the way you know the inside of your own home — they never forgot one rule.

DON JONES

Stay away from the reeds at dusk.

Not the open water. Not the rocky shore. The reeds. The tall grass at the lake's edge where the water goes shallow and dark and the mud pulls at your feet. That is where the Water Babies live.

And before you picture something soft and small and harmless — before your mind goes to the word "baby" and makes it sweet — let me tell you what they actually are.

The Paiute call them Paakniwat.

They are not the ghosts of children. They are not lost infants, not spirits of the drowned. They are something older than that — a distinct kind of being, born of the deep cold springs of the high country, as native to this landscape as the sage and the stone. They have lived in the lakes and the mountain streams and the hidden seeps of the plateau since long before the first human being cupped water from a desert spring and called it good.

They are small. They have long black hair that floats around them in the water like ink dissolving in a current. Their faces, at a distance or in poor light, look almost human — almost like the face of a very young child, wide-eyed and pale and fragile-looking.

Almost.

Up close, the teeth give them away.

But by the time you are close enough to see the teeth, you have already made the mistake that brought you there. You have already heard the sound and followed it, the way the Paakniwat intend. Because the Water Babies are, above everything else, mimics.

They listen. They learn. They reproduce, with perfect and terrible accuracy, any sound that has ever been made near their water — the call of a loon, the bark of a dog, the particular pitch of wind through the pines at elevation.

But their favorite sound — the one that works the best, the one that has worked for thousands of years without ever once failing — is the sound of a child crying.

Not screaming. Not wailing. Crying. The soft, exhausted, lost kind

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of crying that a child makes when they have been frightened for a long time and are starting to give up hope. The sound that reaches into the chest of any adult within earshot and pulls.

The sound that makes you move toward it without deciding to.

[Narrator: Let that land. Then continue, a little more conversational — like you're telling something that actually happened.]

Navajo Lake sits at nearly ten thousand feet on the Markagunt Plateau, cupped in a natural bowl where the volcanic rock meets the sky. The water is cold enough in summer to take your breath away and it is dark — that particular clear darkness of deep alpine water, where you can see twenty feet down on a calm day and then suddenly nothing at all, the bottom dropping away into black.

It is a beautiful lake. People camp there every summer. They fish, they kayak, they let their children run along the rocky shore and they take photographs of the reflections of the ponderosas in the still water.

Most of them have never heard of the Paakniwat.

A man named Robert had. He'd grown up in Panguitch, and his grandmother — a woman of Southern Paiute descent who had the particular gift of telling a story in a way that made it impossible to disbelieve — had told him about the Water Babies when he was eight years old. She'd told him about the reeds. About the crying.

She'd told him never to go near the edge of the lake after sunset.

Robert was thirty-four years old when he took his family camping at Navajo Lake for the first time. His wife. His daughter, who was four. His son, who was seven and deeply committed to the project of catching a fish, any fish, at any cost.

They had a good day. A great day, actually — the weather held, the kids swam in the shallows near the boat ramp where the water was warmer and the bottom was sandy, and in the late afternoon his son caught something small and silver that thrashed magnificently on the line before being returned to the lake with great ceremony.

By the time they'd eaten dinner and got the kids settled, the sun was down.

Robert sat by the fire and listened to the lake.

DON JONES

It was a quiet night. Still air, no wind, the kind of silence that collects at altitude after dark like water filling a bowl. The fire popped. An owl made one low inquiry from the treeline and then thought better of it. The surface of the lake was a perfect black mirror at the edge of the firelight.

Robert was almost asleep when he heard it.

Far off. From the direction of the lake's eastern shore, where the reeds grew thick and dark and the ground went marshy.

A child crying.

He was on his feet before he was fully awake, every nerve in his body answering the sound before his mind had time to weigh in. He took three steps toward the lake before the thought arrived, fully formed and ice-cold:

His children were in the tent.

He stopped.

He turned and unzipped the tent. His daughter was asleep. His son was asleep. Both of them breathing, both of them warm, both of them entirely accounted for.

He zipped the tent back up and stood in the dark and listened to the crying from the reeds.

It was very good. He understood, standing there in the cold with his heart still hammering, exactly why it worked. It wasn't one note repeated — it shifted, the way real crying shifts, between the short gasping inhale and the longer, wavering exhale. It had texture. Exhaustion. A specific, heartbreaking quality of a child who has been crying long enough that they are no longer expecting anyone to come.

His grandmother had told him this.

He knew what it was.

He sat back down by the fire.

He did not go to the reeds.

And for a while, that seemed like enough. He sat and listened and reminded himself of what he knew, and the crying continued from the east shore, patient and unvarying, and the fire burned down, and the night was otherwise perfectly still.

Then the crying moved.

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[Narrator: Slow down. Almost a whisper now.]

Not dramatically. Not suddenly. Just — gradually, over the course of perhaps ten minutes, the sound shifted position. From the far eastern shore, it traveled north along the waterline. Toward the campsite. Toward the boat ramp. Toward the place where the reeds thinned out and the shore came close.

Toward him.

Robert put more wood on the fire. He told himself this was practical — warmth, light — and not because something in him believed that the fire was a boundary, that the circle of light was a kind of protection. He told himself this.

The crying reached the near shore.

And then it stopped.

The silence that followed was not the ordinary silence of a quiet night. It was the silence of something that has finished making one sound and is deciding whether to make another. A listening silence. Patient and close.

Robert stared at the line where the firelight met the dark, at the pale flicker of the lake's surface just visible between the trees, at the nodding tops of the reeds in a breeze he couldn't feel from where he sat.

Something was standing in the shallows.

He could not see it clearly — just the suggestion of a shape, dark against the dark water, low to the surface, roughly at the waterline. Still. Watching, the way a heron watches before it strikes. The long black hair fanning out around it on the surface of the lake, spreading slowly, the way ink spreads in water.

Robert did not move.

For a long time, neither did it.

Then, from the tent behind him, his daughter shifted in her sleep and made a small, drowsy, entirely innocent sound — the soft noise a four-year-old makes in the middle of a good dream, half-sigh and half-murmur — and the shape in the water went absolutely rigid.

It had heard her.

Robert stood up.

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He walked to the water's edge. He stopped ten feet from the shallows — close enough to see, far enough to run — and he looked directly at the shape in the reeds. And he said, in a voice he hoped was steadier than he felt, the words his grandmother had taught him. The old words, in the old language, the ones that said: I know you. I see you. I am not afraid. I am not coming in.

The shape was still for a moment.

Then it turned toward him.

And it opened its mouth — not to cry this time, not to mimic, but with the slow deliberation of a thing abandoning one strategy and considering another — and what came out was not a child's voice at all.

It was his grandmother's voice.

His grandmother, who had been dead for six years. His grandmother, who had sat across from him at a kitchen table in Panguitch and told him about the Paakniwat and the reeds and the crying. His grandmother's voice, exact and unmistakable, saying his name in the particular way she had always said it — two syllables, the second one rising slightly, the way it sounded when she was calling him in for dinner.

"Robert."

He stepped forward.

He couldn't help it. Six years of missing her and one word in her voice and his feet moved without his permission, one step, onto the cold wet mud of the shore, toward the water, toward the shape, toward the thing that had listened to the crying of every creature that had ever come to this lake and saved the best sound it had for exactly this moment —

The reeds parted.

And Robert saw its face.

[Narrator: Total silence. Hold it as long as you dare — eight, ten seconds. Look slowly around the fire. Then, just as someone opens their mouth to speak —]

BOO!

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[After the noise dies down, add the coda quietly, almost gently:]

Robert packed up his family and left Navajo Lake before dawn. He didn't explain to his wife why. He hasn't been back.

He doesn't talk about what he saw in the reeds. Not the face, not the teeth. There are some things, his grandmother always said, that you keep between yourself and the water.

But every so often, in a quiet moment, he thinks he hears her voice. And he's never quite sure, anymore, which one of them it is.

THE TOP HAT AT THE SUU AUDITORIUM

EVERY THEATER HAS ONE.

[Narrator: Start with performance in your voice — a little theatrical, a little grand. You are, after all, telling a story about the theater. Let the formality slowly drain away as the story gets darker.]

It doesn't matter how new the building is, how bright the lights, how modern the sound system. Every theater that has ever housed a real performance — that has felt the specific electricity of an audience holding its breath in the dark — has a presence. A watcher. The one who never leaves.

Theater people know this. They don't always talk about it, but they know. They feel it in the way the empty house seems less empty than it should when the stage lights are on and the rest of the world has gone home. They feel it in the particular quality of silence that fills a theater after the last audience member has walked out the door — not the silence of an empty room, but the silence of a room that is occupied by something that doesn't make sound.

At Southern Utah University, in the aging, red-brick auditorium

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that has hosted a hundred years of plays and recitals and performances and graduations, they call him the Man in the Top Hat.

Nobody knows his name. Nobody knows his story. He simply appears — in the balcony, front row center, the best seat in the house — and he watches.

He has always watched.

The SUU Auditorium is a beautiful building if you know how to look at it — the kind of beauty that belongs to old things that have absorbed a great deal of human feeling over a long time. The seats are worn smooth. The velvet on the balcony railing is rubbed thin in the places where a hundred years of hands have rested. The stage has been walked by students who went on to great things and students who went on to ordinary things, and the boards don't distinguish between them. Every performance is equal, in the memory of an old theater.

The stagehands and the technical crew are the ones who see him most often. Not the performers — performers face the light and the audience is darkness to them, a breathing, rustling mass without individual features. But the crew works in the wings, in the catwalks, in the booth at the back of the house. They see the balcony from angles the audience never does.

And late at night, when a show is in tech rehearsal and the stage manager is calling cues into her headset and the director is making notes in a dark row of the orchestra, the crew will sometimes look up at the balcony — just a glance, the automatic scan of a person who has learned to keep track of all corners of a space — and see him.

Sitting.

Front row center. The silhouette unmistakable: the straight-backed posture of a man of a certain era, the broad brim of a Victorian top hat, the hands folded in the lap. Never moving. Never reacting. Just watching the stage with the patient, evaluating attention of a man who has seen a great many performances and is making up his mind about this one.

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Some of the crew have learned to find it comforting, in a strange way. The Man in the Top Hat doesn't interfere. He doesn't cause cold spots or flickering lights or any of the dramatics you might expect from a theatrical ghost. He simply attends. And there's something almost flattering about that, once you get used to it. Something that says: whatever you are doing here on this stage, it matters enough to watch.

But every so often, someone gets curious.

And curiosity, in an old theater late at night, is a different thing than it is anywhere else.

[Narrator: Shift here. Quieter. More personal — like this is a story you heard from someone who was there.]

Her name was Margot, and she was a senior stage manager — experienced, unflappable, the kind of person a director calls when something goes wrong because she is constitutionally incapable of panic. She had spent three years working late nights in that auditorium and she had seen the Man in the Top Hat exactly four times, always at the same distance, always from below.

She was not afraid of him.

She was, if anything, a little annoyed. She had questions.

It was the last night of tech for the fall production — a late November evening with the temperature outside somewhere around fifteen degrees and the heating system in the auditorium doing its best and falling short, as it always did. The cast had been released at eleven. The director had gone home at midnight. By one in the morning, Margot was alone in the building, running a final systems check before locking up: every light cue saved, every sound file labeled, every prop accounted for, the stage left exactly as the director wanted to find it in the morning.

She was in the wings, clipboard in hand, when she looked up at the balcony.

He was there.

Front row center. The top hat. The folded hands. The absolute still-

ness of a figure that belongs to a different set of physical rules than the rest of the room.

Margot stood in the wings for a moment, looking up at him. Her clipboard was in her hand. Her headset was around her neck. The ghost light — the single bare bulb on a stand at center stage that every theater leaves burning when the building is empty, the one that keeps the darkness from settling all the way in — cast long shadows across the stage and up into the balcony, and in that light the Man in the Top Hat looked more solid than he usually did. More present.

More real.

Margot made a decision.

She walked out of the wings, across the stage, down the stage-left stairs, up the aisle of the orchestra section, and through the heavy door at the back of the house that led to the balcony stairs.

The stairwell was cold. Colder than the rest of the building, which was already cold — a concentrated, specific chill that she told herself was simply the result of inadequate insulation in an old building, the way cold air pools in stairwells. Nothing unusual. She climbed.

The balcony door was stiff. It always was — the wood swelled in the dry Utah winters — and it opened with a groan that echoed out into the empty house below. She stepped through.

The balcony was dark. The ghost light below threw faint illumination up to the ceiling, but the front row was in shadow, and she had to pick her way carefully between the seats, one hand on the backs of the chairs as she moved toward the front railing.

Front row center.

Empty.

Of course it was empty. She had known it would be. She stood at the railing and looked down at the ghost light burning on the stage below — at the long, lonely cone of illumination it threw upward, the shadows it carved out of the wings and the curtains and the back wall of the set — and she felt, for the first time in three years of working in this building, properly alone.

Which was strange. She was always alone at this hour. But it had never felt like this before — like the aloneness had texture, like the empty seat beside her was a different kind of empty than the other

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seats, like something had been here very recently and the air still held the shape of it.

The velvet on the railing in front of the center seat was warm.

She noticed that without meaning to. She'd put her hand on the railing and the velvet under her palm was warmer than the rest of it — the specific warmth of a surface where hands have rested for a long time, where body heat has soaked into the fabric over years and decades and is slow to leave.

Margot stood very still.

The theater was completely silent. No heating system tick, no settling of old joists, no distant sound of the campus outside. Just the ghost light burning on the empty stage and the dark pressing in from every side and the warm velvet under her hand and the absolute certainty, arriving without any theatrical flourish at all, that she was not alone in the front row of the balcony.

[Narrator: Barely a whisper. Lean forward into the firelight.]

She turned her head to the left.

He was sitting one seat away.

Not a silhouette. Not a trick of the light. He was there — solidly, specifically there — in a black wool coat with a high collar, a white cravat at his throat, the top hat resting on his knee now rather than his head, his hands folded over the brim. His face was the face of a man in his sixties: deeply lined, heavy-lidded, with the particular expression of someone who has watched a great many performances in a great many theaters over a great many years and developed very exacting standards as a result.

He was not looking at the stage.

He was looking at Margot.

She could not speak. Could not move. The cold that had been present since the stairwell was now specific and total — not the cold of an unheated room but the cold of proximity to something that generates no warmth at all, something that has been sitting in this seat so long it has become part of the architecture of the building, as much a

fixture of the house as the railing and the velvet and the ghost light below.

He held her gaze for a long moment.

Then, with the gravity and deliberateness of a man who chooses his words with care, he opened his mouth.

His voice, when it came, was not frightening in its quality. It was the voice of an educated man, precise and unhurried, the consonants clipped in a way that suggested a different century. It was the voice of a man who was accustomed to being listened to and had never needed to raise it.

He said: "The blocking in Act Two is still wrong."

Then he turned back to the stage.

And Margot — stage manager, unflappable, constitutionally incapable of panic — ran.

Down the balcony aisle, through the stiff door, down the cold stairwell, across the empty orchestra, up onto the stage past the ghost light, into the wings and out the stage door into the fifteen-degree November dark, where she stood in the parking lot for ten minutes before she could make herself go back inside to lock up.

The next morning, she told the director that the Act Two blocking needed work.

She did not explain how she knew.

But she was right. The director spent an hour reworking the scene and the show was better for it.

She worked in that auditorium for the rest of her senior year. She looked at the balcony from below, every night, during every tech run.

She never went up there again.

And every night, before she locked the stage door and stepped out into the cold, she would pause at the ghost light — the way every stage manager pauses at the ghost light, as if something ancient in the theater tradition demands it — and she would look up at the front row of the balcony.

Most nights, it was empty.

Most nights.

CEDAR MOUNTAIN CAMPFIRE STORIES

[Narrator: Let the silence gather. Look slowly around the fire — take your time. Make eye contact. Then, just as the tension peaks, grab the shoulder of the nearest person and —]

BOO!

[Let the laughter run. Then finish quietly, almost as an aside:]

There is a rule in theater — one of the oldest, one that every person who has ever worked the boards knows without quite being able to explain why they know it.

You never turn off the ghost light.

Leave the building as dark as you like. Lock every door. Kill every circuit on the board. But the ghost light stays on. Always. A single bare bulb burning on an empty stage in an empty house.

They'll tell you it's a safety measure. They'll tell you it's so the first person in the next morning can find the light switches without walking into the orchestra pit.

But that's not why.

It's for him.

So he can see the stage. So the theater is never fully dark. So there is always a performance of sorts — the ghost light itself, burning for an audience of one, in the front row of the balcony, where the velvet on the railing is always a little warmer than it should be.

Every theater has one.

THE "DEEP PURPLE" RECITAL

THERE'S A SONG.

[Narrator: Begin very quietly. Almost dreamily — like you're humming something under your breath that you can't quite place. If you know the melody of "Deep Purple," hum a few bars before you speak. Then let it trail off, unfinished. That's the whole story, really, in miniature.]

You may have heard it, or a version of it. It was popular in the 1930s — a slow, lush, romantic thing, the kind of song that was written to be played in a ballroom while couples held each other a little tighter than was strictly proper. The melody rises and falls like breathing. It has the quality of a dream you keep trying to remember after you wake up — almost there, almost there, and then gone.

It's called "Deep Purple."

And somewhere on the third floor of Old Main at Southern Utah University, it has been playing, on and off, for the better part of a century.

Not all the way through.

It never plays all the way through.

Her name was Eleanor, and in 1934 she was nineteen years old and the most gifted piano student the college had seen in a decade. Her professor said so. The other students said so, in the particular way that students acknowledge talent in their peers — with a mixture of genuine admiration and something that isn't quite resentment but lives in the same neighborhood.

Eleanor had been accepted to perform a solo recital in the spring — a rare honor for an undergraduate, and one she had worked toward for three years. She chose her program carefully: a Chopin nocturne, a Scarlatti sonata, and as her closing piece, an arrangement of "Deep Purple" that she had adapted herself, expanding the original song into something longer and more complex, a set of variations that began simply and built, over the course of eight minutes, into something that showcased everything she could do.

She was going to end the recital with it. She was going to stand up from the bench and bow, and the audience was going to rise.

She practiced it every night.

The third-floor rehearsal room in Old Main had an upright piano that had been there since the building went up, and Eleanor had a key to the room — a privilege extended to advanced students — and she would go there after dinner, when the building had quieted and the hallways were empty, and she would play.

The other students, working late in the floors below, would sometimes stop what they were doing and listen. The music came through the floors and the walls with the particular intimacy of sound in an old building — not loud, but close, as if Eleanor were playing in the next room rather than two floors up. It was beautiful. Everyone agreed.

But sometime in late February, a few weeks before the recital, something changed.

The music started stopping in the same place.

Not at the end of a phrase, not at a natural break. Partway through the final variation — the most technically demanding section, the one that built to the piece's emotional peak — the piano would simply stop. A chord, hanging in the air, unresolved. And then silence.

CEDAR MOUNTAIN CAMPFIRE STORIES

Students would look up from their books. Someone would sometimes say, "She stopped again." And after a moment, the music would resume from the beginning.

Always from the beginning. Never from where she'd left off.

One of Eleanor's classmates asked her about it — gently, the way you ask a friend about something you've noticed that might be embarrassing. Eleanor looked at her strangely. She said she didn't know what the girl was talking about. She had been practicing the full piece, start to finish, every night. She had never stopped in the middle.

She had never stopped in the middle.

[Narrator: Let that echo. Then, carefully:]

Three weeks before the recital, Eleanor got sick.

Nothing dramatic — a winter cold that settled into her chest and refused to leave. She missed a week of practice, then ten days. Her professor told her to rest, that the recital could be postponed, that there was no shame in it. Eleanor refused. She went back to the third-floor room the week before the performance date and she played.

The students below heard it start.

The Chopin. The Scarlatti. And then "Deep Purple" — the opening statement, simple and clean, Eleanor's touch lighter than usual, a little tentative, but recognizably hers. The melody rising and falling. The first variation. The second. Building toward the third, the difficult one, the one that had been cutting off in the same place for weeks.

It reached the place where it always stopped.

It stopped.

The students below looked up.

It did not begin again.

After half an hour, someone went upstairs.

Eleanor was at the piano. Her hands were in her lap. Her head was bowed as if she were studying the keys. The sheet music was open on the stand in front of her, turned to the final pages of her arrangement, and her pencil had rolled off the music stand and come to rest against the piano's leg.

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She had died at the piano, alone in the third-floor room, sometime during the final variation of "Deep Purple."

She had never reached the end.

[Narrator: Long pause. Very quiet now.]

The piano is gone. The building has been renovated more than once since 1934, and the third-floor rehearsal room has been repurposed, the old upright hauled out decades ago. If you go up there now, you'll find storage, or office space, or a corridor that ends in a locked door.

But the music stayed.

Not every night. Not reliably. But often enough — often enough that it has become part of the building's identity, a feature acknowledged by maintenance staff and late-night janitors and graduate students pulling all-nighters in the building's upper floors. A melody, drifting down through the ceiling. The opening of "Deep Purple," recognizable after the first three notes to anyone who knows the song. Building through its variations, growing more complex and more urgent as it climbs toward its peak.

And then stopping.

Always at the same place. Always on the same unresolved chord — the one that leans forward into the next phrase and never arrives, hanging in the air like a question that has been waiting ninety years for its answer.

And then silence. And then, after a little while, the beginning again.

People have tried to find the source. They've climbed to the third floor when the music is audible from below. They've stood in the corridor outside the old rehearsal room location and listened. Sometimes the music is louder up there, which suggests a point of origin. Sometimes it seems to come from inside the walls — from the building itself, as if the plaster and the old timber and the red sandstone have absorbed ninety years of Eleanor's practice sessions and are playing them back, note by note, night by night, in the perpetual hope that this time will be different.

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This time she'll get through it.
This time the chord will resolve.
It never does.

A graduate student named Phillip was working late in Old Main on a December night — the kind of December night in Cedar City that reminds you the desert is also a high-altitude place, the kind of cold that comes down from the plateau and sits in the streets like it owns them. He was in a study room on the second floor, laptop open, papers spread around him, deep in the particular misery of a thesis chapter that refused to end.

He heard the music start sometime around midnight.

He'd heard about the Deep Purple ghost — everyone who spent time in that building had heard about it — but he had never heard it himself, and for a moment he simply sat and listened. It was coming from above him, muffled by the floor but clear enough to follow. A piano, playing a melody he didn't immediately recognize, something old-fashioned and slow and unexpectedly beautiful for a ghost story.

He found himself setting down his pen.

He found himself listening the way you listen to something that holds you still without your permission — the way a particular combination of notes can reach past the thinking part of your brain and land somewhere older and quieter. The melody rose and grew more complex, the variations building on each other, and Phillip sat in his study room and followed it upward, phrase by phrase, toward what felt like it should be a climax, a resolution, an arrival —

And it stopped.

The chord hung in the air above him, unfinished, leaning forward. Waiting.

Phillip sat in the silence for a moment. And then — he didn't entirely know why he did this, except that the music had put him in a particular state of mind, a slightly unmoored, dreaming quality where ordinary inhibitions loosen — he pushed back his chair, left his papers, and walked upstairs.

The third floor was dark. The overhead lights were off and the only illumination came from the red glow of the exit signs at either end of the corridor, painting the hallway in a dim, unsettling crimson. Phillip stood at the top of the stairs and listened.

Silence.

He walked down the corridor, past locked office doors, past a row of filing cabinets that had been pushed against the wall, toward the far end where the old rehearsal room had been. His footsteps were the only sound — the dry tick of shoe leather on linoleum in a silent building — and the red light from the exit sign threw his shadow long and strange ahead of him.

He stopped at the last door.

It was slightly open.

Not wide — just an inch, maybe two, the latch not quite caught. A dark gap that should have meant nothing, that in any other context would mean nothing, that a sensible person would attribute to an old building with doors that don't sit square in their frames anymore.

From the gap came a smell. Old and dry and faintly sweet — the specific smell of piano felt, of aged wooden soundboard, of the particular dust that collects inside an instrument that has been played ten thousand times over a long life. The smell of a piano that hadn't been in this room for sixty years.

Phillip put his hand on the door.

From the other side — from the dark, piano-scented room where there was no piano — he heard a sound.

The creak of a bench.

The small, specific sound of someone settling their weight, adjusting their posture, preparing.

And then, very quietly, the first three notes of "Deep Purple."

Coming from inside the room.

Coming from directly in front of where a piano would have stood.

Phillip pushed the door open.

[Narrator: Hold the silence as long as you can bear. Stare into the dark beyond the fire. Then — not a shout, but a sudden, sharp sound —

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clap your hands together once, hard, right in front of the nearest listener's face. Then say, barely above a whisper —]

BOO!

[Let it settle. Then, after a long pause, quietly:]

Phillip doesn't talk about what he saw in that room.

He finished his thesis. He graduated. He moved away from Cedar City and got a job in a city large enough that the buildings are all new and the walls have not had time to learn anything.

But some nights, in the quiet hour between midnight and one, he hears a melody start in his head — the opening of something old and slow and lush — and he feels it building, variation by variation, climbing toward its resolution.

And every time, just before it arrives, it stops.

The same unfinished chord, hanging in the silence of his apartment.

Eleanor, still practicing.

Still trying to get it right.

Still waiting for someone to turn the page.

THE OUTLAW IN THE DRAW

NOW, I want to ask you something before we get into this.

[Narrator: Start easy and warm — almost like you're settling into a rocking chair on a front porch. This is a story about a legend, and legends deserve a little swagger at the start. The dread comes later. Let the history breathe first.]

How many of you have heard of Butch Cassidy?

[Narrator: Pause. Let them answer or nod.]

Good. Because Butch Cassidy is one of those figures that history and legend have spent a hundred and thirty years arguing over, and I'm not sure either side has won. He was born Robert LeRoy Parker in Beaver, Utah — not far from where we're sitting right now, as it happens — the son of a Mormon ranching family, one of thirteen children, a boy who by all accounts was charming and funny and could make anyone like him inside of five minutes.

He was also, by his early twenties, one of the most wanted outlaws in the American West.

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Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch robbed banks and trains across Wyoming, Colorado, Nevada, and Utah for the better part of a decade, and the thing that made them so hard to catch — aside from the fact that half the ranchers in the territory thought Butch was a hero and would sooner lie to a Pinkerton detective than give him up — was that Butch knew this country. He knew it the way you know the inside of your own house in the dark. Every canyon. Every water source. Every hidden draw and slot and blind corner where a man on horseback could vanish from plain sight like smoke in a wind.

And he knew Red Canyon.

If you've driven through Red Canyon on Highway 12 — and if you're camping in this part of Utah, there's a good chance you have — you already know what kind of place it is. The hoodoos rise in columns of vermilion and coral on either side of the road, sixty and eighty feet tall, carved by ten million years of water into shapes that seem like they should mean something, like some enormous and patient hand worked them into that particular arrangement for a reason. The color in the late afternoon is extraordinary — deep red fading to pink fading to orange, the light doing things you don't have words for.

It is also, as anyone who has hiked off the main trail can tell you, a labyrinth.

Get fifty yards from the road and the canyon becomes a maze of narrow passages and hidden alcoves and sudden drops and walls of rock that look identical from every direction. The landmarks that seemed obvious from the highway dissolve into a sea of red stone the moment you step between the formations. People who know the canyon well can navigate it. People who don't know it can get turned around within minutes.

Butch Cassidy knew it better than anyone.

The story goes that after a particularly rowdy dance in Panguitch — a dance that ended, as dances sometimes did in frontier Utah, in a disagreement that escalated beyond the social norms of the occasion — Butch found himself with a posse on his heels and a short head

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start. He turned his horse south, away from town, into the broken red country of the canyon.

The posse followed. They were good men and capable riders, and in open country they might have run him down. But Red Canyon is not open country. In the dark — a new moon that night, stars but no light to speak of — the canyon swallowed Butch Cassidy whole.

He turned his horse into a narrow drainage — a draw, barely wide enough for a horse to pass through, hidden between two hoodoos that had leaned toward each other over the centuries until they almost touched overhead — and he waited.

The posse rode past in the dark. He heard the hoofbeats, and then he heard them fade, and then he heard nothing but the wind in the canyon and his horse breathing and the particular silence of a man who has just gotten away with something and knows it.

That draw still exists. If you know where to look for it on the trail maps, you'll find it listed, quite matter-of-factly, as Butch Cassidy Draw.

And this is where the history ends and the legend begins.

[Narrator: Lean forward slightly. Your voice drops — not to a whisper yet, just quieter. More private.]

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid fled to South America in 1901, ahead of the Pinkertons who had been closing in for years. The official history says they died in a shootout in Bolivia in 1908. But the official history of Butch Cassidy has always been a negotiation, and there are people in southern Utah — people whose grandparents knew him, people who grew up on stories about him — who will tell you quietly, over a cup of coffee, that Butch came back.

That he came back to Utah in his old age, under a different name, and lived out his years quietly in the country he knew better than anywhere on earth.

And that when he died — wherever and whenever that was — he didn't entirely leave.

There are things in Red Canyon that don't belong to the living. Caches of money and stolen gold that Butch never returned to retrieve,

hidden in the rock over decades of running. Some say he buried them deliberately — a dead man's insurance, scattered across the canyon in places only he could find. Others say the canyon itself holds them, the way stone holds heat long after the sun has gone down, as a kind of residue of all those years of being his sanctuary.

And others say that whatever Butch left behind in Red Canyon, he left a guardian with it.

A shadow that sits at the entrance to Butch Cassidy Draw at dusk, in the shape of a man on a horse, watching the canyon the way a man watches something that belongs to him.

Hikers have seen it. Not many — you have to be deep enough in the canyon at the right hour of the evening, when the light has gone flat and the shadows of the hoodoos stretch long across the ground and you can't quite trust your eyes anymore.

But some have seen it. And a few have made the mistake of going closer.



His name was Daniel, and he was the kind of hiker who plans his trips down to the last water cache and the last blister kit, and who consequently tends to feel, after a long day on the trail, that the situation is entirely under control.

He had been hiking the Pink Ledges loop in Red Canyon all afternoon, alone — he preferred solo hiking, found the company of other people an intrusion on what he was trying to do, which was mostly think — and he had lingered longer than he intended, stopped too many times to look at the formations, and was now, as the sun dropped behind the western rim of the canyon, approximately forty-five minutes from the trailhead with the light failing faster than he'd calculated.

He was not lost. He knew that clearly. He had a map and a compass and a headlamp in his pack, and the trail was well-marked and he had walked it before. He was simply later than he meant to be, in a canyon that was becoming, as the dusk deepened, a different place than it had been an hour ago.

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The color drained from the hoodoos as the sun left them. The reds went brown, then grey, then the particular non-color of stone in failing light. The canyon narrowed, or seemed to. The trail, which had felt generous and well-defined in the afternoon, now felt like a suggestion.

Daniel rounded a bend in the trail and saw the fire.

Small, almost invisible — not a campfire, nothing so ordinary as that. Just a glow, low to the ground, tucked into the entrance of a narrow draw between two leaning hoodoos. The kind of fire you build when you don't want to be seen from a distance. The kind of fire that gives just enough light to see by and no more.

And beside the fire, sitting on a flat rock with his back against the canyon wall, a man.

He was wearing the kind of clothes you don't see people wear on the trail: dark canvas trousers, a collarless shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbow, a vest that might once have been good quality. A wide-brimmed hat pushed back on his head at an angle that suggested ease, comfort — a man entirely at home. One hand rested on his knee. The other was occupied with a revolver, which he was polishing with a cloth in the slow, methodical way of someone doing a familiar chore that requires no particular concentration.

Daniel stopped on the trail.

The man didn't look up.

The sensible thing — the obvious thing — was to keep walking. The trailhead was forty-five minutes away and the light was going and a man sitting alone at a small fire in a canyon at dusk, whatever his situation, was not Daniel's business.

Daniel kept walking.

He had gone perhaps twenty steps past the draw when the feeling hit him — that specific, irrational, utterly compelling feeling that you are being watched. Not the vague unease of being alone in the dark, but the precise sensation of a gaze landing on your back, focused and deliberate, the kind of attention that has weight.

He slowed.

He told himself not to turn around.

He turned around.

The man was still at the fire. Still polishing the revolver. But now

he was watching Daniel — had turned his head to follow him up the trail, his eyes visible under the brim of the hat, catching the firelight in a way that made them look, just for a moment, like they were lit from within. He had stopped polishing. His hand was still. The cloth hung from his fingers, forgotten.

Daniel looked at the man's boots.

Later, he would not be able to say exactly what made him look at the boots. Some instinct, some detail at the edge of his vision that his brain flagged before his conscious mind caught up. But he looked, and what he saw was the ground around them — the fine red sand of the canyon floor, soft and undisturbed and perfect for holding impressions.

No boot prints.

The man was sitting in undisturbed sand. No marks of his arrival. No impression of his weight. The fire cast no shadow from his body. His boots rested on the surface of the ground without pressing into it, the way an object rests on glass.

Daniel's headlamp was suddenly in his hand, though he didn't remember reaching for it.

The man watched him. Unhurried. Patient. The way a man watches someone who is just now understanding something he should have understood sooner. One corner of his mouth moved — not quite a smile, not quite not one — and he lifted the revolver, not pointing it, just holding it loosely at his side, the barrel angled toward the ground.

And with his other hand, the one that had been holding the cloth, he gestured. A slow, deliberate gesture — toward the draw behind him, toward the dark passage between the leaning hoodoos, toward whatever lay inside it in the dark.

An invitation.

Or a warning.

Daniel was not sure which.

He took a step back up the trail toward the draw. The man's eyes followed him. The revolver hung loose in his hand. The fire crackled once, and in the flare of it Daniel saw the man's face clearly for just a moment — the strong jaw, the pale eyes, the expression of a man who has spent a lifetime making quick judgments about other

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people and whose judgment, in this instance, appeared to be still forming.

Daniel took another step.

The hammer of the revolver clicked back.

Not raised. Not aimed. Just cocked — a sound that in a narrow canyon at dusk carries with absolute clarity, a sound with only one meaning in any language, a sound that said: that's far enough.

Daniel stopped.

The canyon was silent except for the fire.

For a long moment, the man and Daniel looked at each other across the red sand with its absence of footprints, in the last of the dusk light, while the hoodoos stood over them both like witnesses.

Then the man tipped his hat.

And turned back to his fire.

And Daniel walked — not ran, he would tell people later, he walked, which he felt was important to establish — he walked back to the trailhead in the dark with his headlamp on, and he did not look back again, not once, and he reached his car and he sat in it for a good long while before he felt ready to drive.

[Narrator: Let the story breathe here. Nice and easy. Then, almost conversationally:]

He went back the following summer.

In the daylight this time, mid-morning, with three other people, which he felt covered his bases adequately. He found Butch Cassidy Draw exactly where the map said it would be. He went inside.

It was just a draw. Narrow, red-walled, sandy-floored, ending after about sixty feet in a dry pour-off choked with scrub oak. No fire ring. No flat rock. No impression in the sand of any boot heel or any seat.

Nothing.

Except, on the canyon wall at the back of the draw, at about chest height, scratched into the sandstone with something sharp — something like the sight of a silver-plated Colt revolver, say — a single letter.

B.

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Fresh-looking. The edges of the scratch pale against the darker weathered surface, the way stone looks when it's been cut recently.

Recently.

As in: since last summer.

[Narrator: Full stop. Look around the fire. Take your time — this is a slow burn of an ending. Then, easy as you like, lean toward the person next to you as if you're about to share one last secret — and —]

BOO!

[After the noise fades, lean back, relaxed, like you're just wrapping up a pleasant story:]

Butch Cassidy died in Bolivia in 1908. That's the official story, and the official story is probably right.

Probably.

But Red Canyon has a long memory, and it holds what it's given. And somewhere between the leaning hoodoos of Butch Cassidy Draw, at the hour when the light goes flat and the shadows run long and the color drains out of the stone —

Something is keeping watch over what was left behind.

And it hasn't decided yet whether you're welcome.

THE CURSE OF THE ESCALANTE SOUVENIR

I WANT to ask you something, and I want you to be honest.

Have you ever taken something from a place you weren't supposed to?

[Narrator: This one opens with a confession — warm, a little conspiratorial, like you're about to say something everyone is thinking but nobody says out loud. Look around the fire as you start. Make it feel like you're bringing people in on something.]

Not stealing, exactly. Not anything serious. Just — a rock. A pretty one, maybe, pulled from a riverbed or a canyon floor. A pottery shard you spotted in the dust of an arroyo. A fragment of old wood from a ruin, smoothed by a thousand years of wind. A feather. A bone. Something that caught your eye and fit in your pocket and seemed like it belonged in your life more than it belonged on the ground where you found it.

Come on. You can admit it. You're among friends.

[Narrator: Pause. Let people react — laugh, confess, look guilty. Then, with a slight shift in tone:]

The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument covers nearly a million acres of the most remote, most starkly beautiful, most geologically improbable landscape in the American Southwest. Canyons that took two hundred million years to carve. Arches balanced on fins of stone no wider than this campfire is wide. Slot canyons where you can put both hands on the walls and feel the cool of ten thousand years of shadow. Petrified wood that was alive when the dinosaurs were alive, lying on the desert floor like scattered firewood, right there in the open, right there for the taking.

You're not supposed to take it.

You're not supposed to take any of it. The Monument is federal land, and removing natural objects — rocks, fossils, petrified wood, artifacts, any of it — is a federal offense. The rangers will tell you this cheerfully and firmly at the visitor center, and they'll hand you a brochure with a photograph of a piece of petrified wood on it and the words LEAVE IT WHERE YOU FOUND IT in large friendly letters.

Most people comply.

Most people.

The rangers at Escalante have a name for what happens to the ones who don't comply.

They call it the Curse.

They say it in the particular way that people who work outdoors in remote places say things they half-believe and won't fully commit to — with a slight smile and a slight hesitation and the air of someone who has seen enough to make them careful about what they dismiss. You ask a ranger at Escalante about the Curse and they'll shrug, and they'll give you the smile, and then they'll tell you about the mail.

The mail is real. That part is documented, verifiable, has been written about in newspapers and mentioned in park service reports. The rangers at national parks and monuments across the American Southwest receive, every year, a steady trickle of packages in the mail. Padded envelopes. Small boxes. The occasional zip-lock bag taped to a notecard. And inside them: rocks. Fossils. Pottery shards. Fragments of

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petrified wood. Objects removed from protected land, sometimes years or decades ago, being returned.

The notes that come with them tell the story.

Job loss. Illness. Car accidents. Relationships ending. A string of bad luck so consistent and so specific in its timing — beginning shortly after the visit, following the person home like a shadow — that the writer, who is usually an educated adult who does not believe in curses, has decided that returning the rock is worth trying. Just in case.

Just in case.

The Escalante rangers have a folder of these letters. A thick one.

[Narrator: Let that settle. Then, more quietly:]

Her name was Suki, and she was twenty-six and on her first solo road trip — the kind of trip you take when a long chapter of your life has just closed and you need to drive somewhere that makes your own problems feel appropriately small. She had chosen the Escalante because a friend had described it as the loneliest beautiful place in America, and that had sounded exactly right.

She spent three days hiking. Slot canyons. The Toadstools. The alien ridgeline of the Devils Garden. She took photographs obsessively, the way you do when you want to prove to yourself later that something this extraordinary was real.

On her last afternoon, hiking out of a canyon she'd had entirely to herself, she found the stone.

It was wedged in a crack in the canyon wall at about knee height — a piece of petrified wood, roughly palm-sized, smooth and dense and heavy for its size. Its color was extraordinary: deep burgundy fading to gold at the edges, with a grain visible in the stone that was still, unmistakably, the grain of ancient wood. You could see the growth rings. Two hundred million years old, and you could still count the seasons the tree had lived through.

Suki crouched and looked at it for a long time.

She knew the rule. She had read the brochure. She thought about the brochure.

She put the stone in her pack.

She told herself it was just a rock. She told herself the Monument was nearly a million acres and there were millions of pieces of petrified wood scattered across it and one piece, this one piece, wouldn't be missed. She told herself that the rangers weren't here and nobody had seen her and the rule was arguably overcautious anyway.

She drove home to Salt Lake City with the stone in the cupholder between the front seats, where it sat like a passenger.

The first thing that happened was the dreams.

Not nightmares — nothing dramatic, nothing she could describe as frightening on its own terms. Just a recurring quality in her sleep, every night from the first night back, of being underground. Of standing in a narrow slot canyon with walls so close she could feel them on both shoulders, and the stone around her was not dead stone, not inert mineral, but alive in some slow lithic way — aware, patient, waiting. And the light above her was wrong, coming from the wrong direction, as if the sun had set inside the rock and was shining upward from below.

She woke from these dreams unrested. Every morning.

Then her car broke down. The same car that had driven to Escalante and back without incident, that had sixty thousand miles on it and had never given her trouble, that she had serviced three months before the trip. The mechanic found nothing wrong. It happened again the following week. Again the week after.

Her camera — the good one, the one she'd saved for, the one she'd taken to the Escalante specifically to photograph things she wanted to remember — corrupted its memory card. Six hundred photographs, three days of the loneliest beautiful place in America, gone.

A water pipe burst in her apartment while she was at work. Not a dramatic burst — just a slow, persistent leak from a joint that the building super said had been fine for thirty years and had no business failing now.

She knew what she was doing every time she catalogued these events. She knew she was constructing a narrative, finding patterns in

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randomness, doing the very human thing of connecting unconnected dots because the alternative — that life simply rains down misfortune without reason or order — is somehow more disturbing than the idea of a curse. She knew all of this.

She kept the stone on her bookshelf and watched it and waited to feel better.

She did not feel better.

Six weeks after she got home, she woke at three in the morning from the underground dream — the narrow canyon, the wrong light, the alive stone pressing in from both sides — and she lay in her bed in the dark for a long time, and then she got up, and she went to the bookshelf, and she picked up the stone.

It was warm.

Not room temperature. Not the passive warmth of an object that has absorbed the heat of an indoor space. It was warm the way a hand is warm, the way a living thing is warm — from the inside out, with a specific, directional heat that she felt move against her palm when she shifted her grip, as if something within the stone was turning toward her touch.

Suki set the stone down on the kitchen table.

She sat across from it.

In the dark, with the street light coming through the curtains and the stone sitting on the table between them, she thought about the growth rings she could see in its surface. Two hundred million years of seasons. Two hundred million years of the same desert sky, the same red earth, the same canyon walls. She thought about what it meant to be that old and that still and to have been, for all of that time, exactly where you were supposed to be.

And she thought: it wants to go back.

Not as a metaphor. Not as a psychological insight about the nature of guilt and consequence. She meant it the way she would mean it about a dog scratching at a door or a child reaching for a parent. The stone wanted to go back. It had been trying to tell her this, in the only language available to it, from the first night she brought it home.

She drove back to the Escalante the following weekend.

She hiked back into the canyon. Found the crack in the wall where

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she had taken the stone — she recognized it, exactly, without quite being able to explain how, the way you recognize a face you've only seen once. She pressed the stone back into the crack.

It fit.

Perfectly. Seamlessly. As if it had never been moved.

She stood back and looked at it for a moment. Then she turned around and walked out of the canyon.

The dreams stopped that night.

Her car started fine the next morning.

She has been back to the Escalante three times since. She takes photographs. She takes nothing else.

But every time she hikes that particular canyon, she stops at the crack in the wall and looks at the stone. Just to confirm it's still there. Just to confirm it's still where it belongs.

It always is.

And every time, when she leans in close, she can feel a faint warmth coming off it.

Whether that's the stone or the desert or just her imagination, she has decided she doesn't need to know.

[Narrator: Pause here. Nice long pause. Then, almost gently, look around the fire — and let your eyes land on someone. Hold that eye contact. Speak directly to them:]

Now.

I want to circle back to the question I asked at the start.

Is there anyone here — anyone at all — who picked up a rock today?

[Narrator: Let that sit. Watch faces. If anyone looks uncomfortable — and someone usually does — keep your eyes on them just a beat too long. Then, very casually, lean toward the person nearest you as if to whisper —]

BOO!

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[After the laughter, deliver the final lines in the most reasonable, matter-of-fact tone you have:]

The Grand Staircase-Escalante Monument receives, on average, between forty and sixty returned packages per year.

The notes inside them are, without exception, from people who don't believe in curses.

And before you turn in tonight — if you did pick up a rock today — you might want to think about where you left it.

And whether it's already thinking about you.

THE SLAVES OF THE OLD SPANISH TRAIL

NOTE that this story touches on a topic that can be deeply uncomfortable: The hard truth of enslaved Indigenous children during the United States' Pioneer era. Although presented as a ghost story, it's still a difficult subject for some folks. Reader discretion is advised.

[Narrator: Begin with the quiet authority of someone about to teach something. Not a lecture — more like a guide who knows the land. Measured. Respectful. The ghost story grows out of the history naturally; don't rush to get there.]

Before there were highways, before there were railroads, before the first wagon rut was pressed into the red soil of southern Utah, there was the trail.

The Old Spanish Trail was one of the longest and most brutal trade routes in North American history — nearly two thousand miles of desert and mountain and canyon connecting Santa Fe, New Mexico to Los Angeles, California. It wound through country that had no business being crossed by laden mule trains: the slickrock plateaus of the

Colorado Plateau, the deep gorges of the canyon country, the alkaline flats where the heat in summer could kill a horse in an afternoon.

Traders used it anyway. For twenty years, from the 1820s to the 1840s, the trail carried blankets and wool east from California, and horses and mules west from New Mexico. It carried the ambitions of merchants and the dreams of settlers and the surveying eyes of men who were deciding what this country was worth and to whom it would belong.

And it carried something else.

The trail passed through the heart of Paiute country — through the high plateaus and the desert springs and the mountain meadows where the Southern Paiute had lived for centuries. And some of the men who traveled it, in those years before any law reached this far into the wilderness, took advantage of that fact in the worst way imaginable.

They took children.

Not many historians dwell on this part of the trail's story. It tends to appear in a sentence, maybe a paragraph, in books that are mostly about geography and commerce. But for the Paiute people whose families were broken by it, it was not a footnote. It was a wound that ran the full length of the trail, from the springs of southern Utah all the way to the households of California and New Mexico, where Paiute children were put to work and called servants and grew up far from everyone and everything they had ever known.

The trail is still there. Most of it, anyway — bits of it absorbed into modern highways, stretches of it still visible as a faint depression in the desert, the ghost of a path worn into the earth by two decades of hooves and boots and the small, unwilling feet of children who were going somewhere they had not chosen to go.

And some people, traveling that country at certain hours and in certain lights, have heard those feet still walking.

His name was Martin, and he was the kind of traveler who did things properly. He had driven down from Salt Lake City on a long weekend

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with a detailed itinerary, a well-stocked cooler, and a paperback history of the Old Spanish Trail that he had been meaning to read for two years and had finally cracked on the drive south.

He was interested in history the way some people are interested in birds — not casually, not just as something to look at from a distance, but with a real desire to understand the mechanics of the thing. Why it worked the way it worked. What it meant. What had been lost and what remained.

He stopped at the historical marker near Parowan in the late afternoon — a low brown sign beside the highway, the kind you drive past a hundred times without reading if you're in a hurry. He was not in a hurry. He pulled over, got out, stood in the wind and read it.

The marker described the trail in broad strokes. Commerce. Geography. Exploration. The names of the men who had mapped and traveled it. Martin read it twice, then looked out across the sage flat toward the low hills to the west, where the trail had run. The late sun was turning the hills amber and rust, and the shadow of the highway sign stretched long across the gravel, and the wind moved the sage in slow, grey-green waves.

He had read, in his paperback history, the chapter about the child trade.

Standing at the marker, looking at those hills, he thought about that chapter. About what it meant that the pleasant historical sign made no mention of it. About the distance between the official version of a place and what had actually happened there.

He decided to walk.

Not far — just out into the sage flat, toward the hills, in the general direction the trail had taken. He had good boots and two hours of light and his phone had GPS. He crossed the shallow bar ditch at the edge of the highway and stepped into the desert.

[Narrator: Slower now. Quieter. Like the desert itself is asking you to lower your voice.]

The sage flat looked featureless from the road but revealed itself, up close, to be full of subtle topography — shallow draws and low

ridges, dry washes choked with rabbitbrush, the occasional outcrop of pale limestone pushing through the thin soil. Martin walked west, roughly, letting the terrain guide him, and after about twenty minutes he found what he was looking for.

Or rather, he found what he hadn't known he was looking for.

A depression in the earth. Faint, barely visible in the angled light of late afternoon, but unmistakable once he had noticed it — a shallow trough running roughly northwest to southeast, maybe six feet wide, pressed into the desert floor by the passage of many things over many years. No modern path ran here. No cattle trail, no jeep track. The vegetation in the trough was subtly different from the vegetation on either side — lower, sparser, as if the ground remembered being walked on and had not entirely recovered.

The trail.

Martin stood at its edge and looked along its length — northeast toward Parowan, southwest toward the hills and eventually, two thousand miles away, California. The wind moved the sage on both sides. The light was turning, the amber going deeper, the shadows lengthening. He was standing on the actual surface of the Old Spanish Trail, a two-hundred-year-old road, and the feeling that came with that — the particular, vertiginous quality of standing on ground where a great deal of human experience had been compressed — settled over him like a change in the weather.

He stood there for a while, just listening.

The desert in that hour has a specific silence — not empty, but layered, textured, full of small sounds that become audible only when the larger sounds of the road have faded. The wind. The distant call of something he couldn't identify. The faint dry rustle of the sage.

And, beneath all of it, something else.

So faint he wasn't sure he was hearing it at all. A sound that seemed to come from the direction of the trail itself — from the southwest, from the direction the trail ran toward the horizon. Rhythmic. Regular. The soft, shuffling rhythm of feet on dry earth, many feet, moving at the patient pace of people who have been walking a long time and have a long way still to go.

Martin turned and looked southwest along the trail.

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Empty.

Sage and pale earth and the long shadow of the hills and nothing moving but the wind. He listened. The sound had stopped — or had never been there. He stood very still and waited, the way you wait when you've heard something ambiguous and your mind hasn't yet decided what it was.

The sun touched the rim of the hills to the west.

And in the moment the light changed — flattened, went from gold to grey in the way it does in those last minutes before the desert loses the sun entirely — he saw the light.

Small. Faint. Moving along the trail from the southwest, maybe a hundred yards away, in the shallow depression of the trail itself. Not a flashlight, not a lantern — too warm for that, too unsteady. More like a candle flame, or a lamp turned very low. It moved at walking pace, unhurried, following the line of the trail exactly.

And behind it: another.

And another.

A line of small lights, moving in single file along the old trail, spaced about ten feet apart, each one the size and quality of a flame cupped in a hand. Martin counted seven. Eight. He lost count. They moved with the particular evenness of a group that has been walking together long enough to fall into a shared rhythm, each light rising and falling slightly with the movement of whoever carried it.

He thought: hikers. He thought: a group camping trip, kids with lanterns. He thought several ordinary things in quick succession, the way the mind reaches for ordinary explanations in the moment before it accepts that an explanation is needed.

Then the nearest light reached the point on the trail that was level with him, maybe thirty feet away, and he saw that no one was carrying it.

[Narrator: Drop to barely above a whisper. Take your time.]

The light moved at the height a child's hand would move if a child were carrying a lamp — three feet from the ground, give or take. But there was no child. No hand. No visible form of any kind. Just the light itself, drifting along the trail at walking pace, small and warm and steady in the windless air close to the ground.

All of the lights were like this.

A line of small flames, traveling the Old Spanish Trail at dusk, at the height of a child's outstretched hand, moving southwest in the direction the trail had always run, in the direction people had always been taken.

Martin did not move.

He stood at the edge of the trail and watched them pass, one by one. And as each light came level with him, he became aware of something — a drop in temperature, slight and specific, the kind of cold that has nothing to do with the evening air. And a feeling, accompanying each light as it passed, that was harder to name: a weight, a gravity, the sense of a presence that was not quite grief and not quite longing but held something of both.

These were not angry spirits. They were not malevolent, not dangerous, not the kind of presence that fills a space with dread. They were simply — going somewhere. Following a path. Doing what they had always done, what they had been made to do, with the endless patience of those for whom the journey never reached its end.

The last light passed him.

And then stopped.

Thirty feet past him along the trail, the last small light paused. It did not flicker. It simply ceased moving, hovering in the dusk above the old path, while the others continued southwest and slowly faded into the distance.

Martin looked at the light.

The light — or whatever held it, whatever moved within that small warm glow — seemed to look back.

Then, very slowly, it turned.

Away from the trail.

Toward the northeast — back the way the trail had come, back toward Parowan and the springs and the plateaus and the mountain country that the Paiute people had called home long before the trail existed. The light moved in that direction, just a few feet, and stopped again.

As if it were showing him something.

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As if — after a hundred and seventy years of going in the wrong direction — something had finally remembered which way was home.

Martin stood in the half-dark for a long time after the lights had gone.

Then he turned northeast himself, toward the highway and his car, and he walked back the way he had come.

He has never entirely decided what he saw out there on the sage flat at dusk. He knows what the land was. He knows what the trail was for. He knows the chapter in his paperback history that the road-side marker didn't mention.

Some nights, when the wind is a certain way and the dark outside his window is a certain quality, he thinks he can still see it — the last small light, pausing on the trail, turning toward the mountains.

Still pointing home.

[Narrator: A long pause here. Longer than usual. Let the fire settle. Then, when you feel the stillness shift — when someone starts to relax and look away — lean forward sharply and —]

BOO!

[After the laughter and noise settle, finish in a quiet, almost reflective tone — not scary, just thoughtful:]

The Old Spanish Trail still runs through this country. You drove across it to get here, probably, without knowing it.

Most of the places it passed through have markers now — brown highway signs, plaques in rest areas, entries in the guidebooks. They tell you about the commerce and the geography and the great adventure of opening the West.

The full story is longer than the markers.

It always is.

And sometimes, at dusk, in the sage flat west of Parowan, the land tells the rest of it.

In small lights.

Moving in a line.

One by one.

THE HUMAN TORCH OF OLD MAIN

MAYBE YOU'VE HEARD of Virginia Loomis.

[Narrator: This one rewards a slow, deliberate start — like you're laying bricks. Each fact placed on top of the last. The story has two parts that the audience won't know are connected until you connect them. Play the first half straight, like a history lesson. Save everything for the furnace.]

Maybe we talked about her before — the young woman whose story was folded into the walls of Old Main at Southern Utah University along with the red sandstone of the Markagunt. The dark brick in the northeast corner of the basement. The warmth that never leaves that section of wall. The scratching behind the plaster, slow and patient, that has been going on since 1898.

What we didn't talk about is what happened to the man who put her there.

Because Virginia Loomis was a ghost with a long memory. And a building, it turns out, can have one too.

DON JONES

The campus legend doesn't name him in the early tellings. He's just referred to as the boyfriend — the young quarry worker who was there the morning Virginia died, who loaded the wagon without looking too carefully at what was on it, who left Cedar City shortly afterward and was not seen again for a very long time.

Some versions of the story say he went north, to Salt Lake. Others say he went east, toward the mining towns of Carbon County, where a man could lose himself in the population of a boomtown and never be asked about his past. The details vary. But on one point, every version of the legend agrees.

He came back.

Decades later. An older man, going by a different name, looking for work. The kind of work he knew — maintenance, heavy labor, the care and feeding of old buildings. Cedar City had grown in the intervening years. The college had grown. Old Main stood on its hill the way it always had, red and solid and permanent, built from the stone of the quarry he knew very well.

He got a job as the building's janitor.

He worked there for eleven years.

And the building waited.

[Narrator: Pause here. Let it sit. Then, as if changing the subject — though you're not:]

The winter of 1948 was a hard one in Cedar City. The kind of hard that old-timers remembered and referenced for the rest of their lives as a benchmark — that winter, the one where the pipes froze three times in January and the snow on Main Street didn't clear until late March. The kind of cold that made the furnace in the basement of Old Main work harder than it was ever meant to.

The furnace was the janitor's responsibility. It was a coal-fed beast — a great iron chamber five feet tall, installed in the 1920s to replace an even older system, its belly full of fire from October through April. It required stoking twice a day: once in the early morning, before the building filled with students, and once in the evening before the last

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lights went out. The janitor had done this routine, without incident, for eleven years.

On a morning in February 1948, he came in early, as he always did, and went down to the basement to stoke the furnace for the day.

He crossed the basement floor in the dark, the way he had crossed it a thousand times before, not needing the light anymore, his feet knowing the distance and the angle by memory. He passed the coal bin. He passed the utility shelving. He passed the northeast corner — the warm corner, always warmer than the rest of the basement, the corner where a section of wall ran a steady twenty degrees hotter than the surrounding masonry, the corner he had learned, in eleven years of working in this building, never to look at directly.

He stopped in front of the furnace.

He reached for the iron handle of the loading door.

And the building woke up.

[Narrator: Your voice drops. Steady. Deliberate. Like you're reading from a report.]

What happened next took, by the estimates of the investigators who examined the scene afterward, somewhere between two and four minutes.

The furnace door swung open — not by his hand, or not only by his hand — with a force that threw him forward. The heat that came out of it was not the ordinary heat of a coal fire that has been burning all night. It was the heat of something that had been waiting all night, fed by something other than coal.

The iron door swung back.

The latch caught.

He was inside the furnace.

No — not inside. His arm was inside, the door having caught him at the elbow, the heavy iron mechanism pinning him against the face of the furnace with a force that the investigators would later describe, in the careful language of official reports, as inexplicable given the mechanical specifications of the equipment.

He couldn't pull free.

He screamed. The basement swallowed it — old stone walls, heavy floor above, no one in the building yet at that hour. He screamed again. The furnace breathed against his arm with a heat that registered, later, in the condition of the iron door itself — warped, as if subjected to a temperature far exceeding its design parameters.

And from the northeast corner of the basement — from the warm section of wall, from behind the plaster, from the place where a brick darker than the rest pulsed with its own interior heat — came a sound.

The slow, patient scratching stopped.

For the first time in fifty years, the wall was silent.

And then the fire found the rest of the building.

The fire of 1948 destroyed the original Old Main entirely. The structure that stands today is a reconstruction, built on the same footprint, using some of the same stone — though not, the campus legend is careful to note, from the same quarry. The new bricks are different. Lighter. They don't have that particular depth of color, that iron-rich darkness that the original sandstone carried.

The investigators found what they found in the ruins of the basement. An official account was filed. It was quiet about certain details — the position of the body, the state of the furnace door, the fact that the mechanism showed no fault that could explain how a man had come to be pinned inside it. Official reports, in 1948, were good at being quiet about things that didn't fit.

What the official report did not record — because no official report was going to record this — was what the early-morning witness saw.

A student, cutting across the quad before dawn on his way to an early lab, looked up at the burning building and saw two things.

The first was the fire itself — the windows of Old Main lit gold and orange, the smoke beginning to rise, the particular beauty and horror of a building on fire in the winter dark.

The second was a figure in the highest window.

Not panicking. Not waving for help. Standing perfectly still in the third-floor window, framed in the fire behind her, watching the

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campus below with an expression the student would spend the rest of his life trying to describe and never quite managing.

A woman. In a dress that might have been fashionable fifty years earlier.

Standing in the fire as if the fire were hers.

As if she had been waiting in those walls for a very long time, and the walls had finally given her what she asked for.

[Narrator: Let that image hang. Don't rush it. Then, after a long pause, shift into the final section — quieter still, almost casual:]

The rebuilt Old Main has a basement, of course.

New furnace. Modern system — gas, not coal, nothing so old and temperamental as that iron chamber from the 1920s. Clean and efficient and entirely without atmosphere.

The northeast corner of the basement still runs warm.

The maintenance staff know about it. It's been looked at, over the decades — the HVAC checked, the insulation inspected, the plumbing traced to make sure there isn't a pipe running hot through that section of wall. Nothing has ever been found to explain it. The building engineer who filed the most recent inspection report noted it as an anomaly and suggested monitoring.

Nobody monitors it.

And the scratching — softer now, in the new plaster, in the lighter stone — is still there, some nights. Students who stay late in the basement study rooms and sit too close to the northeast wall will sometimes pause in the middle of a sentence, pencil lifted, head tilted, listening to a sound they can't identify and can't locate.

They always move their chairs.

They always move away from that corner.

Smart.

Because Virginia Loomis has already gotten what she waited fifty years for. She is, in the campus stories, at peace — or as close to peace as someone in her situation can get.

But a building holds more than one story.

And in the rebuilt basement, on certain nights, when the furnace

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kicks on and the pipes tick and the heat moves through the walls the way heat moves through old buildings — spreading, rising, finding the paths of least resistance — some people claim to hear something else entirely.

Not scratching.

Pounding.

From inside the furnace room.

Slow. Heavy. The sound a fist makes on iron when the fist has been making that sound for a very long time and no longer expects an answer, but cannot stop.

[Narrator: Let the silence stretch to its absolute limit. Watch the fire. Watch the faces around it. Then, when the moment is exactly right — when the quiet has become its own kind of noise — stand up, if you're sitting, and —]

BOO!

[After the chaos settles, sit back down slowly. Then, almost as an afterthought, in the most ordinary voice you have:]

Old Main has a furnace room in the rebuilt basement.

It has a door.

The door has a latch.

Nobody goes in there alone.

Not anymore.

Not after dark.

THE WITCH OF ROCKVILLE

I WANT to tell you about a woman named Mary Parker.

[Narrator: This one calls for a storyteller's voice right from the start — warm, a little conspiratorial, the tone of someone who has been carrying a story for a while and is finally ready to put it down. There is grief in this one alongside the fear. Let both breathe.]

Not because she was frightening. Not because she was evil. But because what happened to her was both of those things, and because the land around Rockville, Utah has been trying to tell her story ever since — in the particular way that land tells stories, which is slowly and without words and usually at night.

Rockville sits at the south end of Zion Canyon, where the Virgin River comes out of the narrows and the canyon walls open up and the red rock country gives way to something a little gentler, a little more hospitable. Cottonwoods along the river. Old stone houses built by the first settlers, some of them still standing. A bridge. A cemetery on the hill.

In 1880, it was a small place. Close. The kind of community where everyone knew everyone's business, and where that familiarity was

both a comfort and a danger, depending on whose business was being known.

Mary Parker had lived in Rockville for years. She was sixty-three years old — a widow, self-sufficient, tending her own garden and her own affairs with the independence of a woman who had learned early that waiting for help from others was a strategy with a low success rate. She knew things: which plants eased a fever, which poultice drew infection from a wound, which tea helped a baby sleep. Knowledge like that, in a frontier settlement far from any doctor, was worth a great deal.

In Rockville in 1880, it was also worth being afraid of.

The word witch is a word that has meant many things across many centuries, and in the pioneer communities of nineteenth-century Utah it carried a specific weight — the weight of suspicion, of otherness, of the fear that some people are drawing on a power that runs outside the sanctioned channels. Mary Parker wasn't drawing on any such power. She was drawing on knowledge, which is a different thing entirely, though the people who feared her never quite grasped the distinction.

The man who killed her was named Jared Dalton.

Dalton's family had been struggling — illness, bad harvests, the particular run of misfortune that visits every farming family sooner or later and that human beings, then as now, find almost impossible to accept as simple bad luck. Someone, Dalton decided, was responsible. Someone had put a hand on his family's fate and turned it in the wrong direction.

He decided that someone was Mary Parker.

There was no evidence. There never is, in stories like this one, because the accusation doesn't require evidence — it requires a story that feels true, a shape that fits the misfortune, a face to put to the thing you can't explain. Dalton had his story. He had his shape. He had Mary Parker's face.

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On Mary's sixty-third birthday, he lured her to the edge of town and killed her.

He left her body under a pile of stones.

He was eventually tried for the crime, and in a remarkable turn that says something uncomfortable about the frontier justice of the era, he received a pardon. The argument made on his behalf — and accepted — was essentially that he had genuinely believed she was a witch, and that this belief, however mistaken, constituted a kind of mitigating circumstance.

Mary Parker got no such consideration.

She got a pile of stones and a story that the town told itself for a generation, quietly, and then stopped telling because the story made them feel bad about what they had and hadn't done.

But the land around Rockville remembered.

The land always remembers.

[Narrator: A pause here. Not a long one — just a breath. Then, shifting into the present tense, into the story proper:]

The bridge at Rockville has been there in one form or another since the settlers first needed to cross the Virgin River, and it has been the site of the most persistent Mary Parker sightings for as long as anyone has been keeping track of such things. People see her at dusk, mostly. An old woman, sitting on a rock or standing at the roadside, wearing dark clothing in the style of the previous century. Sometimes she is still. Sometimes she is walking — slowly, with the deliberate gait of someone who has no particular reason to hurry because she has been waiting a very long time already and a few more minutes make no difference.

The sightings share certain details. She is always alone. She never speaks first. And if you approach her, or if she approaches you, there is always a moment — just before you get close enough to see her face clearly — when something in the air changes. A drop in temperature. The particular quality of silence that settles when every living thing within earshot has simultaneously decided to hold very still.

Most people who see her leave quickly.

DON JONES

A rancher named Cal did not leave quickly, and what happened to him has been told in Rockville and the surrounding country for over forty years.

Cal had lived his whole life in that part of the Virgin River valley. He knew the roads and the trails and the river crossings with the intimacy of a man who has traveled the same ground in every season and every kind of weather since he was old enough to be put on a horse. He was not, by his own accounting or anyone else's, a superstitious man. He knew the Mary Parker stories the way everyone in the area knew them — as local color, as the kind of thing you told to visitors and newcomers with a certain performative relish — but he did not believe them in any serious way.

He was riding home one October evening — the last of the light going behind the canyon walls, the air beginning to carry the cold that comes down off the plateau after sunset — when he saw her.

She was sitting on a flat rock at the side of the trail, maybe thirty yards ahead of him, facing away. An old woman in dark clothes, her posture upright, her hands in her lap. Perfectly still in the way that people are perfectly still when they're either very calm or very cold.

Cal's horse slowed without being asked to.

He noticed that. He noticed it the way you notice a thing that your body has registered before your mind has caught up — the way a horse that knows the country sometimes knows something you don't yet. The animal moved forward reluctantly, placing its feet carefully, its ears working with a focused attention it didn't usually bother with on a trail it had traveled a hundred times.

Cal looked at the woman on the rock.

She was holding something in her lap. He couldn't make it out at first — the light was going and his eyes weren't what they used to be. Something small. Wrapped.

As he drew closer, he could see it more clearly.

A gift.

A small package, wrapped in cloth and tied with a piece of cord,

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the kind of homemade bundle you'd put together for a birthday or a holiday. She was holding it in both hands in her lap, the way you hold something you've been looking forward to giving.

Cal pulled his horse to a stop a few yards away.

"Evening," he said. The word came out quieter than he intended.

She didn't answer.

He tried again. "You all right, ma'am? It's getting dark."

Nothing. She sat with her back to him, the gift in her hands, the canyon walls rising around them both in the fading light.

His horse took one more step forward and then stopped again, planting its feet with a finality that Cal, in thirty years of riding, had learned to respect.

He looked at the woman's hands.

They were the hands of an old woman — veined, thin-fingered, the skin loose over the knuckles. But the way they held the gift was the way you hold something when you've been holding it for a long time. Not casually. Not loosely. With the specific grip of someone who has been waiting to give this particular thing to a particular person and is tired of waiting.

She had been sitting on that rock for a hundred and forty years.

The thought arrived in Cal's mind fully formed, without preamble. Not a conclusion he had reasoned his way to — a fact, delivered from somewhere below reason.

"Mary," he said.

He didn't know why he said it. The name wasn't something he had been thinking about. It came out the way names sometimes come out — summoned by something you're not consciously doing.

She turned.

[Narrator: Absolute stillness here. No movement. Hold eye contact with someone across the fire. Then, very slowly, very quietly:]

She turned to face him, and the thing about her face was not that it was frightening.

It was that it was so utterly, completely ordinary.

The face of a sixty-three-year-old woman. Lines around the eyes, deep ones, the kind that come from decades of squinting into desert sun. A broad, composed expression — not peaceful, not serene, but the

expression of someone who has had a great deal of time to come to terms with something and has mostly managed it. Her eyes were dark. They were entirely human.

And they were looking at him with an expression he could only describe, afterward, as recognition. As if she had been expecting not him specifically, but someone. As if visitors, over the years, had been arriving at this rock, one at a time, and she had been noting each of them and finding them not quite right, not quite who she was waiting for.

She held out the gift.

Cal did not take it.

He sat on his horse and looked at her face and at the wrapped bundle in her outstretched hands and he thought about what he knew. About the pile of stones. About the birthday. About a woman who had lived alone and tended her garden and known which plants eased a fever and been killed for it on the same day she turned sixty-three years old, in the very canyon where he was currently sitting on a very reluctant horse at dusk.

He thought: she just wants someone to take it.

She just wants someone to come to her party.

And some part of him — the part that was already reaching forward in the saddle, already thinking about what it would mean to take that bundle from those cold, patient hands — that part wanted to give her what she wanted.

His horse moved.

Backward.

Two steps, then three, pulling away from the rock with a quiet insistence that broke the moment as cleanly as a snapped thread. Cal straightened in the saddle. He looked at the woman on the rock. She had lowered the gift back to her lap. She was watching him with the same composed, patient expression — not hurt, not angry. Just waiting.

Still waiting.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He meant it.

He turned his horse and rode home.

Cal told that story for the rest of his life. Not often — it wasn't the kind of story you told at every dinner table — but at certain times, to certain people, he would describe the October evening and the woman on the rock and the gift in her hands and what he had almost done.

He always said the same thing at the end of it.

He said: "I don't know what would have happened if I'd taken it. I've thought about it for forty years and I still don't know. Maybe nothing. Maybe something."

And then he'd pause, and he'd look at whoever he was telling the story to, and he'd say: "But I'll tell you one thing. She wasn't what they said she was. She was just a woman who got robbed of everything and never quite got over it. And honestly?" He'd shake his head slowly.

"Can you blame her?"

The bridge at Rockville still stands.

The rock beside the trail is still there.

And every October — around a birthday that a town once refused to celebrate — travelers on that road sometimes see an old woman sitting alone at dusk, holding something small and wrapped in both hands.

Waiting for someone who'll finally stay.

[Narrator: Let the fire crackle into the silence. This one doesn't need a sharp jump — it's been building to something quieter than that. But the audience has relaxed, which means the moment is right. Lean in close to whoever is nearest and — very softly, right in their ear —]

BOO!

[After the laughter: no coda this time. Just let the story sit. Sometimes the fire says the rest.]

THE MISTS OF MOON LAKE

THERE IS a lake in the Uinta Mountains called Moon Lake.

[Narrator: Open with a light touch — almost dreamily, like you're remembering a place you love. The beauty of Moon Lake is real and you want the audience to feel it before the story takes it away from them. The dread should creep in the way mist creeps in — slowly, from the edges, until you're in it before you noticed it arriving.]

It sits at eight thousand feet in a glacial basin surrounded by lodgepole pine and aspen, fed by the south fork of the Duchesne River, cupped in a bowl of granite and old moraine like something precious held in two hands. On a calm morning, before the wind comes up, the surface is the kind of still that makes the word mirror inadequate — it's more than a reflection, it's a doubling, as if there are two mountains and two skies and the water is simply the place where they meet.

People have been coming to Moon Lake for generations to fish and camp and let the altitude and the quiet do what altitude and quiet do to a person who has been living too long at speed. It is, by any measure, one of the most beautiful places in Utah.

It is also one of the strangest.

DON JONES

The strangeness has two parts, and they have been tangled together for so long that it's impossible now to separate them — like two vines that started on opposite sides of a fence and met in the middle and grew into each other until you couldn't say where one ended and the other began.

The first part is the thing in the water.

The second part is the girl on the shore.

They call it Moonie.

Not a frightening name, really — more affectionate than threatening, the kind of name a community gives to something it has decided to live with rather than fear. Moonie has been sighted at Moon Lake for as long as anyone has been keeping records of such things, and the sightings follow a consistent pattern: a V-shaped ripple moving across the center of the lake, slow and purposeful, in the early morning when the mist is still on the water. Not the ripple of a fish, not the wake of a bird. Something larger, moving just below the surface, displacing water in the way that large things displace water — without hurry, without drama, simply going somewhere.

What it is, nobody has ever established.

The lake is deep — surprisingly deep for a mountain lake of its size, with sections that have never been reliably sounded. The water is cold enough year-round to preserve things, to keep things, to hold whatever lives in the darkness of its lower depths entirely hidden from the surface world. People have been trying to photograph the ripple for decades. The ripple appears, the cameras come out, and the ripple goes.

Moonie is shy.

Or Moonie is patient.

Those are different things, and which one it is matters considerably.

[Narrator: A slight shift here — a little quieter, a little more careful:]

The girl is a different matter.

She has been seen at Moon Lake for as long as Moonie has — the

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same generations of campers and fishermen who noticed the V-shaped ripple also noticed, sooner or later, the figure on the shore. Always on the north shore, where the trees come close to the water and the bank is rocky and the mist collects in the early morning. Always alone. Always in a white dress that the witnesses universally describe as too clean, too bright — white in the way that nothing that has been near a mountain lake for any length of time stays white.

She stands at the water's edge and looks out toward the center of the lake.

She never looks at the people watching her.

She never looks anywhere but out.

Nobody knows who she is. There are stories — a girl who drowned in the lake decades ago, a child separated from her family on a camping trip and never found, a spirit native to the basin who has watched over the water since before the first human being climbed to this elevation and looked down at the doubling surface and thought it beautiful. The stories are different in their details but consistent in one thing:

She is waiting for something to come back from the deep water.

And whatever it is, it hasn't come back yet.

The Kowalski family — parents, two kids, a dog of advanced years and diminished energy — arrived at Moon Lake on a Thursday evening in August and set up their camp in the trees on the north shore, which had the best shade and the easiest water access and which the campground host recommended without hesitation.

They had a good first night. The kids fished off the bank and caught two things that might technically have been trout. The dog located a dead bird and had to be redirected. The parents sat in camp chairs and watched the light leave the mountains and felt, for the first time in months, like people rather than schedules.

In the morning, the mist was on the lake.

The older child — a girl of eleven named Petra, who had her father's habit of waking before everyone else and her mother's habit of

doing whatever she wanted until someone stopped her — was up at first light. She pulled on her jacket and her boots and walked the thirty yards from the tent to the water's edge, where she stood in the mist and watched the lake and felt the particular satisfaction of being the only person awake in a quiet place.

That was when she saw the other girl.

Standing twenty feet away along the bank, at the exact edge of the water, in a white dress.

Petra's first thought was entirely practical: she felt a pang of territorial irritation at not being alone after all. Her second thought, arriving a beat later, was that the dress was strange. Nobody camped in a white dress. And the girl's feet were bare, which at eight thousand feet in August at six in the morning was a choice that would have been uncomfortable at best.

Her third thought never quite finished forming, because that was when she noticed that the girl wasn't breathing.

Not in any dramatic way — no suspended animation, no held breath. Just the simple absence of the small movements that breathing makes in a person: the rise and fall of the shoulders, the slight shift of the ribcage, the unconscious adjustments that a living body makes because it is alive and therefore always in subtle motion. The girl in the white dress was perfectly, absolutely still. The way a photograph is still.

The mist moved around her.

She did not.

Petra stood very quietly and looked at the girl the way you look at something when you're not sure whether it's seen you yet. And after a moment the girl raised one hand — slowly, without turning — and pointed.

Out toward the center of the lake.

Toward the mist.

Petra looked.

In the center of the lake, barely visible through the mist, the water was moving. Not the surface chop of wind — there was no wind. Something deeper than that: a slow, circular disturbance, a subtle lifting of the water at the center as if something below was rising,

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drawing upward toward the surface with the patient, inexorable momentum of something very large that has been a long way down and is on its way back up.

The V-shaped ripple began to form.

Moving toward shore.

Moving toward them.

[Narrator: Slow right down. Nearly a whisper. This is the still point of the whole story.]

Petra took a step back from the water's edge.

The girl in the white dress turned her head.

Not all the way — not to look at Petra. Just enough to show her profile against the mist: the straight line of a child's nose, the curve of a cheek, the suggestion of an expression that Petra, years later, would still not be able to name with any confidence. It wasn't fear. It wasn't grief. It was something more like the expression of a person standing at a train platform who has been waiting a very long time and has just heard, in the distance, the sound that means the train is finally coming.

Anticipation.

The ripple was thirty feet from shore.

Twenty.

The water around its leading edge had taken on a quality that Petra noticed without having the vocabulary for — a pressure, a density, the sense of something displacing a great deal of water simply by being the size it was. The mist above the ripple swirled and parted.

Petra took another step back.

And another.

The girl in the white dress did not move.

Petra turned and ran back to the tent.

She woke her father. She pulled him out into the grey morning and pointed down at the shore.

The mist was thick now, lying flat on the water all the way to the bank.

The north shore was empty.

The lake was still.

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Her father stood in his camp sandals and squinted at the water and said, with the patience of a parent who has been woken early before, "There's nothing there, Pete."

Petra looked at the waterline.

At the edge of the lake, right at the point where the rocky bank met the water, she could see two shallow depressions in the soft silt. Small. Spaced about a foot apart. The impressions a child's bare feet would make if a child had been standing there, perfectly still, for a very long time.

No other marks around them. No trail leading to them or away from them. Just those two prints at the water's edge, and the flat grey water beyond, and the mist that was already beginning to thin as the sun came up over the rim of the basin.

And in the center of the lake — just barely visible, just before the mist dissolved entirely — a V-shaped ripple, moving slowly away from shore.

Going back.

Going deep.

[Narrator: Let the story rest in the silence for a long moment. Look out into the dark beyond the fire — toward any water you might be near. Let people follow your gaze. Then, when you feel someone begin to relax —]

BOO!

[After the noise settles, finish with the coda slowly, as if you're still half-watching the dark:]

The Kowalski family packed up the following morning and moved to a different campsite on the south shore.

Petra never talked about what she saw. Not to her parents, not to her friends. For years the memory sat in her the way certain memories sit — not painful, not frightening exactly, but weighty. Real in a way that resisted the ordinary erosion of time.

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She went back to Moon Lake when she was twenty-four. Alone, on purpose, in August. She camped on the north shore.

On the second morning she woke before dawn and walked to the water.

The mist was on the lake.

She stood at the bank for a long time.

The girl in the white dress was not there.

The center of the lake was still.

Petra stood in the mist and watched the water and breathed the cold mountain air and felt — she would tell you this if you asked her — not disappointed exactly. More like the feeling you get when you return to a place that was once charged with something and find that the charge has moved on.

Whatever the girl was waiting for, she was still waiting.

Whatever Moonie was, it was still down there.

And the lake was just a lake.

Until the mist moved.

And the water changed.

And something, very far below the surface, began to rise.

THE SOBBING OF THE MEADOWS

NOTE that this story is based on a darker portion of our history. It's not really a controversial story, but it can be pretty sobering—and scary.

There are places in this world where the ground itself carries grief.

[Narrator: This one requires a different kind of gravity from the start. Not spooky — solemn. You are about to talk about something real, something that happened to real people, and the audience should feel that weight before the ghost story begins. Speak slowly. Speak carefully. The horror here is historical before it is supernatural.]

Not metaphorically. Not as a figure of speech. Literally — where something happened so terrible, in a place so specific, that the land absorbed it the way stone absorbs heat, and has been releasing it slowly ever since, year by year, decade by decade, in the particular way that places remember what people would rather forget.

Mountain Meadows is one of those places.

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It sits in a shallow valley in the high country southwest of Cedar City, at about five thousand feet, surrounded by the kind of rolling scrub-covered hills that look peaceful from a distance and feel, when you stand in the center of the meadow, like walls.

It is a beautiful place. It has always been a beautiful place. The emigrants who passed through it in September of 1857 thought so — thought it a welcome resting ground after the long, hard crossing from the east, a place of good grass and clean water where they could let their cattle graze and mend their wagon wheels and prepare for the final leg of the journey to California.

They stopped there on the second of September.

The survivors — the children too young to be considered witnesses — left on the thirteenth.

One hundred and twenty men, women, and children did not leave at all.

The Mountain Meadows Massacre is one of the darkest events in the history of the American West, and it remains, more than a hundred and sixty years later, a wound that has not entirely closed. The Fancher-Baker party — emigrants from Arkansas, traveling to California — were attacked over a period of days by a combination of local militia and others, manipulated by the fear and fury of a region that believed itself under siege. On the final day, the emigrants were persuaded to surrender their arms and walk out of their fortified camp under a flag of truce.

The truce was a trap.

They were killed in the meadow, in the open, on a clear September morning, within sight of the mountains and the grass and the sky they had come so far to reach.

Only one man was ever tried and executed for the crime. His name was John D. Lee — a militia leader who participated in the massacre and who spent the twenty years between the event and his execution attempting, in various ways, to justify what could not be justified and to escape a consequence that was, in the end, unavoidable.

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He was shot by firing squad at Mountain Meadows in 1877, in the very meadow where it happened, sitting on the edge of his own coffin.

The graves of the victims are marked now — a stone cairn, a federal monument, a quiet place where visitors come to pay their respects and the wind moves the grass and the hills stand around it all, still as witnesses who have seen everything and said nothing for a very long time.

Not nothing.

Not quite nothing.

[Narrator: Pause here. A real pause — ten full seconds. Look at the fire. Then look up.]

The reports have been coming in for as long as anyone has been keeping track of such things, and probably long before that.

Wagons.

The sound of wagons — wheels and harness and the creak of heavy wooden beds — rolling across the meadow when no wagons are there. Heard most often at dusk, coming from the direction of the old emigrant trail, moving toward the center of the valley. Heard by people who don't know the history of the place, who have stopped to look at the monument or to stretch their legs on a drive, who ask afterward if there's a ranch nearby, if there's a living history demonstration, if someone is filming something.

There never is.

And the sobbing.

Low, persistent, sourceless — described consistently by people who have never compared notes with each other, in accounts spanning decades, as coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. Not a single voice. Many. The sound of grief that has been going on for a long time and has not diminished with the years, the way real grief doesn't diminish — it just becomes the texture of the place, woven into the air above the meadow the way the smell of sage is woven into the air.

And, near the cairn, a man.

Sitting. Sometimes standing. Dressed in the clothes of the 1870s. A

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heavysset man, going to grey, with the posture of someone carrying a weight that has become so familiar he no longer stands fully upright beneath it. He is always alone. He is always near the cairn. And the people who have seen him close enough to describe his expression use the same words, over and over, regardless of when they saw him or whether they knew anything about the history of the man he appears to be.

They say he looks like a man who is sorry.

And who knows that sorry is not enough.

And who cannot leave.



Her name was Frances, and she was a historian — not an academic, not a professor, but the serious amateur kind, the kind who spends her weekends in county archives and her evenings reading primary sources and who has developed, over twenty years of this, a finely calibrated sense for the difference between the places where history is documented and the places where history is felt.

She had wanted to visit Mountain Meadows for years. Not for the ghost stories — she was professionally skeptical of ghost stories, in the way that people who work with primary sources tend to be skeptical of anything that can't be cited. She wanted to stand in the place where it happened. To understand the geography. To feel the scale of it, the way you can't feel the scale of a historical event until you've stood in the space it occupied.

She drove out on a Thursday afternoon in late September — almost exactly the anniversary, though she hadn't planned it that way. The meadow was empty when she arrived. No other visitors. The monument gleaming in the late sun. The hills around it amber-green with the last of the summer's growth, the sky above them the deep, saturated blue of high-elevation September.

She stood at the cairn and read the names.

There are a hundred and twenty of them. She read every one.

It took a while. The sun moved. The light changed. By the time she reached the last name on the last panel of the monument, the shadows

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of the surrounding hills had crept halfway across the meadow floor and the air had gone from warm to cool in the way September air does at altitude — not gradually, but all at once, as if a door had been opened somewhere to the north.

She stepped back from the monument.

And heard the wagons.

Coming from the east — from the direction of the old trail, from over the low rise of the eastern hill. The creak and roll of heavy wheels on uneven ground, the jingle of harness, the particular rhythmic percussion of a wagon train moving at walking pace. Clear. Specific. Unmistakably the sound of what it was.

Frances stood very still.

The sound came closer. Over the hill and into the meadow, rolling toward her across the grass, though the grass itself did not move, though no wheel rut appeared in the soft earth, though there was nothing to see in the direction the sound was coming from but the hill and the sky and the long September shadow.

She was a historian. She reached for her phone to record it.

Her hands were shaking.

The wagons — the sound of them, the echo of them, the memory of them preserved in that valley like an insect in amber — rolled past her and into the center of the meadow and stopped.

And in the silence after they stopped, the sobbing began.

[Narrator: Almost a whisper now. Slow every word down.]

Not one voice. Dozens. All around her — not loud, not overwhelming, but present, woven into the air the way she'd read it described in the accounts, everywhere and nowhere, sourceless. The sound of people who have been weeping for a very long time.

Frances did not run.

She has thought about that since — why she didn't run, why she stood in the center of that meadow with her phone recording sound that she already knew would not play back on any device, surrounded by the sobbing of a hundred and twenty people who had stopped in

this exact spot on a September afternoon a hundred and sixty years ago and never gotten back in their wagons.

She thinks it was because running felt wrong.

They had not been able to run.

She stood in the meadow and she listened, and after a while she became aware of something else — a presence, separate from the general grief that saturated the place. A specific weight, close by. She turned, slowly.

He was standing near the cairn.

Just as described. Heavy-set, grey-haired, dressed in the manner of another century, standing near the stone marker with the posture of a man who has stood in this spot before and will stand here again. He was looking at the ground. His hands hung at his sides.

Frances looked at him.

He raised his head.

And the expression on his face was exactly what the others had said it was — a sorrow so practiced, so thoroughly inhabited, that it had become the man's whole physiognomy. There was nothing else in that face. Not anger, not defiance, not any of the rationalizations that the historical record suggests he spent his living years constructing. Just sorrow. Bare and total and without any relief in sight.

He looked at her the way a man looks at someone he needs something from and knows he has no right to ask.

The sobbing around them swelled.

Frances took a step toward him.

She said: "I know who you are."

His mouth moved. No sound came — or not any sound she could separate from the sobbing, which had risen now until it was the whole atmosphere of the place, until it was the sky and the grass and the cold air and the shadows of the hills all speaking at once.

She said: "They're still here."

A statement, not a question. She could hear them. He could hear them. They had both been hearing them since before she arrived, and would hear them after she left, and the difference between them was that she could leave.

He could not.

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The figure at the cairn looked at her for one more long moment.
Then he looked down at the names on the stone.
And Frances turned and walked back to her car.
She drove away from Mountain Meadows in the last of the
September light, and she did not look back, not because she was afraid
of what she'd see, but because she had seen enough.
She had come to understand the geography.
She understood it now.
Some places hold their history like a fist.
Mountain Meadows will not be letting go.

[Narrator: A long pause here. The longest in the whole night. Let the
fire do its work. Then, when the silence has settled all the way in and
someone has exhaled and the group has relaxed — not a shout, not a
lunge. Instead: lean forward slowly, and in a voice barely above a
whisper, say the next word directly into the ear of the person nearest
you —]

BOO!

[After the laughter — and there will be laughter, because the tension
needed somewhere to go — let it fully settle before you add the final
lines. Quietly. Almost to yourself:]

The monument at Mountain Meadows is maintained by the federal
government.
It is open to the public, every day.
People go there to pay their respects, to read the names, to stand in
the place and try to understand.
Most of them visit in the middle of the day.
Very few of them are there at dusk.
The ones who are rarely come back.
Not because they're frightened.
Because once is enough.
Once is more than enough.

THE GHOST OF OLD IRON TOWN

THERE IS a ghost town in the cedar forest west of Cedar City that most people have never heard of.

[Narrator: This one starts with wonder before it turns to dread. Old Iron Town is a place of real, strange history — an industrial ghost town swallowed by the desert — and that strangeness should come through in your voice at the start. Curious. Almost enthusiastic. Let the audience feel the pull of the place before they feel the fear of it.]

Not a tourist ghost town. Not the kind with a gift shop and a walking tour and a sign explaining what each crumbling foundation once was. This one is genuine — genuinely abandoned, genuinely forgotten by everyone except the historians and the hikers and the occasional curious driver who turns off the highway onto a dirt road and follows it until the trees close in and the ruts get deep and the modern world falls away behind them like a coat shrugged off in a warm room.

It is called Old Iron Town.

Or Iron City. Or, in the sparse historical record that documents its brief and troubled existence, simply The Iron Works.

It was Utah's first real industrial settlement — established in 1868, abandoned by 1876, eight years of hammering human ambition against one of the most indifferent landscapes in the American West and losing. The founders had found iron ore in the volcanic rock of the Markagunt, had hauled in equipment and timber and men from distant places, had built blast furnaces and a foundry and a row of beehive charcoal kilns that still stand today — great domed structures of pale stone, silent and strange in the cedar forest, like the eggs of some enormous vanished creature.

For eight years, the furnaces burned.

Then the ore ran thin, and the investors ran cold, and the men took what they could carry and left everything else — the kilns, the furnace walls, the ruins of the schoolhouse and the company store and the modest houses of the workers — to the desert and the centuries.

And something stayed behind with the ruins.

Something that was there, the miners said, even before the town was abandoned.

Even before the town was built.

The accounts began early. The first workers to arrive in the cedar forest, cutting timber and clearing ground for the construction, reported hearing music at night.

Not faint music. Not the kind of distant, ambiguous sound that tired men convince themselves they hear in the wind after weeks in the wilderness. Brass band music — full and clear and carrying across the forest with the unhesitating confidence of a band that knows it has an audience. Marches, mostly. The kind of sturdy, stomping music that said: we are here, we are organized, we have dressed up for this occasion.

There was no band.

The nearest settlement with any musicians was Cedar City, miles away. The sound had no source that any search party ever found, and several search parties looked, because the alternative — that the music was simply there, in the forest, belonging to nothing and no one —

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was an alternative that men building a rational industrial enterprise in the middle of the desert preferred not to entertain.

They entertained it anyway, in the end. They had no choice.

The music played on the nights the furnaces ran hot, when the glow of the ironworks lit the undersides of the cedar branches in shifting orange and the smoke rose into the dark sky and the whole enterprise looked, from a distance, like something that had no business being out here in the first place.

It played on the quiet nights too, when the furnaces were banked and the workers were in their beds and the forest was as still as the forest gets when it's listening to itself.

And it played on the last night — the night the final shift of workers loaded the last of their belongings onto wagons and prepared to leave for good — with a brightness and a clarity that several of them would describe, in letters home written years later, as the most beautiful and most frightening thing they had ever heard.

As if whatever was out there in the cedars was glad to see them go.
And had been waiting, patiently, since long before they arrived.

[Narrator: Shift here. The history gives way to the present. Your tone becomes more personal — like you know this place, like you've been there.]

The beehive kilns are the part of Old Iron Town that people remember.

There are three of them, standing in a row at the edge of the ruins, each one about twenty-five feet tall and perfectly hemispherical — corbelled stone domes with a small opening at the base just large enough to crawl through, built by hand over a hundred and fifty years ago by men who were trying to turn cedar wood into charcoal for the furnaces. They worked. The kilns worked, the furnaces worked, the iron came out of the rock as intended.

Standing in front of them now, in the silence of the cedar forest, you can feel that they still work — that something in their particular architecture, in the geometry of the stone and the space enclosed

within, conducts whatever is present in this place with a focused efficiency.

Sound, for instance.

If you stand between two of the kilns and speak in a normal voice, your words come back to you from unexpected directions, fractured by the curved stone into overlapping echoes that sound briefly, uncannily, like other voices answering.

Or not so briefly.

Or not so uncannily.

Depending on who you ask.

His name was Owen, and he had driven out to Old Iron Town on a whim — one of those Saturday afternoons when the weather is good and the alternative is staying home, and the idea of standing among ruins in a forest sounds better than either of the sensible options.

He arrived in the mid-afternoon, parked at the end of the dirt road, and spent an hour wandering the site with a sense of satisfaction at having found something genuinely remote and genuinely strange. The kilns. The furnace walls. The foundations of buildings that the cedar trees had been slowly, methodically reclaiming for a hundred and fifty years. The profound quiet of a place that was once loud — hammers and bellows and the roar of burning iron — and is now entirely, weightily silent.

He found the schoolhouse as the afternoon light began its late shift toward amber.

It was the most intact of the structures — or rather, the least ruined. Three walls still standing to something near their original height, the fourth collapsed into a long low mound of dressed stone. The interior was open to the sky, filled with the cedar saplings that had found their way through the stone floor and the pale grass that grew where thirty children had once sat at wooden desks and learned their letters and looked out windows that no longer existed at a forest that had barely changed in the intervening century and a half.

Owen stepped through the gap where the door had been.

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He stopped.

The air inside the three standing walls was different. He noticed it immediately — a quality of stillness that was distinct from the stillness outside, more concentrated, as if the walls were doing something to the air they enclosed beyond merely surrounding it. Holding it. Keeping it.

He stood in the middle of what had been the schoolroom floor and looked around.

Grass. Cedar saplings. The collapsed fourth wall. The long amber light coming over the standing walls from the west, throwing deep shadows across the interior. A piece of twisted iron half-buried in the corner that had probably been part of a stove. The distant — very distant, barely perceptible — sound of the wind in the cedar tops outside the walls.

And then, without preamble, the bell.

A single clear note — a school bell, unmistakably, with the particular round, carrying quality of cast iron struck once and allowed to ring out. It came from above — from where the bell tower had been, where now there was only open sky and the tops of the cedars. It rang once, and the echo of it moved through the three standing walls and bounced between them and faded, and was followed by a silence that was somehow more complete than the silence before it.

Owen looked up at the empty sky where the bell tower had been.

He looked back down.

The schoolroom had changed.

[Narrator: Very quiet now. Measured. Every word placed deliberately, like stones.]

Not dramatically. Not the way a room changes in a dream, all at once, into something unrecognizable. The walls were the same walls. The grass was the same grass. The amber light still came over the western wall at the same angle.

But the room was occupied.

They were seated in rows — children, their shapes visible in the particular way that shapes are visible at the edge of perception, not

solid, not transparent, something in between. The suggestion of small bodies in the arrangement that small bodies make when they have been told to sit still and face forward. Facing forward — facing the collapsed fourth wall, the wall that had been the front of the room, the wall where the blackboard would have been.

Owen could not count them. Every time he tried to count, his eyes slid away from the attempt, the way your eyes slide away from the sun. He got the impression of perhaps twenty. Perhaps thirty. Children of various sizes, the smaller ones toward the front in the way of schoolrooms everywhere and always.

None of them were looking at him.

They were all looking at the front of the room.

Where the teacher stood.

He was tall — taller than the children made him seem at first, taller than Owen had time to fully register before other details arrived. The dark coat. The careful posture of someone accustomed to being observed. The hands clasped behind his back, the chin slightly raised, the whole bearing of a man who believes in what he is doing and intends to do it whether anyone is watching or not.

He was writing on the collapsed wall.

On the stones and the rubble and the grass that filled the space where the blackboard had been, his hand moved in the steady, deliberate strokes of a man forming letters — large letters, the kind you make when you want to be certain the children in the back row can read them. Owen could not see what was written. The light was wrong, or his eyes were wrong, or the letters were in a register that his vision couldn't quite resolve.

The teacher stopped writing.

He turned.

And the children turned with him — all of them, all at once, the way children turn when the teacher turns, following that authority automatically, without being asked.

They were all looking at Owen now.

The teacher's face was not frightening in its individual features. It was the eyes that were wrong — not in their color or their shape, but in their quality. The quality of eyes that have been looking at the same

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room, the same desks, the same students, for a hundred and fifty years without the room or the desks or the students changing at all, without any new thing arriving to interrupt the lesson.

Until now.

Until Owen.

The teacher reached into the pocket of his dark coat.

He produced a watch.

He opened it. He looked at it with the practiced economy of a man who has checked the time ten thousand times and knows immediately what the hands say. He snapped it shut.

He looked at Owen.

And he began to walk toward him.

Not fast. The measured pace of a man with the authority of the room behind him, the children behind him, the bell and the walls and the whole architecture of his domain behind him. The pace of a man who does not need to hurry because you are in his space and he simply needs to arrive at you.

The children watched in silence.

The amber light held.

The teacher was ten feet away. Eight. Five. And his eyes were fixed on Owen's with an expression that was, in its way, the most terrifying thing about the entire encounter — not rage, not menace, not the supernatural fury of a wronged spirit.

Curiosity.

The focused, evaluating curiosity of a teacher who has just encountered a student he has never seen before and is making up his mind.

About whether there is room in the class.

Owen ran.

He will tell you, if you ask him, that he is not proud of this. He will tell you he is a grown man who ran out of a ruin in a cedar forest at full speed and did not slow down until he reached his car, and that he drove back to Cedar City without stopping, and that he sat in a diner on Main Street for an hour over a cup of coffee that he barely tasted, staring at the table.

He will also tell you something else.

He will tell you that as he ran through the door — through the gap

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in the wall where the door had been — he heard the brass band start up in the cedars.

A march.

Bright and full and carrying through the trees with absolute confidence.

And that it sounded, somehow, like applause.

[Narrator: Let the story settle. A good long pause — look into the fire, look up at the trees around you. Then, as though an afterthought just crossed your mind, turn to the nearest person with casual interest and —]

BOO!

[After the commotion fades, lean back. Relaxed. Conversational:]

The beehive kilns at Old Iron Town are a Utah State Historic Site.

The site is open to visitors.

The schoolhouse ruins are accessible on foot from the main parking area.

The state asks only that you stay on the trail, respect the ruins, and take nothing with you when you leave.

They don't mention the bell.

They don't mention the teacher.

Go in the middle of the day.

Leave before the amber light.

THE LIBRARIAN'S FLOATING GLASSES

LET me tell you about a particular kind of exhaustion.

[Narrator: Open with the warm, slightly conspiratorial tone of someone sharing insider knowledge. This story lives in a very specific world — the world of late-night libraries, of academic desperation, of the particular intimacy between a student and the books they need at two in the morning. Make the audience feel that world before anything goes wrong in it.]

Not the good kind — not the honest tiredness of a hard day's physical work, the kind you take to bed like a medal. I mean the specific, grinding exhaustion of a student at the end of a semester, when every resource in the body has been redirected toward keeping one project, one paper, one impossible deadline alive, and everything else — sleep, food, the memory of what sunlight feels like — has been quietly deprioritized.

In that state, the library becomes a different place than it is in ordinary hours.

You know it during the day as a functional space — bright, navigable, full of other people going purposefully about their research. But at

one in the morning, at two, at three, when the overhead lights have been dimmed to their overnight setting and the circulation desk is unstaffed and the only other people in the building are the handful of others as desperate as you are — at those hours, the library becomes something more like a living thing. The stacks breathe. The silence has texture. The books on the shelves seem less like objects and more like presences, each one containing the compressed attention of whoever wrote it and whoever read it and every pair of eyes that has moved across those particular pages since they were first bound.

The Gerald R. Sherratt Library at Southern Utah University is a building that takes this quality seriously.

Especially on the third floor.

Especially after midnight.

Especially in the northwest corner, near the periodical archives, where the fluorescent light in the third bay from the end has been flickering since approximately 2003 and maintenance has been meaning to fix it ever since.

Her name was Edith Crane, and she was the head librarian at what was then the Branch Normal School — the institution that would eventually become Southern Utah University — from 1913 until her death in 1951.

Thirty-eight years.

Thirty-eight years of knowing every book in the collection by its position on the shelf, every student by their reading habits, every faculty member by the slightly guilty expression they wore when they returned something three weeks overdue. Thirty-eight years of maintaining, against the persistent pressure of underfunding and understaffing and the general indifference of an institution that considered the library a support service rather than its beating heart, a collection that she believed — with the fierce, unapologetic conviction of someone who has staked their life on a position — was the most important thing on campus.

She was not wrong.

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Edith Crane wore, throughout her career, a pair of wire-rimmed reading glasses on a chain around her neck. This detail appears in every account of her — in the memories of students who knew her, in the few photographs that survive, in the campus newspaper obituary that described her as 'formidable, fair, and possessed of a gaze that could be deployed, over the top of her spectacles, with the precision and effect of a surgical instrument.'

When she died in 1951, the glasses were not found among her effects.

No one thought much about this at the time.

They thought about it later.

[Narrator: A slight shift here — from history to testimony. As if you're now reading from a series of accounts.]

The first sighting was reported in 1957, six years after Edith's death, by a student who was working late in the periodical section and looked up from her notes to see a pair of wire-rimmed glasses hovering at approximately head height in the aisle between the stacks, with no face behind them.

She did not report this to the librarian on duty. She reported it to her roommate, who told two other people, who told four more, and within a week it had become the kind of campus story that gets attached to a place and never quite detaches.

The next sighting came in 1962. Then 1969. Then a cluster in the mid-seventies, when the library moved into its current building and the northwest corner of the third floor — which happened to be where the periodical archives were relocated — began accumulating its specific reputation. A reputation for the glasses. Always the same: wire-rimmed, small-lensed, hanging in the air of the stacks at the height a woman of five-foot-three would wear them on a chain around her neck, with nothing visible above or below them.

Always in the periodical section.

Always in the northwest corner.

Always between the hours of eleven at night and four in the morning.

And — this is the detail that separates the Edith Crane sightings from most campus ghost stories, the detail that gives them a quality beyond mere atmospheric spookiness — always in response to the same thing.

A student looking for something they cannot find.

[Narrator: Slower now. Let this build.]

His name was Aaron, and he was three days from the submission deadline of a thesis that had been fighting him for two years.

Not the writing — he was a good writer, fast and clear, the kind of student who does not labor over sentences. What was fighting him was a single source. A specific journal article, published in 1948, that he had found cited in three separate secondary sources, each of which described it as foundational to the argument he was trying to make. He needed it. Without it, a central chapter of his thesis had a gap in it that his committee would notice immediately.

The article was listed in the library catalog. It was supposed to be in the periodical archives on the third floor. He had looked for it four times over the past two weeks — in the correct location, in the adjacent locations, in the possibility that it had been misfiled, in the further possibility that it had been misfiled somewhere very creative indeed.

It was not there.

At eleven-thirty on a Tuesday night, Aaron was in the northwest corner of the third floor of the Sherratt Library for the fifth time, crouched in front of the periodical shelf, running his finger along the spines of bound journals with the focused desperation of a man who has decided that the article must be here because the alternative is that it isn't, and the alternative is not acceptable.

The fluorescent light in the third bay from the end flickered.

He ignored it.

It flickered again. Twice.

He kept reading spines.

Then the light went out entirely.

Aaron sat back on his heels in the sudden dimness, the ambient glow from the other bays giving just enough light to see by, and

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rubbed his eyes, and considered, for the first time seriously, whether he was going to have to tell his thesis committee that he could not locate a source he had promised them he had.

He heard something.

In the stacks — a sound that was not the building settling, not the HVAC system cycling, not any of the ordinary nighttime sounds a library makes when it is mostly empty and mostly dark. A soft, specific sound that he eventually identified, after a moment of puzzled listening, as pages turning.

In the dark.

In the stacks to his left, where no one was sitting.

Aaron stood up.

He looked down the dark aisle between the periodical stacks, toward the northwest corner.

The glasses were there.

[Narrator: Don't rush this. Every detail matters. Quiet, precise, like a good cataloguer.]

Wire-rimmed. Small-lensed. Hanging in the air at the height of a person's face — a short person's face, he noted, with the absurd specificity of a mind trying to impose measurement on the unmeasurable. They caught the ambient light from the next aisle and glinted faintly, two small ovals of reflected fluorescence, perfectly still.

Below them, at about waist height, a book was open.

Also suspended in the air. Also with nothing visible holding it. A bound journal, lying open in the space between the shelves, its pages — this was the source of the turning sound — turning on their own, slowly, as if being read by someone who read carefully and did not hurry.

Aaron did not move.

The pages turned. One. Another. The glasses above them did not move — fixed, attentive, the posture of someone reading something they have read many times before and know exactly where to find what they are looking for.

The pages stopped.

The journal hung open.

The glasses tilted slightly — a small, precise movement, the movement a head makes when it turns to look at someone standing in a doorway. Toward Aaron.

Aaron looked at the open journal.

His article was on the left-hand page.

Not a different article. His article — the one he had been looking for, the one cited in three secondary sources, the 1948 foundational piece that his thesis needed and that every previous search had failed to produce. He could read the title from where he stood. He could read the author's name. He could see, at the bottom of the page, the footnote numbering that matched the citations he had been working from.

The journal was from the wrong section.

It was shelved — had been shelved, before whatever was holding it had removed it — in the bay one aisle over from where Aaron had been searching. Misfiled in 1974, according to the date stamp on the inside cover that he would examine later, after his hands had stopped shaking. Misfiled and sitting in the wrong place for forty-nine years, waiting for someone to need it badly enough.

Aaron took a step forward.

The glasses rose slightly — a centimeter, maybe two — in what he interpreted, later, as acknowledgment. The specific small movement of a librarian who has found the thing you were looking for and is holding it out.

He reached out and took the journal.

The glasses descended slowly back to their original position. And then, with the unhurried deliberateness of someone who has completed a task and has a great deal of other work to return to, they turned — the tilt of attention moving away from Aaron, back to the shelves — and moved into the stacks.

And were gone.

The fluorescent light in the third bay from the end came back on.

Steady. No flicker.

Aaron stood in the northwest corner of the third floor of the Sherratt Library at eleven-forty on a Tuesday night, holding a misfiled journal

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from 1948, and he thought about Edith Crane — thirty-eight years of knowing every book in the collection, of caring about the collection the way most people care about things that breathe — and he thought that if you were going to haunt a place, this was a good place to haunt.

And if you were going to spend your afterlife doing something, you could do a lot worse than this.

He went back to his carrel and finished his thesis.

He passed his defense.

He sent a thank-you note to the library, addressed to the Special Collections department, and asked that it be placed in Edith Crane's file if one existed.

It did.

They put it there.

The Sherratt Library is open until midnight on weekdays during the academic year.

The third floor is accessible to all students.

The periodical archives are in the northwest corner.

The light in the third bay from the end still flickers sometimes.

If you are ever in that corner late at night — if you are ever desperate for something you cannot find, if you have looked in the right place and the wrong place and every place in between and the source you need is simply not where it should be —

Look up.

And if you see two small wire-rimmed lenses catching the light in the dark of the stacks, about five-foot-three from the floor —

Don't be afraid.

She's just doing her job.

[Narrator: Wait for the quiet that follows that. It's a gentler ending than most of these stories, and the audience will feel that. Let them settle into it. Let them almost smile. And then, precisely when they have relaxed all the way —]

DON JONES

BOO!

[After the laughter — and this one will get a real laugh, because the release from tension into something warm and then back into a jump is satisfying — no coda needed. Just grin. Edith would approve of the efficiency.]

THE HEADLESS HEADLIGHT

HIGHWAY 14 RUNS east from Cedar City up onto Cedar Mountain, through the Dixie National Forest, and eventually down the other side toward Long Valley and Highway 89.

[Narrator: This one starts with the road itself. Get the audience feeling the isolation of a mountain highway at night — the dark, the mist, the particular vulnerability of being in a car on a winding road with nothing outside the headlights. Casual at first, like a driving story. Almost like a joke being set up. The turn comes later.]

It is, in the daylight, a spectacular drive. The road climbs through the cedar and pinyon at the base of the plateau, then breaks out into the high country — ponderosa pine and aspen, meadows edged with wildflowers in July, the occasional view south toward the canyon country that will take your eye and hold it until you realize you've drifted toward the center line.

At night, it is a different road entirely.

The curves that were scenic in daylight become demands in the dark — tight, banked switchbacks with no shoulder and a drop on the outside edge that the guardrail only partially addresses. The forest

closes in on both sides. The headlights cut a moving cone of visibility that shows you what's directly ahead and nothing else, and what's directly ahead is always another curve, another wall of trees, another section of road that vanishes into the dark before you can see where it goes.

Mountain fog makes it worse.

Cedar Mountain collects fog the way a bowl collects rain — it sits in the low places, in the hollows and the draws, across the road in shifting banks that go from mere atmospheric to zero visibility in the space of a car's length. Locals know to slow down when the fog is up. Locals know the particular terror of the mist on Highway 14 at night.

And locals know about the headlight.

The single headlight.

The one that appears in your rearview mirror on the dark stretches and follows you home.

The story begins, as these stories do, with a death.

His name is not recorded in any version of the legend with any consistency — he is sometimes called Danny, sometimes just the Kid, sometimes not named at all. What is consistent is the outline: a young man, a motorcycle, Highway 14 at night, sometime in the early 1970s. A curve he had taken a hundred times before. A patch of fog, or gravel, or wet asphalt, depending on who is telling the story. The motorcycle going over the edge.

He was found the next morning.

The motorcycle was found with him.

His head was not.

This detail is stated flatly in every version of the legend, without elaboration, in the way that the most disturbing facts sometimes get stated flatly because that is the only way to state them. The search parties looked. The terrain on that stretch of the mountain is steep and dense and unforgiving. They did not find it.

And so the legend goes that he is still looking.

Still riding the mountain road at night.

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Still checking every car that passes, peering into every vehicle that moves through the dark, hoping that this one, this driver, this set of headlights cresting the next rise — might have found what he's been missing.

[Narrator: Shift here into the practical — the rules of the phenomenon, delivered like a briefing. Matter-of-fact. Almost helpful. Like you're preparing someone for something they might actually encounter.]

The headlight does not behave like a motorcycle.

This is the first thing everyone who has seen it says, and it is the thing that separates the people who have genuinely seen it from the people who have simply been startled by a motorcycle on a dark road. A motorcycle headlight follows the curves. It tracks the road. It rises and falls with the terrain the way a wheeled vehicle must.

This light does not do any of those things.

It appears — without warning, without the gradual brightening of an approaching vehicle — simply there, in the rearview mirror, at a distance of perhaps fifty yards. A single point of white light, round and unwavering, at the height a motorcycle headlight would be if the motorcycle were upright on the road.

It follows.

Not by tracking the road — by tracking the car. When the road curves left, the light curves left, but a beat late, a half-second behind the physics of what a wheeled vehicle should do. When the road straightens, the light straightens with it. When you accelerate, the distance holds. When you brake, the distance holds. It is always, witnesses say, exactly the same distance behind you — not gaining, not falling back. Fifty yards. Give or take.

It does not pass.

It does not turn off.

It follows you until it doesn't, which happens — and this is the part no one can explain — at a point roughly corresponding to the edge of Cedar Mountain, where the road begins its descent toward the valley. The light simply stops being there. No pullout. No side road. No explanation. One moment it is in the mirror. The next it is not.

DON JONES

As if it cannot leave the mountain.

As if what it is looking for is up here, somewhere, and it cannot go further down the road until it finds it.

Her name was Noelle, and she had been driving Highway 14 since she was sixteen years old. She had grown up in Long Valley, on the east side of Cedar Mountain, and the highway was her road — the road to Cedar City, to the university, to the rest of the world that required crossing the plateau to reach. She had driven it in every season, in every condition, at every hour.

She had heard the headlight story all her life.

She had never seen it.

The night she did, she was coming back from Cedar City late — later than she'd planned, the way evenings have a way of running past their scheduled endings. A little before midnight. The fog was up on the mountain, the heavy kind, rolling across the road in slow, opaque waves that required patience and a reduced speed and the particular sustained attention of driving in conditions that don't forgive inattention.

She was maybe six miles from the summit when the light appeared.

She noticed it the way you notice something that has been in your peripheral awareness for a moment before your conscious attention catches up with it — with the retrospective certainty that it had been there for a little while before she registered it. In the rearview mirror. Fifty yards back. A single round point of white light, steady in the shifting fog.

Noelle looked at it.

She had grown up with the story. She knew what she was looking at.

She kept driving.

This is the thing about knowing a ghost story well — it does not necessarily make the ghost story less frightening when it happens to you. The knowledge sits in your head and says: this is the headlight,

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this is the one from the story, this is not a motorcycle, and none of that information makes the white point of light in your rearview mirror look any less white or any less present or any less perfectly, steadily fifty yards behind your car on a mountain road at midnight in the fog.

Noelle drove.

The light followed.

She crested the summit. She began the descent toward Long Valley, the road dropping away in front of her through the fog, the trees closing in on both sides, the darkness outside her headlights total and absolute.

The light was still there.

It had not stopped at the edge of the mountain.

Every account she had ever heard said it stopped at the edge of the mountain.

It had not stopped.

It was still fifty yards back, still steady, still following the curves of the descending road with that slight, wrong delay — and Noelle, who was a practical and unsuperstitious woman who had driven this road five hundred times and had always privately considered the headlight story to be colorful exaggeration, felt her hands tighten on the wheel in a way that was entirely outside her control.

She came around a long left-hand curve and the road straightened for a quarter mile, and in that straight stretch she did something she had not planned to do.

She pulled over.

There was a wide spot — a turnout, unpaved, half-lost in the fog — and she turned into it and stopped the car and killed her own headlights and sat in the dark and watched the rearview mirror.

The light came around the curve.

It moved up the straight stretch at the same unhurried pace it had maintained since she first saw it. Fifty yards. Forty. Thirty. Coming toward her now, toward the stopped car in the turnout, with no sign of slowing, no adjustment for the fact that she had left the road.

Twenty yards.

Ten.

It stopped.

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Directly behind her car. Close enough that its light came through the rear window and lit the interior of the car with a pale, flat illumination that had no warmth in it at all. Close enough that Noelle could see, in the rearview mirror, the light itself — round, steady, white, at the height of a headlight on a motorcycle that wasn't there.

She sat very still.

The light sat very still.

The fog moved around them both.

[Narrator: Almost a whisper now. The next lines fall like stones into still water.]

And then — slowly, in the way that things move when they are not constrained by the ordinary mechanics of movement — the light rose.

Off the road. Up. Past the height of a headlight, past the height of a windshield, past the height of a roof. Rising with a smooth, unhurried deliberateness until it hung in the fog above her car at perhaps eight feet — the height of something standing upright behind her vehicle, looking down.

The rear window of Noelle's car went dark.

Something was standing between the light and the glass.

Something that had no head to cast the shadow its body was casting.

Noelle did not look back.

She started the car.

She pulled back onto Highway 14.

She drove down the mountain at a speed that she will not specify when she tells this story, except to say that the fog was thick and the speed was inadvisable and that she was entirely unable, in that moment, to care about either of those things.

In the rearview mirror, the light was behind her again.

Fifty yards back.

Following.

It stopped at the bottom of the mountain.

Just as the stories always said it would.

Just where the road levels out and the valley opens up and the

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mountain releases you back to the ordinary world, the light simply ceased to be in her mirror.

She drove home.

She sat in her lit kitchen for a long time.

She has told this story many times since, and the telling of it has not made it smaller. Some stories get smaller with the telling — the strangeness worn down by repetition until the edges are smooth and the fear is more like memory than feeling. This one has not gotten smaller.

It stays exactly the size it was the night it happened.

Which was considerable.

[Narrator: Let the story settle completely. Let the fire be the only sound for a long moment. Then, casually — almost as if you're moving on to something else entirely — glance over your shoulder into the dark behind you. Peer at something. Frown slightly. Then turn back to the group with the faintest hint of concern and say, very quietly —]

BOO!

[After the noise fades, with a completely straight face:]

Highway 14 is open year-round.

The drive from Cedar City to Long Valley takes about forty-five minutes.

At night, in the fog, you should leave extra time.

And if something appears in your rearview mirror on the dark stretch near the summit — a single white light, round and steady, exactly fifty yards back —

Don't pull over.

Don't stop.

And whatever you hear outside your window when the light gets close —

Don't roll it down.

THE SKINWALKER OF NAVAJO LAKE

THERE ARE some stories you tell carefully.

[Narrator: Begin with genuine respect and care. The Skinwalker is not a legend to be handled lightly, and the audience should feel that from the first word. Not fearful — careful. There is a difference between a story that frightens and a story that warns, and this one is both. Speak as someone who takes the warning seriously.]

Not because they're too frightening. Not because the audience can't handle them. But because the thing the story is about has earned a particular kind of care — because it comes from a tradition that is not yours to own, only to acknowledge, and because the people who know it best will tell you, if you ask them, that there are limits to how much of it should be spoken aloud, and where, and to whom.

This is one of those stories.

I'm going to tell you what I know. And I'm going to tell you, right now before we start, that what I know is the edge of it — the part that has passed into general awareness, into the campfire tradition of this region, over many decades. The deeper part of this story belongs to

the people who have lived on this land for centuries, and that part stays with them.

The part I'm going to tell you is enough.

More than enough.

The high plateaus of southern Utah are transition zones.

Geologists will tell you this — that the Markagunt Plateau, the Paunsaugunt, the Aquarius, these are places where one kind of landscape meets another, where the Colorado Plateau tilts up toward the Great Basin, where different climates and different ecologies intersect in complex ways that make the biology of the region stranger and richer than either zone on its own.

But the people who have lived here longest will tell you something else about transition zones.

They will tell you that where two worlds meet in the physical landscape, two worlds also meet in the other sense. That the places where the geography changes are the places where the boundaries between the ordinary and the not-ordinary are thinner. More permeable. More prone to the passage of things between one side and the other.

Navajo Lake sits near the top of the Markagunt at just under ten thousand feet, in a high volcanic bowl where the forest is dense and the air is thin and the dark, when it comes, comes completely. The Southern Paiute have long regarded this country as spiritually potent — a place where Puha, spiritual power, runs close to the surface of things. Where the land remembers more than it shows.

And somewhere in that country — in the volcanic ridges and the dark forest and the places where the treeline gives way to open sky — something moves at night that is neither fully one thing nor fully another.

The Navajo call it yee naaldlooshii.

In English, the closest translation is: with it, he goes on all fours.

Most people know the word Skinwalker.

And most people, if they know anything about it at all, know the first rule.

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You do not talk about it.

You especially do not talk about it at night.

You especially do not talk about it at night in the open, near the places it has been seen.

[Narrator: A pause here. Look around the fire. Then, quietly, with a very slight smile:]

So let's talk about something else entirely.

Let's talk about four friends camping at Navajo Lake, and what happened to them on the second night of a trip that had started perfectly well and ended the way trips sometimes end when people stop paying attention to what the land is telling them.

There were four of them: Brennan, who had organized the trip and was the kind of person who always organized the trip; his girlfriend Sasha, who had been camping her whole life and was the most practically competent of the group; their friend Marcus, who was along for the first time at altitude and had spent the first evening mildly winded and deeply impressed by the stars; and a woman named Jo, who was Marcus's older sister and who had camped in this specific area before and who had, on the drive up, mentioned the Skinwalker legend in the way you mention something you actually believe in but are slightly embarrassed to admit you believe in.

Nobody had taken Jo's mention particularly seriously.

By the second night, they had revised this position.

The evening had been good — a long day hike, a solid dinner, a fire that had burned down to satisfying coals. Marcus had finally acclimated. The stars above the lake were what they always are at that elevation and that latitude, which is to say they were extraordinary, wall-to-wall extraordinary, the kind of sky that makes people from cities go quiet and stay quiet for longer than they expect to.

The fire was low. The conversation had wound down to that

comfortable, half-drowsy exchange of people who are warm and fed and pleasantly tired. Brennan was already talking about turning in.

Then, from the treeline, the voice.

[Narrator: Slow right down. Each sentence its own moment.]

Not an animal voice. Not a human voice, quite. Something that lived in the register between — the quality of a sound that the ear receives as familiar and the brain immediately flags as wrong, the way a face in a photograph can look almost right and somehow deeply disturbing for reasons you cannot articulate.

It was high-pitched. It carried a rhythm — not language, or not any language any of them spoke, but structured, patterned, the cadence of meaning without the meaning itself. And underneath it, just audible, the sound of something moving through underbrush. Not the light movement of a deer or a fox. The deliberate, heavy movement of something large, picking its path slowly.

Coming closer.

Brennan said: "What is that?"

Nobody answered.

The sound continued for another half-minute — the voice and the movement together, approaching through the trees from the northeast, staying just inside the treeline where the firelight didn't reach. And then it stopped. Mid-phrase, mid-step. The forest went completely silent in the particular way it goes silent when everything in it has simultaneously decided to hold very still.

Jo put more wood on the fire.

Nobody laughed at her for it.

"Probably a bird," Marcus said.

"Right," said Sasha.

A minute passed. Two. The fire climbed back up. The stars continued their indifferent business overhead. The forest stayed silent.

And then someone spoke from the dark outside the camp.

Brennan's name.

In Brennan's voice.

[Narrator: Let that land. Full stop. Don't rush the next line.]

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Not like Brennan's voice — his voice. The exact pitch, the exact cadence, the particular way Brennan said his own name when he was trying to get someone's attention. The quality of it was so precise that Sasha, who had been with Brennan for three years, turned toward the dark outside the firelight before she had processed what she was hearing.

Brennan was sitting directly across the fire from her.

He was looking at the dark too.

His face, in the firelight, was the face of someone who has just heard something deeply wrong and is having difficulty locating the word for it.

"Don't answer it," Jo said.

Her voice was very quiet and very level, the voice of someone who has prepared for this specific moment and rehearsed what they would say when it arrived.

"Don't answer it. Don't go toward it. Keep looking at the fire."

They kept looking at the fire.

From the dark, Brennan's name again. The same voice. The same intonation. Patient. Unhurried. Repeating in the particular way that suggests it can continue repeating for as long as necessary, that time is not a consideration, that it has all night and so does the forest.

Then Sasha's name, in Sasha's voice.

Then Marcus's, in Marcus's.

Methodical. Working through them.

Testing each voice, trying each name, with the focused patience of something that knows one of them will work.

"What is it doing?" Marcus whispered.

"It's trying to get one of us to answer," Jo said. "Or to walk toward it. Don't."

"Why not?"

Jo didn't answer that.

She didn't need to.

The names continued. Then the voices shifted — began combining, overlapping, two at once, three at once, the sound folding over itself in a way that should have been cacophonous but was instead eerily

coherent, as if whatever was producing the sounds had a capacity for simultaneous voices that no single human throat should possess.

And then it tried Jo's voice.

Jo's own voice, calling Jo's own name, from the dark outside the fire.

Jo closed her eyes.

She did not answer.

She did not answer.

The voices stopped.

And then the sound of something moving in the treeline again — but different this time. Not slow and deliberate. Fast. Fast enough to cross the camp perimeter in seconds, fast enough that the firelight flickered with the displaced air as it passed, fast enough that none of them saw anything except the blur of movement at the very edge of the circle of light.

And then nothing.

Silence.

The lake, still and black beyond the trees.

The stars above.

The fire.

None of them slept that night.

They left before dawn, packing in the dark with headlamps, not speaking much, moving with the quiet efficiency of people who have collectively decided not to discuss what has just happened until they are somewhere considerably further away.

On the drive down from the plateau, as the first grey light came into the sky over the eastern hills, Marcus finally asked the question that had been sitting in the car with all of them since the campsite.

"What would have happened," he said. "If one of us had answered?"

Jo drove.

She looked at the road ahead.

She said: "I don't know exactly."

And then, after a moment:

"But I know that the ones who answer aren't the ones who get to tell the story afterward."

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Nobody said anything for a long time after that.

The road descended.

The plateau receded behind them.

The sky grew lighter.

And at no point, the entire way down, did any of them look back toward the mountain.

[Narrator: A very long pause. Look at the fire. Look at the dark around the fire. Then look at the people closest to you, one by one, as if you're just checking something. As if you're listening. Then, leaning very slowly toward the person to your immediate left, right into their ear — soft as a voice from the dark outside a campfire —]

BOO!

[After the noise settles — and settle it must, completely, before the final lines — speak with total calm. Almost gently:]

One more thing before we move on.

I said at the start that there are limits to how much of this story should be spoken aloud.

We're at that limit now.

So.

If you hear your name tonight — from somewhere outside the firelight, in a voice you recognize —

Look at the person it belongs to first.

Make sure they're still here.

Make sure their mouth is closed.

And then, whatever you do —

Don't answer.

THE VOICE IN THE PIPE

I WANT to tell you about a creek that isn't there anymore.

[Narrator: This one opens quietly and strangely — more like a meditation than a ghost story at first. The horror here is environmental before it is supernatural, and the audience should feel the particular melancholy of a place that has been changed against its will. Let the atmosphere do the early work. The fear comes from below.]

Or rather — a creek that is there, that is still running, still cold, still fed by the same high-country snowmelt it has always been fed by — but that you cannot see, cannot hear, cannot dip your hand into or let your children wade in. A creek that was taken from the surface of the earth and put underground, sealed inside a metal pipe, and sent along its route through the forest in permanent darkness, removed from the sky and the soil and the living things that depended on it, for the benefit of a smelter operation that needed the water more than the forest did.

This is a real thing that happened.

Berry Creek, in Duck Creek Valley on the Markagunt Plateau, was

diverted into a pipeline sometime in the early twentieth century. The water still flows — somewhere beneath the dry creek bed that the forest has spent the intervening decades learning to live without. If you walk that bed today, you walk on ground that remembers water without having it. The streamside plants are gone or changed. The willows that lined the banks are gone. The animals that depended on the open water have adapted or moved on.

But the creek itself is still there.

Underneath you.

Running in the dark.

And if you know where to step — if you know where the pipe runs close to the surface, in certain low-lying stretches of the valley — you can hear it. A faint, continuous sound, coming up through the ground beneath your feet. The ghost of a creek. The memory of moving water, sealed into metal and sent underground and still, after all this time, making the sound that moving water makes.

The people who know Duck Creek Valley call it the Ghost of Berry Creek.

And most of the time, when they say it, they mean the sound of the water.

Most of the time.



The pipeline has access hatches.

This is a practical necessity — any buried infrastructure of significant length needs points of access for inspection and maintenance, and the Berry Creek pipe is no exception. The hatches are set into the ground at intervals along the route, their metal covers flush with the surface, easy to miss if you don't know what you're looking for. They are, officially, not for public access. They are locked, or are supposed to be locked, the way the access panels on any utility infrastructure are locked.

Not all of them stay locked.

Weather works on locks. Seasons expand and contract the metal of the covers. Curious hikers are a force in the world, and curious hikers

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with time and a multi-tool are a force the designers of utilitarian infrastructure are never entirely prepared for.

Some of the hatches, on some days, are open.

And the sounds that come up through them are not always only the sound of water.

[Narrator: A quieter register now. The way you'd describe something you found and weren't sure what to do with.]

Her name was Petra, and she was eight years old the summer her family rented a cabin in Duck Creek Village for two weeks.

She was the kind of child who investigated things. Not recklessly — she was careful, methodical, the kind of eight-year-old who will spend forty minutes examining a single interesting rock before moving on to the next interesting thing. Her parents considered this a virtue, which it was, up to a point.

On the fourth day of the trip, she found the dry creek bed.

She had wandered further from the cabin than she was strictly supposed to — not out of defiance but out of the absorbed, forward-pulled momentum of a child following one interesting thing to the next. A beetle that led her off the main trail. The beetle's path took her through a stand of aspens to the edge of a shallow depression in the forest floor, maybe six feet wide, running roughly north to south through the trees.

A dry creek bed.

Petra stood at the edge of it and looked both ways along its length. The bed was smooth gravel and pale sand, the way creek beds are, with the ghost of a channel carved by water that had once run here and now didn't. It was peaceful. Quiet. The aspens on both sides made their particular dry-leaf sound in the afternoon breeze, and the light came through them in shifting patches, and it was exactly the kind of place that invites a child to explore it.

She stepped down into the bed and began walking.

She had gone perhaps a hundred yards when she felt it under her feet.

A vibration. Faint, but distinctly there — coming up through the

soles of her shoes from the ground beneath the gravel. She stopped and stood still and felt it. A continuous, low trembling, like the ground was humming to itself. She crouched down and pressed her palm flat on the gravel, the way her father had shown her you could feel train tracks before a train came.

The vibration was stronger with her hand on the ground.

And it sounded, very faintly, like rushing water.

Petra pressed her ear to the gravel.

The water sound was clear now — the unmistakable gurgle and rush of a creek running over stones, coming from directly beneath her, running through the earth under the dry bed like a secret. She stayed there for a while, listening, delighted in the particular way that children are delighted when they discover something hidden, something the ordinary world has tucked away in an unexpected place.

Then she found the hatch.

It was fifty yards further along the bed — a metal cover, circular, about eighteen inches across, set flush into the gravel. Painted green once, now mostly rust. The locking mechanism was a simple bar latch that had corroded open years ago and hung loose in its bracket.

Petra looked at it.

She looked up the creek bed, and down the creek bed.

She lifted the hatch.

[Narrator: Slow down here. Every detail deliberate. You're eight years old, and you've just opened a door in the ground.]

The sound that came up was immediate and full — the rush of moving water, loud now, real now, echoing up the metal throat of the access pipe in a way that made the whole underground structure suddenly present and alive. Cold air came with it, the specific cold of underground spaces and moving water, carrying the smell of metal and minerals and the clean, dark smell of rock that never sees the sun.

Petra lay flat on the gravel at the edge of the hatch and looked down.

The pipe was perhaps four feet in diameter. Below the access point,

CEDAR MOUNTAIN CAMPFIRE STORIES

maybe six feet down, the water moved — dark and fast and slightly luminous in the way that moving water is luminous even in poor light, catching what little daylight fell through the open hatch and scattering it in cold flickers. The sound of it was beautiful in the enclosed space. Amplified. Immediate.

She watched the water for a while.

Then she heard something else in it.

Under the rush of the water — not separate from it, not distinct, but woven into the sound the way a voice can be woven into music until you're not sure if you're hearing it or imagining it — a sound that her brain kept trying to organize into words. The shape of speech, without the content. The rhythm of a voice, without the voice.

Petra went still.

She listened.

The sound in the water shifted. It was closer now — or she was more attuned to it, or the creek was running faster in this section and carrying more sound. It was definitely a voice. Low, liquid, moving with the current, speaking in a language she didn't know and couldn't place. Not frightening in its quality — ancient, maybe. The way certain sounds are ancient in a way you feel rather than know. Like the sound the water was using had been in this creek long before the creek went underground, long before the pipe was laid, long before anyone put a name to this valley.

Petra leaned a little further over the hatch.

The voice in the water said her name.

[Narrator: Stop. Let that sentence sit alone. Count to five before continuing.]

Not her full name. Not Petra, which was what her parents called her and her teachers called her and what appeared on every form and piece of paper in her life. Her other name. The name her grandmother called her — a shortened, private version, used only within the family, used only by the people who had known her longest and loved her most specifically.

DON JONES

The name that no one in Duck Creek Valley, no one within a hundred miles, had any reason to know.

It came from the water clearly. Once. In a voice that was made of the sound of moving water but shaped, unmistakably, into that name.

And then a hand closed around her wrist.

She screamed.

And her father — who had been following her trail through the aspens for ten anxious minutes and had arrived at the creek bed thirty seconds before she heard her name — pulled her back from the edge of the open hatch and held on.

"What are you doing?" he said. "You're right at the edge — Petra, you could have—"

She was shaking. Not from the shock of being grabbed — from the voice. From the name.

"Something in the pipe," she said. "It said my name."

Her father looked at the open hatch. Looked at the moving water visible six feet below. He crouched at the edge and listened, as she had listened.

He heard the rush of the water.

He heard, after a moment, something in the water that might have been structured. That might have had the rhythm of speech.

He closed the hatch.

He stood up and took Petra's hand and walked her back along the dry creek bed toward the aspens and the trail and the cabin, and he did not look back at the hatch, and he did not let go of her hand the entire way.

That evening, after dinner, Petra asked him what he had heard.

He said: "Water. Just water in a pipe."

She said: "Did it sound like anything?"

A long pause.

"It sounded like it used to be outside," he said.

He stared at the table.

"And like it's been trying to get back there for a long time."

They did not walk along the dry creek bed again for the rest of the trip.

Petra has not been back to Duck Creek Valley since.

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But she thinks about the creek sometimes. About what it means to take a living thing and seal it into metal and send it underground in the dark. About what accumulates in enclosed, lightless spaces over enough decades. About what learns to speak, given enough time and enough darkness and enough need.

About what it wanted, when it said her name.

She still doesn't know the answer to that last one.

She has decided she is content not to.

[Narrator: A long pause now — longer than usual. Let the story breathe into the silence the way water breathes into stone. Then, very quietly, address the group directly, almost in a whisper:]

The next time you're somewhere with running water — a river, a stream, anywhere the water moves over rock in the open air —

Listen to it.

Really listen.

Because what the Ghost of Berry Creek teaches us is that water has a voice. That moving water, given enough time in enough places, picks things up. Carries things. The voices of the forest and the creatures that drank from it and the people who sat beside it for thousands of years.

And what happens when you take all of that and seal it into a pipe in the dark —

Is that it learns to wait.

And when a hatch opens, and a little daylight falls down, and a child leans in close enough to hear —

[Narrator: Look directly at the youngest person at the fire. Hold the eye contact. Then, just as they process what you're doing —]

BOO!

[After the laughter: one last quiet beat, like an afterthought dropped into the settling dust:]

DON JONES

Berry Creek is still running.

Somewhere under Duck Creek Valley, right now, in the dark.

The hatches are still there.

And the water has had a long, long time to practice.

THE PURPLE LADY OF THE DEPOT

LET me tell you about the age of the train.

[Narrator: This one opens with elegance — with the romance of the railroad era, with the particular beauty of things that have been waiting a long time. Think of your voice as a passenger platform: spacious, slightly formal, the kind of place where people dressed up to say hello and goodbye. The dread is dressed up too, at first. It comes out of what was beautiful before it was ruined.]

Not the Amtrak era — not the practical, utilitarian business of getting from one place to another in a metal tube with Wi-Fi. I mean the earlier age. The age when the arrival of a train at a depot was an event. When people came to the platform to watch even if they weren't traveling — to see who was coming, who was leaving, what was being shipped, what the world beyond the desert was sending their way.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the railroad changed southern Utah the way rivers change landscapes — it cut new channels into the existing geography of commerce and communication, and everything downstream shifted accordingly. Cedar City got its rail connection in 1923, when the Union Pacific extended a branch line

down from Lund. Suddenly the iron ore that had been the region's buried promise for fifty years could be moved at scale. Suddenly the distance between Cedar City and the rest of the world contracted from weeks to days.

And suddenly, the depot became the most important building in town.

Not just functionally. Socially. The depot was where things happened. Where soldiers left for wars and came back from them, or didn't. Where families arrived from distant states with their furniture in a freight car and hope in their faces. Where young men in good suits met young women in good dresses on the platform and the whole architecture of lives to come was negotiated in the twenty minutes before the train pulled away.

And where, on one particular evening in the late 1920s, something went very wrong on the tracks.

And a woman in a purple dress has been standing on the platform ever since.

Nobody agrees on the details.

This is the nature of the Purple Lady legend — it exists in versions, plural, the way all the best ghost stories do, each version agreeing on the essential elements and diverging on the particulars in ways that tell you more about what people find plausible than about what actually happened.

The essential elements are these: a woman, arriving at or departing from the Cedar City depot in the late 1920s, wearing an exceptional purple dress — the formal kind, the kind you wore when the occasion required your absolute best, the kind that announced that this moment mattered. A man. A quarrel on the platform, or near it, or on the tracks themselves. A ring — her engagement ring, or her wedding ring, depending on the version — lost or thrown or pulled away in the struggle.

And then the train.

The details of what the train did, or didn't do, vary so widely

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between versions that the specifics seem almost beside the point. What every version agrees on is the aftermath: she died at the depot. The ring was never found. And she has not left.

She is looking for the ring.

She has always been looking for the ring.

And the looking, in a hundred years, has not improved her disposition.

[Narrator: A slight shift here — quieter, more precise. Like you're reading from a description.]

She is always seen at dusk, or after dark.

Always in the purple dress — formal, floor-length, in the style of the late 1920s, with the particular cut and drape of a garment made to be seen and admired. The color, in the accounts that describe it most carefully, is not a gentle purple. It is deep. Almost bruised. The purple of the sky on the western horizon about twenty minutes after the sun goes down, when the last warmth has left the light and the cold of the night is just beginning to make itself felt.

She wears a hat with a veil.

The veil is always described as thick. Deliberately thick — the kind of veil that obscures rather than merely softens, that is worn not as adornment but as concealment. This detail recurs in every version of the sighting accounts, from the earliest in the 1930s to the most recent, and it is the detail that those who have seen her remember last and longest.

Because the question it raises — what is being concealed, and why — is the question that follows you home.

She moves through the depot space with the purposeful agitation of someone searching. Not wandering — searching. She checks the platform edge. She looks along the tracks. She examines the ground near the old waiting benches with the focused attention of a person who has lost something small and valuable and knows approximately where it should be but cannot find it.

She does not acknowledge the living.

Except when she does.

And when she does, the accounts agree on this too: she holds out her hand.

Not in greeting. Not for help. Palm up, fingers spread — the specific gesture of someone waiting to receive something they are owed.

And several of the fingers are missing.

His name was Gerald, and he was a security guard at the historic depot during the years when it was being used as a community events space — after the rail line had long been discontinued but before the building had found its permanent new purpose. His shift was evenings, which meant he was usually the last person in the building, doing a final walkthrough before locking up.

He had worked there for two years without incident.

He had heard the Purple Lady stories, in the way that everyone who worked at the depot heard them eventually — from the caretaker who'd been there longest, from the volunteers who staffed the occasional events, from the local history enthusiasts who came to look at the building and stayed to talk. He had listened politely and filed the stories in the same mental cabinet where he kept all colorful local folklore: interesting, atmospheric, not something he expected to encounter personally.

On a Thursday evening in October, he was doing his final walkthrough — main hall, platform room, the old waiting area, the freight office — when he saw the light under the door of the women's waiting room.

The women's waiting room had been locked for renovation for six weeks. He had the only key.

The light was on.

Gerald stood in the corridor for a moment, running through the practical explanations. Electrical fault. A light left on before the renovation began that he'd somehow not noticed in six weeks of walkthroughs. Someone else with a key he didn't know about.

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None of these explanations were satisfying, but they were all he had, so he took out his key ring and unlocked the door and opened it.

The room was empty.

The light was off.

The renovation work was exactly as it had been left — paint tarps on the floor, old benches pushed against one wall, the plaster repair on the east wall half-finished, the particular smell of a room that has been closed for six weeks: dust and old wood and the faint, sweet decay of a building letting go of its history one layer at a time.

Nothing.

Gerald stood in the doorway and swept his flashlight across the room.

In the far corner, in the gap between the pushed-together benches and the east wall, something caught the light.

Small. On the floor. A glint of metal in the beam of his flashlight, sharp and bright and specific in the way that precious things catch light differently from everything else around them.

Gerald crossed the room.

He crouched.

A ring.

Old — clearly old, the style and the weight of it placing it well before his own time. A band of gold, set with a small stone that his flashlight couldn't color but that the quality of its cut suggested had once been beautiful. Lying in the gap between the bench and the wall as if it had been dropped there a long time ago and had been waiting, with the patient, inanimate persistence of lost objects, to be found.

Gerald picked it up.

He held it in his palm.

And the temperature in the room dropped.

Not gradually. All at once, the way a door opening onto winter changes the air of a warm room in an instant. A cold that had direction — that came from behind him, from the doorway, from the corridor through which he had just walked.

Gerald stood up slowly.

He turned around slowly.

She was standing in the doorway.

[Narrator: Take your time here. Every detail deliberate, in the order it registered to him.]

The dress first.

Deep purple, floor-length, formal in the manner of a century ago — but not dusty, not faded, not the ruined remnant of a garment that time had worked on. It was immaculate. Perfectly, impossibly immaculate, as if it had been pressed that afternoon for an occasion that still mattered.

The hat. The veil — thick, dark, falling to her collarbones, obscuring the face behind it completely.

The hands.

Both hands raised, held at waist height, palms upward. The gesture of someone waiting to receive.

Gerald looked at the hands.

The left hand was missing the ring finger and the little finger. The right hand was missing the index finger. The remaining fingers were thin, very still, and very white against the purple of the dress.

She said nothing.

She simply stood in the doorway with her damaged hands held out, and waited.

Gerald looked at the ring in his own palm.

He looked at her hands.

He thought about what it meant that the ring fit in the gap between the bench and the wall. That it had lain in that specific corner of that specific room for some number of years that he could not calculate but that was certainly very long. That whatever had taken her fingers had perhaps been the same event that had separated her from this ring. That she had been walking through this building in this dress for as long as the depot had been standing, searching for something that had been in this room, twenty feet from the platform where she died, the entire time.

He took a step toward her.

He held out the ring.

She tilted her head — a small movement, the precise angle of someone assessing an offer, measuring sincerity, deciding.

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Then one hand reached forward.

The remaining fingers closed around the ring.

The cold in the room deepened for just a moment — one sharp, complete instant of absolute zero — and then it released. All at once. Like a breath let go after a very long time.

The doorway was empty.

The room was warm.

Gerald stood among the paint tarps and the pushed-together benches and the half-finished plaster repair, alone, with his hands at his sides, in a room that felt different than it had sixty seconds ago — lighter, somehow. The way a room feels after a window has been opened and the stale air replaced.

He finished his walkthrough.

He locked up.

He did not report what had happened, because there was no form for it.

He worked at the depot for three more years after that night.

He never saw her again.

Nobody has.

In the years since Gerald's final walkthrough, the reports of the Purple Lady have simply — stopped. The sightings that had accumulated since the 1930s, the occasional glimpse on the platform, the figure in the waiting room, the smell of an old perfume in an empty corridor — all of it went quiet.

The depot stands.

The platform is empty in the evenings.

Whatever she was looking for, she found it.

Or it found her.

[Narrator: A long, warm pause. This ending is gentler than most — almost peaceful. Let the audience settle into that. Let them feel the resolution. And then, precisely because they have relaxed into something like comfort —]

BOO!

DON JONES

[After the laughter — and there will be real laughter here, the best kind, the release of tension that was almost contentment — pause a beat. Then, with a slight frown, as though something just occurred to you:]

Although.

I did say nobody has seen her since Gerald's last shift.

I should clarify: nobody has seen her at the depot.

There was one report, about eighteen months after the depot sightings stopped.

A woman in a purple dress, standing at a window of a house on the east side of town.

Looking out.

Her hand raised against the glass.

Fingers spread.

Waiting.

THE BIG FISH OF PANGUITCH

THIS IS *the perfect campfire story upon which to end the evening. Not too scary, not dark at all, and above all else... a fishing story.*

All right.

I want to finish tonight with a fishing story.

[Narrator: This is the last story of the night, and it knows it. Open with warmth — with humor, even. You've earned it. The anthology has taken the audience through grief and history and genuine dread, and this final story is allowed to start easy, almost silly, before it earns its chill. Begin like a fisherman settling into a chair. Take your time. You're in no hurry. Neither is the fish.]

Now — before anyone rolls their eyes — I know what you're thinking. A fishing story. After everything we've talked about tonight. After the quilts and the bricks and the airport and the reeds and the trail and the furnace and the graves. After all of that, the last story of the night is about fishing.

Bear with me.

Because this particular fishing story starts exactly where most fishing stories start — with a man at a lake at dawn, with a line in the water and nothing much happening and the particular peace of a morning that hasn't decided what it's going to be yet — and it ends somewhere considerably more interesting than most fishing stories end.

It ends with something that has been in Panguitch Lake since before the town of Panguitch existed.

Something that has been growing in those cold, dark, spring-fed waters for a very, very long time.

And something that, when the light is right and the water is right and you've been sitting in one spot long enough to start feeling like part of the lake rather than a visitor to it, will come to the surface and look at you.

And then go back down.

And leave you sitting in your boat wondering what you just saw.

And whether it was as big as you think it was.

And whether it'll be back.



Panguitch Lake sits at eight thousand four hundred feet in the high country southeast of town, in a natural basin where the snowmelt from the Markagunt collects into a body of water about two miles long and a mile wide. The water is cold. Very cold — cold the way high-altitude spring-fed lakes are cold, where the surface temperature in summer barely clears fifty degrees and the deep water, the water where the big springs come up from below, stays near freezing year-round.

It is an exceptionally good fishing lake. Has been for as long as anyone has been fishing it. The rainbow trout, the brook trout, the cutthroat — they grow large in that cold dark water, larger than they have any business growing, larger than the same fish in lower, warmer lakes. Something about the depth of the cold. Something about the springs.

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The fishermen of Panguitch have been telling the story of the Big Fish for at least a hundred years.

Not a particular species. Not a prize-winning trout or an enormous catfish or anything that fits neatly into a taxonomy. Just: the Big Fish. The one that is down there, in the deep water near the springs, older than the record books and larger than the record books would allow. The one that surfaces occasionally — always in the early morning, always in the stillest water, always to a solitary fisherman who wasn't expecting it — and regards the surface world with the calm, patient attention of something that has been the most significant living thing in this particular body of water for longer than anyone alive can remember.

The fishermen who have seen it don't always agree on the details. They all agree on the eyes.

[Narrator: Slower now. Settle in. This is the part you've been building toward.]

His name was Gus, and he had been fishing Panguitch Lake since he was seven years old, which meant he had been fishing it for fifty-three years, which meant he had forgotten more about that lake than most people would ever know. He knew where the springs came up. He knew the underwater topography the way a man knows his own yard. He knew where the fish ran in June and where they moved in August and where, if you got there before anyone else on a still October morning, you could drop a line and pull up something extraordinary.

He had heard the Big Fish stories his whole life.

He believed them the way he believed most things — provisionally, with the practiced skepticism of a man who had seen enough genuine strangeness in sixty years of outdoor life not to dismiss anything entirely, but who also knew that fishermen were the world's most unreliable narrators.

He had not, in fifty-three years, seen the Big Fish.

Until the October morning when he did.

He had been out since before dawn in his small aluminum boat,

anchored over the deep spring hole he called the Cathedral — named for the quality of the light down there on a clear day, visible from above as a column of pale green rising from the darkness below, the cold water glowing as the sun hit it.

The morning had been good — a nice brook trout early, two solid rainbows by eight o'clock, the lake flat and still and silver in the low autumn light, the aspen on the hills above already full gold, the sky coming up clear and blue and enormous. The kind of morning that reminds a sixty-year-old man why he started doing this when he was seven.

By nine o'clock the bite had slowed, the way it does when the sun gets up and the surface warms slightly and the fish go down. Gus sat in his boat and watched his line and let himself be still, which was a thing he was good at.

He was watching the line when the water changed.

Not all at once. A gradual thing — a shift in the color of the water directly beneath the boat, the pale green glow of the Cathedral deepening, the darkness below it rising. As if something large was ascending through the water column, displacing light as it came.

Gus put down his rod.

He leaned over the side of the boat and looked down into the water.

It was coming up.

He could see it — not its shape exactly, not yet, but its presence. A density in the water below him, a mass that absorbed the pale green light rather than transmitting it, rising with the slow, deliberate ease of something that has never in its long life needed to move quickly because it has always been the largest thing in the room.

It rose.

And rose.

And rose.

Gus sat very still in his aluminum boat and watched it come up through the cold dark water toward him, and he thought — in the way the mind reaches for scale when it encounters something that requires a new scale — that it was longer than the boat. Maybe twice as long as the boat. The boat was fourteen feet.

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It broke the surface in silence.

Not in the way a fish breaks the surface to take a fly, not in the way a large fish rolls, which is all motion and spray and urgency. It simply — arrived at the surface. A long dark shape in the grey-silver water, lying alongside the boat, near enough that Gus could have leaned over and touched it if every instinct he had wasn't telling him very firmly to keep both hands inside the boat.

He looked at it.

It was a fish. Unmistakably, fundamentally a fish — the right shape, the right architecture, fins and scales and the lateral line running the length of its body. A trout, maybe, or something in that lineage, though larger than any trout the record books had ever entertained.

Its scales, up close, were extraordinary. Each one the size of his palm. Deep iridescent colors — the greens and blues and silvers of deep cold water, catching the morning light from above in small explosions of color, the way old glass catches light.

And the eye.

One eye, this side of the fish, just at the waterline.

It was gold.

Not yellow — gold. The deep, saturated gold of things that have been in the cold dark for a very long time and developed their own light to compensate for the absence of the sun's. The pupil was vast and dark and perfectly round. It was — and this was the word Gus would use, every time he told this story, the word that made people who heard it go quiet — the eye was aware.

Not in the ordinary fish-eye way — not the blank, reflexive awareness of a creature responding to stimuli. Aware the way old things are aware. The way a mountain is aware of being a mountain. Conscious of its own age, its own depth, its own continued and uninterrupted existence in this small cold lake at eight thousand feet while everything around it changed and changed and changed again.

The eye looked at Gus.

Gus looked at the eye.

For a long moment — he would not be able to say how long, time having stopped its ordinary business for the duration of this encounter

— they regarded each other. Gus, who had been fishing this lake for fifty-three years. The thing in the water, which had been in this lake since before the town was built, before the settlers arrived, before the trails through this country had names.

Gus had the sudden, absolute conviction — arriving in the way convictions sometimes arrive, without being reasoned toward — that he was not the only fisherman this creature had surfaced to observe. That it had done this before. That it came up, occasionally, to see what was sitting in the boats above the Cathedral spring. That it was, in its own unhurried way, keeping track.

He thought: it knows me.

He thought: of course it does. I've been here for fifty-three years.

Then the fish looked away.

Not a quick movement — the long, smooth turn of a large head in deep water, the eye breaking its line with Gus's face, rotating away toward the open water of the lake, toward the distant south end where the springs ran coldest and deepest.

And it went down.

Slowly. With the same unhurried ease with which it had arrived. The darkness descending through the pale green glow of the Cathedral, the mass diminishing, the light returning to the water as the shape retreated into the depths.

Until there was nothing below Gus's boat but cold water and distance and the faint pale glow of the springs far below.

Gus sat in his boat for a long time.

He did not pick up his rod.

He rowed back to the dock.

He loaded his truck.

He drove home.

He has never put a line in Panguitch Lake since.

Not because he's afraid of it.

Because some things you don't fish for.

Because some things have been in a place long enough that the place belongs to them, and the correct response when they surface to look at you is to row home and leave them to it.

He goes back, sometimes. Sits on the dock. Watches the water.

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He says the lake feels different since that morning. Not threatening — nothing like that. Just inhabited. The way a house feels inhabited when you know someone is home, even before you've seen them.

He says the Cathedral spring still glows, on clear mornings, that pale green from below.

He says sometimes, when the light is right, the glow shifts.

Like something moving underneath.

Still down there.

Still keeping track.

[Narrator: A long pause. Let the fire settle. Let the quiet come all the way in. This is the last story of the night, and it deserves a last-story kind of silence. Look around the fire — at every face, slowly, the way you've been telling stories all evening. Then, with a warmth and ease that is entirely out of keeping with what's about to happen —]

BOO!

[Let the laughter and the noise go all the way. This is the last one — let it land fully. Then, after the commotion has completely settled, lean back and look up at the sky. Wait a moment. And then, quietly, like a proper ending:]

Every lake has one.

The oldest thing in the water.

The one that was there before everything else.

The one that surfaces, sometimes, to see who's sitting in the boats above.

The one that knows all the fishermen by name.

Including yours.

Sleep well.

It was a good night.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

THIS GUIDE IS INTENDED for anyone reading these stories aloud — whether around a campfire, in a classroom, or as part of a performance. Many of the words and place names in this anthology come from languages and traditions that are not widely taught in standard American education, and mispronunciation in a live performance can interrupt the story's spell at the worst possible moment.

Pronunciations here are given in plain English approximation rather than formal phonetic notation, on the grounds that a narrator reading these pages by firelight does not need the International Phonetic Alphabet — they need something they can glance at and immediately use. Stressed syllables appear in CAPITALS.

A note on Indigenous terms: several words in this anthology come from living languages — Southern Paiute, Navajo — spoken today by real communities in this region. The pronunciations given here are practical approximations for English speakers and are not intended as authoritative linguistic guides. Narrators who wish to engage more deeply with these languages and their speakers are encouraged to seek out resources produced by those communities directly. The "Notes for Narrators" column in the table below flags any terms that deserve particular sensitivity in performance.

How to Read This Guide

STRESSED SYLLABLES appear in full capitals (e.g. MAR-kuh-gunt). Hyphens separate syllables. Where two pronunciations are equally common among locals, both are noted. The "Appears In" bit gives the story title where the word is most prominent; many terms recur across multiple stories.

Paakniwat

PAHK-nih-waht

Southern Paiute (Numic)

The Mimic in the Reeds

The plural and general term for Water Babies. The double-a is held slightly longer than a single vowel; the stress falls firmly on the first syllable.

Paiute

PIE-yoot

Anglicisation of Numic self-name

Multiple stories

Two syllables. The "ai" is a pure diphthong as in "pie." Avoid "PAY-oot" or "puh-YOOT." Southern Paiute (the people of this region) may also be referred to as Nuwuvi.

Nuwuvi

noo-WOO-vee

Southern Paiute self-designation

Background / context

The Southern Paiute people's own name for themselves. Three syllables; stress on the second. Rarely appears in spoken narrative but useful context for narrators who wish to introduce the stories

accurately.

Puha

POO-hah

Southern Paiute (Numic)

The Skinwalker of Navajo Lake

Spiritual power or life-force in Paiute belief. Two syllables, equal stress, both vowels are pure and open. Do not reduce the final vowel to a schwa.

Markagunt

MAR-kuh-gunt

Southern Paiute

Multiple stories

The plateau name. Three syllables; stress on the first. The final syllable rhymes with "hunt." A common mispronunciation is "mar-kuh-GUNT" — resist the urge to stress the last syllable.

Panguitch

PAN-gwitch

Southern Paiute — "big fish place"

Multiple stories

Two syllables. The "gwitch" is a single fluid sound, not "guh-witch." Locals say it quickly; narrators should match that ease rather than over-enunciating.

Paunsaugunt

pawn-SAW-gunt

Southern Paiute — "home of beavers"

Background / context

Three syllables; stress on the second. The first syllable rhymes with "dawn." A neighbouring plateau to the Markagunt; may arise in story-

telling context.

Yee naaldlooshii

yay NAHL-dloo-shee

Navajo (Diné bizaad)

The Skinwalker of Navajo Lake

The Navajo term conventionally translated as "Skinwalker." Four syllables across the two words. The "dl" cluster in "naaldlooshii" is a single lateral affricate sound with no English equivalent; approximate with a soft "dl" blend. Many Navajo scholars and community members discourage non-Navajo speakers from using or repeating this word; the story's text acknowledges this. Narrators may choose to say "the Navajo term" and move on rather than attempting the full pronunciation.

Diné

dih-NAY

Navajo self-designation

Background / context

The Navajo people's own name for themselves. Two syllables; stress on the second. The accent mark indicates a high tone in Navajo; in English approximation, a slight rise in pitch on the second syllable is appropriate.

Escalante

es-kuh-LAN-tee

Spanish (from Silvestre Vélez de Escalante)

The Curse of the Escalante Souvenir

Four syllables; stress on the third. English speakers often misplace the stress as "ES-kuh-lant." The final "e" is fully pronounced — "tee," not silent as in French.

. . .

CEDAR MOUNTAIN CAMPFIRE STORIES

Parowan

PAIR-uh-wahn

Southern Paiute via Anglicisation

The Last Quilt of the Markagunt; The Slaves of the Old Spanish Trail

Three syllables; stress on the first. Rhymes roughly with "pair of wan." The final syllable is relaxed, not stressed. Locals often compress it slightly toward "PAIR-wahn."

Kanab

kuh-NAB

Southern Paiute — "willow basket"

Background / context

Two syllables; stress firmly on the second. Not "KAY-nab." The "a" in the second syllable is short, as in "cab."

Navajo Lake

NAV-uh-hoe

Spanish rendering of Tewa "navahu'u"

The Mimic in the Reeds; The Skinwalker of Navajo Lake

Three syllables; stress on the first. The final "o" is fully pronounced. The lake name comes from the Navajo Nation's name; the lake sits in Paiute traditional territory, and its naming history reflects the complex layering of peoples in this region.

Zion

ZY-un

Hebrew, via Mormon scripture

The Witch of Rockville

Two syllables; stress on the first. While Hebrew "Tzion" differs, the English rendering is fully established. Rockville sits at the south entrance to Zion Canyon.

. . .

Virgin River

VER-jin

Spanish "Río Virgin" — origin debated

The Witch of Rockville

Standard English pronunciation. Included here because visitors sometimes mistakenly say "VIR-gin" with an affected formality. Locals say it plainly and quickly.

Fancher-Baker party

FAN-cher BAY-ker

English surnames

The Sobbing of the Meadows

The emigrant company massacred at Mountain Meadows in 1857. Both surnames use standard English pronunciation. Worth stating clearly as the story's solemnity demands precise, careful speech.

John D. Lee

Standard English

English name

The Sobbing of the Meadows

Included as a reminder: in the context of this story, his name should be spoken plainly and without dramatic inflection. The history speaks for itself.

Butch Cassidy

BUTCH KAS-ih-dee

Alias; born Robert LeRoy Parker

The Outlaw in the Draw

Fully familiar to most audiences but included here to note: his real surname Parker, and his birthplace Beaver, Utah, may arise in the historical preamble. "Beaver" is simply BEE-ver.

. . .

CEDAR MOUNTAIN CAMPFIRE STORIES

Sherratt Library

SHARE-at

Proper name (Gerald R. Sherratt)

The Librarian's Floating Glasses

Two syllables; stress on the first. Rhymes with "ferret" with a "sh."
Not "shuh-RAT." Named for a former SUU president.

Hoodoo

HOO-doo

English geological term (origin debated; possibly West African via Louisiana Creole)

The Outlaw in the Draw; multiple stories

Two syllables, equal stress. The term for the tall, thin spires of eroded rock characteristic of this region. No pronunciation difficulty, but included here because narrators sometimes mispronounce it "HOO-doh" as though French.

Slickrock

SLIK-rok

English geological/regional term

The Curse of the Escalante Souvenir; multiple stories

One compound word, two syllables, stress on first. Refers to the smooth sandstone surfaces of the Colorado Plateau. No special pronunciation, but the word should be spoken confidently — it is a term of art in this landscape.

Arroyo

uh-ROY-oh

Spanish — "gully" or "dry streambed"

The Curse of the Escalante Souvenir

Three syllables; stress on the second. The double-l in Spanish ("arroyo" has a single "y" sound, not "ar-ROY-oh") is already absorbed into the English borrowing. Not "AR-uh-yo."

. . .

Corbelled

KOR-beld

English architectural term (from Old French "corbel")

The Ghost of Old Iron Town

Two syllables; stress on the first. Describes the technique used to build the beehive kilns — stone courses that progressively overhang inward to form a dome. Not a regional term, but uncommon enough to trip up a narrator mid-sentence.

General Notes for Narrators

Place names in southern Utah often carry the history of the land in compressed form — Panguitch, Parowan, Kanab, and the Markagunt are all Southern Paiute words Anglicised by early settlers, sometimes accurately and sometimes not. Speaking them carefully, and knowing roughly what they mean, is a form of respect for the landscape and its first people. It also helps the stories land: these are real places, and saying their names correctly signals to the audience that the narrator takes the reality of the setting seriously.

For the Navajo term yee naaldlooshii, the story text itself acknowledges the sensitivity of the word and encourages narrators to exercise judgment. A narrator uncomfortable attempting the Navajo pronunciation may simply refer to "the Navajo term" or "the word the Navajo use" without reproducing it — the story functions perfectly well with this approach, and arguably with greater cultural care.

When in doubt about any word in this anthology, slow down. A deliberate pace signals intention rather than uncertainty, and deliberateness around difficult or unfamiliar language is always appropriate in live performance.

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Don Jones is a multi-award-winning author of fantasy, science-fiction, cozy mysteries, and cozy fantasies. After a career in tech, numerous positions at tech startups, and more than sixty published tech books (the ones they seemed to sell by the pound, back in the day), Don left it all behind and started writing down the stories that had been banging around in his head. The result is more than two-dozen novels—with more every year—that have received rave reviews and numerous industry awards. Today, Don writes primarily from a cabin near Duck Creek Village, UT, diligently overseen by a Goldendoodle named Corentin.

