

ALABAMA MOON

WATT KEY



SQUARE
FISH

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FOR MY WIFE, KATIE

ALABAMA MOON

Just before Pap died, he told me that I'd be fine as long as I never depended on anybody but myself. He said I might feel lonely for a while, but that would go away. I was ten years old and he'd taught me everything I needed to know about living out in the forest. I could trap my own food and make my own clothes. I could find my way by the stars and make fire in the rain. Pap said he even figured he could whip somebody three times my size. He wasn't worried about me.

It took me most of a morning to get him into the wheelbarrow and haul him to the cedar grove on the bluff. I buried him next to Momma where you could see the Noxubee River flowing coffee-colored down below. It was mid-January and the wind pulled at my hair and gray clouds slid through the trees and left the forest dripping. I felt the loneliness he'd told me about crawling up from my stomach and into my throat.

I didn't put a cross on the grave. I never knew Pap to believe in things like that. The only way you could make out Momma's grave was the ground that was sunk in over her and 1972 scratched on a limestone rock nearby. I don't remember her face, but I remember somebody else in the bed at night keeping me warm from the other side. Pap said she reminded him of a yellow finch, which is how she stays in my mind.

I found a rock for Pap and scratched 1980 on it with a nail. After placing it beside the dirt mound, I put the shovel in the wheelbarrow and started back for the shelter. The cedar grove trail was the only one we used enough to wear our tracks into it. It was worn like a cow path from years of walking with Pap. Not only did he like to come see Momma up on the bluff, but we used it as a main trail to check the northeast trap lines. It had been almost a week since I'd run any of them because I hadn't wanted to leave Pap's side. I was sure the traps were tangled in the creeks, and it only made the sickness in my stomach worse to think that whatever was in them was most likely dead.

Pap had tried to explain death to me, but I couldn't make sense of it. Pap said you passed on and came back as something else. It could be a squirrel or a coon. It could be a fish or an Eskimo. There was no way to tell. The most confusing part of what he told me was that even though he would come back as something else, there would still be a part of the old him that floated around like smoke. That part of him would watch out for me. I couldn't talk to this thing or touch it, but I could write to it. I could make my letters and then burn them, and the smoke would carry my message to him.

When I got back to the shelter, I put the wheelbarrow and the shovel away and went inside. I took off my deerskin jacket and hat, lay down on the pile of hides that we hadn't been able to sell, and stared at the roots in the ceiling. There was always a lot of work to do and no time to rest. But now Pap was dead and things were not the same.

I thought about death again. Most things he told me made sense real quick. You boil steel traps to get the scent off. You overlap palmetto roofing so the rain slides down it. You soak a deerskin for two days and it comes out with two days of softness to it. I could understand these things. But what he said about dying and the smoky messages and his hate for government—they were the hardest ideas for me to understand.

He'd said the government was after us ever since I could remember. The shelter we lived in was s

miles into a forest owned by a paper company and was a place no person besides us had any cause to be. Even had someone come by, he would have to just about run into our shelter before he noticed anything unusual. It was one small room built halfway into the ground with low ceilings so that Pap had to stoop to walk inside. The roof was covered with dirt, and bushes and trees grew from the top. Over time tree roots had come down into the shelter and twisted through the logs and made their way into the ground at the edges. Everything that showed above ground was from nature. Even the stovepipe sticking up through the ceiling was encased in limestone.

We practiced with our rifles three times a week. Our windows were narrow slits for shooting through and the trees that you saw out of these windows were pocked and chipped from years of Pap and me practicing a stage-one defense. In stage two we moved into the hole at the back side of the shelter where a muddy tunnel led to the box. The box was about a quarter the size of our shelter and made of steel sheets that Pap took from an old barn. An air pipe went up through the ground and was hidden inside a tree stump. Pap said if we ever moved to stage two, we'd cave the tunnel in behind us. We had dried food and water in the box that would last for a week or more. Pap said a stage two would be hard, but the box was made to keep people alive when things got really bad.

"It would be a while before they'd find us," he'd said.

There were no power lines or roads nearby. Except for the path to the cedar grove, we switched our trails every week so we wouldn't wear our tracks into the ground. We made most of our fires in the woodstove to hide the flame. If we had to make a fire outside, we used the driest wood we could find to cut down on the smoke. We couldn't carry anything shiny in the bright sun in case a plane caught the reflection. Our knife blades kept a thin coat of rust on them for that very purpose. Pap even went so far as to sneak up on his game from the south so that the sound from the rifle shot would be aimed down into the river bottom.

From my place on the hide pile I could hear the birds through the small window slit as the forest grew dark outside. I was used to paying extra attention to the late-afternoon and night sounds. Pap said if the government was coming for us, that's when they'd come. He got nervous and quiet when the sun started dropping. He liked to sit inside the shelter and work on chores that didn't make noise. The two of us sewed, whittled, scraped hides, and repaired traps while we studied the forest sounds. But I didn't do any of these things the afternoon after Pap died. I couldn't. I just balled up like a squirrel and cried.

It seemed like everything started going wrong the summer before Pap's accident. We heard through Mr. Abroscotto, who owned the general store in Gainesville, that International Paper Company had run into hard times and was selling off some of its land. Pap said that the paper company had owned the forest as long as we'd been there and that they were too big to know about us. If they sold out the smaller landowners, we'd likely be found.

I could tell that Pap was worried. He told me that the swimming hole was off limits and that I was to stay close to the shelter unless I was checking traps or getting drinking water. Without the creek to swim in, the days were hotter than any I can remember. We spent afternoons sitting in the shelter covered with the tannic acid from boiled acorns to keep off the ticks and mosquitoes. Pap had me practice my reading while he carved fish hooks from briars and bound sticks to make catfish traps.

It wasn't two weeks after our visit to Mr. Abroscotto's store that surveyors found our shelter while we were out checking the traps. When Pap and I returned, we saw their orange vests through the trees and we ducked into the bushes and watched them as they walked around the shelter. They stayed there for about an hour, poking at our things. I asked Pap if they were the government, and he said no, but they weren't much better.

"Should we shoot at 'em?"

"No."

"If they're not any better than—"

"When the war comes, you'll know."

"How?"

"I'll tell you."

The next morning, Pap woke me at daybreak. "Get up," he said. "We need to go into town and find out what's happenin'."

I got excited about going to Mr. Abroscotto's. It was the only time I saw any of the outside world. But I was careful not to let Pap know how I felt. He said showing ourselves to outsiders was the most dangerous part of how we lived. One slipup and the law would be all over us. A trip to the store wasn't anything he wanted to see me excited over.

"We gonna take somethin' to sell, Pap?"

"Ain't got time. Get your britches on."

As the sun slipped over the trees, we made the six-mile trip to Mr. Abroscotto's. We used to sell our furs to him, but it had been more than three years since we'd sold any. He said the prices were so low that he lost money just paying for gasoline to get them to Birmingham, where he sold them to the companies that made clothes and things out of them. Since then, we had sold him the meat instead along with vegetables we grew in the garden, and we bought what we wanted of the outside world with the money he gave us.

Most of the journey was through the forest, but the last half mile was on the road to avoid the big swamp. Pap said this was okay because the road was straight and long and we could hear cars coming

in either direction before they saw us. We had time to slip down into the ditch and lie still until they passed.

The store was on the outskirts of town, and the only building nearby was a small brick one that Pap said was owned by the power company. We could see a traffic light another half mile up the road which Pap said was the only one in Gainesville. I liked to watch the light as long as I could before Pap hurried me past the gas pumps and into the store. I'd seen a tractor go under the light once and even a yellow school bus.

Mr. Abroscotto was a strong man for somebody his age, like he used to be a logger or a policeman. His skin was dark as leather and his snow-white hair stood out against it. This time he told us that a lawyer named Mr. Wellington had purchased eleven thousand acres from the paper company. The property went from the Noxubee River to the big swamp and from the highway to Major's Creek on the east and west sides. By Mr. Abroscotto's landmarks, I figured our shelter was just about in the middle of Mr. Wellington's property. Pap must have been thinking the same thing. He walked out of the store without even saying goodbye. I hurried after him and had to walk fast to keep up.

"Slow down, Pap."

He didn't answer me.

"Pap?"

He turned quickly and grabbed my arm and jerked me along beside him. "You keep up this time," he said. "Run if you have to."

A couple of weeks passed before heavy equipment started making a road and a clearing three miles away. Pap was nervous all the time and snapped at me when I made the smallest mistake. He kept me particular about me stepping on sticks and making noise when we walked through the forest. He kept stopping and touching my shoulder, which meant for me to be still and listen. I could tell by the way he acted that all those workers and equipment meant trouble.

We began to check our catfish traps at night, slipping down the banks of the Noxubee River by moonlight. In the mornings we remained close to the shelter unless we had something special to do. We worked the garden, tending our cucumbers, eggplant, and beets. All of those vegetables, when spaced the right way, grew hidden among the natural forest plants and wouldn't give us away if someone was to come across them. In the heat of the day, we'd get back into the shelter again and stay there until late afternoon. Pap began to watch and listen out the window slits as much as he worked on things. Even my reading began to make him nervous.

"Read to yourself, boy. You're too old to read out loud anymore."

A month later, Pap and I were traveling a trail to the southeast of the shelter to get some red clay for pot making. We were less than a mile from the new clearing when Pap suddenly held his hand up in the air. I knew the signal and stopped. We stood there for several seconds and then, through the whir of mosquitoes, I heard hammering.

"Somebody's makin' somethin', Pap?"

I saw him clench his teeth and narrow his eyes. "Shhh!" he said.

After a few more seconds, Pap continued down the trail.

"What is it, Pap?"

"House."

“Somebody gonna live there?”

“Yeah.”

I could tell Pap didn't want to talk about it, so I followed behind him and didn't ask any more questions.

After we heard the hammering, Pap couldn't keep his mind on his chores. He'd get me to working on something at the shelter and he'd say he had to walk off in the woods and tend to things. He was usually gone for a couple of hours. He didn't want me to know where he went, but I knew it was to watch the hammering.

One day he said, “You finish scalin' those fish. I got to go look for somethin' I left down the trail.”

“I wanna go, Pap.”

“Just a one-man job.”

“I've only got two fish left.”

Pap stared off at the treetops and bit his bottom lip. “All right,” he finally said. “Come on, then.”

Pap never meant to look for anything. We slipped through the forest using gallberry and cane for cover until we got to where the house was being built. They had cemented concrete blocks together and run timbers across them for the floor supports. The yard was stacked with lumber for the rest of the framing. I turned to Pap, waiting for him to tell me what it meant. His face was worried pale.

“Gonna be a big house, Pap?” I finally asked.

“Big huntin' lodge,” he mumbled.

“I've never seen somethin' built that big.”

He nodded his head and motioned for us to head back to the shelter.

We didn't go to the lodge together again. The days began to grow cooler and the breezes told us that fall was arriving. Things had changed between Pap and me. Even though I was with him just about every minute of the day, I didn't feel like he knew I was there. He was far away in thought most of the time, and even though I watched his face, I couldn't get clues to what he was thinking.

We got the steel traps out of storage and oiled them and wired the parts that were broken. The maple leaves had just started to turn and I knew we were over a month away from trapping season. But Pap didn't seem to be doing things in the right order anymore. One day he told me to go gather mulberries. It had been five months since the last mulberry dropped.

“Pap, there's not any mulberries.”

“Just do what I tell you,” he said.

I waited for a few seconds to see if he would realize his mistake, but he went back to sharpening his knife. I didn't know what to do, so I stepped into the forest and started walking, thinking that if I stayed gone long enough it would convince him that I'd tried my best.

Once I got away from the shelter, it felt good to be on my own again after such a long time staying close to Pap and feeling his worries. I looked up into the trees and studied the yellows and reds of the changing leaves. The birds flitted about and made shrill cries from deep in the bush. It felt like I could breathe easier, and the smells of cedar and stinkbugs flowed into my nose.

Without meaning to, I wandered within hearing distance of the lodge. Once the sound of power tools and hammers reached my ears, I was too curious not to slip closer for a better look.

The workmen had moved a house trailer onto the site, and they seemed to be living in it. More lumber was stacked in the yard, along with roofing material and bricks. The lodge was already framed two stories high. I wanted to stay and watch the men working, but Pap's warnings about contact with outsiders started to play in my head. I crept back into the forest and took a different trail to the shelter.

Pap was sitting outside, weaving a basket from muscadine vine when I walked up. I stood in front of him, ready to tell him why I didn't have any mulberries, but he didn't ask about them or anything else. Finally I said, "They're puttin' walls on that lodge, Pap." His fingers stopped and he looked up at me. "I don't ever want you goin' near it again." "But it's not even finished." "I don't care. You heard what I said." "You think maybe when the lawyer moves in we could talk to him and he'd let us stay on?" Pap looked at me again. "I don't know, son! Why don't you get back to work and forget about that lawyer and his business."

As fall passed, the leaves began dropping from the trees and the forest canopy became a solid green fan of pine needles. We pulled our deerskin jackets from between the cedar boards and waterproofed them with mink oil for the season. The carrots would stay in the ground for a while longer, but the other garden vegetables needed to come out before the first frost. I was always excited about the late harvest of the year because I knew it meant we'd go to Mr. Abroscotto's store to sell whatever we had. I was afraid that Pap might tell me to stay behind, but he didn't. He shouldered the sack of vegetables one morning and told me to get my jacket and come with him. Pap would usually be walking slow and studying the forest. He'd look for deer scrapes and hog rootings and any other signs that might help us find game once the weather turned cold. But that day his mind was on other things, and he stared straight ahead and didn't slow down.

Mr. Abroscotto was sitting behind the counter reading a newspaper when we walked in. "Mornin', George," Pap said. Mr. Abroscotto set down his paper and stood up. "Mornin', Oli. How you, Moon?" "I'm fine," I said. "What do you two have for me?" Pap showed Mr. Abroscotto the sack of vegetables. "Cucumbers, eggplant, and beets," he said. Mr. Abroscotto took the sack to the scales. He weighed the vegetables separately and then put them all in a brown box on the floor. "How does twenty bucks sound?" he said. "If that's what you can do, I don't guess we've got much choice." Mr. Abroscotto nodded and paid him from the register. Pap fidgeted the money into his pocket, and I knew he was in a better mood. "What more have you heard about that lawyer?" Pap asked. Mr. Abroscotto shook his head. "Haven't heard much. See his workmen in here all the time." "You know when they're gonna be done?" "They're tellin' me December. Gonna be moved in for Christmas." I stood behind Pap and looked around the store at the shelves of candy and canned food. I was careful not to let Pap see me, because I knew it would make him snap at me. Sometimes he made me wait outside while he went in and traded. He said it was too tempting for a boy inside the store. "What's he gonna do with that big place?" Pap asked. "I hear he likes to squirrel hunt." Pap shook his head and looked mad. "All that to hunt squirrels?" "Guess some people got more money than they know what to do with."

“Guess so,” Pap grumbled. “Let me have some salt, some .22 bullets, vinegar, box of nails, and matches.”

Mr. Abrosotto left to collect our supplies.

“How about some sugar this time, Pap?”

“Don’t need sugar.”

“How about some canned peas like we had that one time?”

“We’ve got a pile of toasted acorns you haven’t touched yet.”

I figured he wasn’t in the mood to buy extras. “We’ve got everything we need already, don’t you worry, Pap?”

Pap nodded. “Got everything we need,” he repeated.

We walked back up the road and into the forest, where we took a trail that I liked through a grove of cedars and tall field grass. That was the last time Pap left the forest.

Winter had been on us for two months, and the forest creatures were fat and fluffy in their new coats. It had started to snow once, but the ground didn't hold it, which always disappointed me. I only remembered a few times when there was enough snow to make tracks in. One of those times Pap and I made pine-bark sleds and had races down the riverbank. I'd always wanted to do it again.

On the morning Pap broke his leg, the north wind was tossing the tops of the trees and gray clouds raced over our heads. Pap was always alert when the wind stirred the forest floor and cartwheeled the leaves. It was hard to tell which sounds were natural and which weren't.

We were checking traps along a beaver dam only a mile from the lodge. With the wind blowing like it was and us being so close to Mr. Wellington's place, Pap must have been extra nervous. I think he was too busy looking around for signs of people to pay attention to where he was going. He slipped off the dam and got his shin caught between two branches. He had just enough time to turn and look at me before he fell into the beaver pond on his back. The water was so clear I saw his face staring up at me and wincing in pain. I jumped down after him and jerked at the branches until his leg came loose. The rest of Pap splashed into the water, and then he dragged himself out of the pond. After he was propped against a cypress knee, I went and found some sticks to use for a splint, and we bound his leg with the leather shoelaces from my moccasins.

That afternoon, I got Pap back to the shelter in the wheelbarrow. He pulled himself inside, and I saw how much his leg hurt by the sweat that soaked his face and clothes. I helped him up on the hide pile and stayed next to him to give him water as he needed it. Pap didn't like doctors, and he didn't like medicine that you couldn't find in the forest, so there wasn't much else for me to do.

Sometime that night Pap told me to take his boot off. I watched his hands white-knuckle the roof above his head while I pulled slowly on the heel. He didn't make any noise because it was nighttime.

When I got the boot off, bloody water and sand poured out of it. I cut the sock away with my knife and placed it to the side. We saved everything. Even a bloody sock could make a rag to patch clothes.

In the dim light of the grease lamp, I saw parts of Pap's bone coming through his shin. Seeing bone and blood and wounds was nothing to me. I dealt with them almost every day killing, skinning, and butchering animals. I only hesitated so that Pap would tell me what to do.

"Get a rag and wipe it off," he said. "Boil some water and put the rag in the water before you do."

"So the wound won't get infected?"

"That's right."

I went to the wood stove and did as he said. When I returned and began to gently wipe his leg, I watched his face. I saw his expression change when the rag went over the jagged portion of bone.

"Does it hurt?"

"Just keep wiping."

"You want me to go get Mr. Abroscotto?"

"Nothin' he can do you can't do yourself, boy."

I nodded and kept wiping. I stayed up with him that night after the wound was cleaned. After a while, Pap didn't seem to be concerned that we stay quiet anymore. He lay there and talked to me and

told me most of what he was thinking.

“Tell me again why we live out here,” he asked me.

“Because we never asked for anything and nobody ever gave us anything. Because of that, we don't owe anything to anybody.”

“Who is it that thinks we owe them somethin’?”

“The government.”

“That's right.”

After a moment: “And what's gonna happen to everybody that relies on the government?”

“When the war comes, they're not gonna be able to take care of themselves,” I said.

“They'll have forgotten how to grow food and trap game, how to make their own clothes and shelter,” he said.

“How to find their own medicine in the forest,” I said.

“That's right.”

“How to shoot rifles.”

“That's right,” Pap said. “All of those things.”

“And I know how to do it all.”

He nodded. I stood, walked over to the stove, and put some more wood into it. Even when Pap let it burn it all night, the heat was rarely enough to keep our breath from streaming in front of our faces.

I returned to the hide pile. “I'm not gonna get better,” he said.

“What?”

“I'm not gonna get better.”

“You're gonna die?”

He nodded.

I felt my stomach twist. “Tonight?”

“No, but soon. Somethin' like this leg won't heal.”

“How soon?”

“I don't know.”

“But I don't understand.”

“Think about it. Think about a deer that breaks its leg. What happens?”

“But you're not a deer!” I yelled.

“There's no difference. We're all animals.”

I felt like I would get sick on the floor. “What will I do?”

“That's what I'm gonna tell you.”

Pap said that it might not be long before Mr. Wellington ran me off the property. I would have to find someone else to live with. Pap said there were many other people like us all over the country. He said there were more now than ever. Most of them were out west, in Montana, Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming. Alaska was even better. A man could still homestead in Alaska. He could get to places where no one would find him. People could still make a living off trapping up there. Hides were worth something in Alaska. I'd have to find my way there.

“But how?”

“You'll figure it out. You can't rely on me anymore. Just remember the things I taught you. Take cover durin' the day and move at night. Use the stars. Don't trust anybody. Write me smoke letters when you get lonely.”

“Do you talk to Momma with smoke letters?”

“Sometimes I do,” he said.

“Does she say anything back?”

“She does, but not in the way you’d think.”

“How will I get answers from the smoke?”

Pap didn’t say anything for a few seconds. “You just do what I tell you,” he finally said.

For the first couple of days I tried to keep our regular routine each morning while Pap was sick. I rose before daylight and checked the traps. I brought back what I caught, skinned it, butchered it, and prepped the hide. I hauled water from the creek and cut needles for tea. In the late afternoon, I did my reading lessons.

But it was hard to keep my mind on these things with Pap lying in the shelter getting worse. Suddenly it seemed like there wasn’t a reason for doing anything. Mr. Abroscotto hadn’t bought out hides in years. We had plenty of water stored up already, and if Pap was going to die soon, why did we need more? And how would I find a place like Alaska on my own?

I couldn’t clean Pap’s wound without him twisting about in pain. Finally, he told me to stop worrying over it and leave it alone. “It won’t do it any good,” he said. “It’s too far gone to trouble over.”

“It’s not too much trouble, Pap. I don’t mind.”

“Leave it be. Put that rag away.”

“What if we cut it off?”

“Too late. Infection’s up my whole leg.”

I started crying. “I can’t live by myself, Pap!”

He shook his head. “Shut up, boy. You don’t cry, you hear me?”

I wiped my eyes and nodded at the floor. I put my arms around his neck. “I can’t do it, Pap. I can’t make it to Alaska. I can’t fight the government. I like it here. I don’t see why I can’t get Mr. Abroscotto to come help you.”

“He’ll just get the law down on you.”

“I can run from the law. I can get away.”

Pap didn’t answer me. He was quiet for a long time. “You’ll be all right,” he finally said. “I don’t wanna hear any more about it.”

I wrote Pap a letter that first night after I buried him.

Dear Pap,

I'm going to see Mr. Abroscotto in the morning and ask him if he knows anything about getting to Alaska. Seeing as how I'll be leaving soon, I'll pull up the traps tomorrow and pack them in the boxes. I am going to take your watch and sell it to Mr. Abroscotto. I thought about keeping it for myself, but I don't need it and you were never much on things a person didn't need. I'm scared, Pap, but I know I can lick most anything three times my size. I know I can survive on my own and keep away from the government. I'm lonely, too, but you said that will go away after a while. It doesn't seem like a feeling that goes away easy. But you always knew about things, so I'm not worried.

Love, Moon

I burned the letter in the woodstove and then walked to the back corner of the shelter where Pap kept his personal storage. It was a metal ammunition box containing his watch and a few other things he called his "valuables" and never let me see. The first time he brought out the box was when Momma died. He showed me the watch and said she gave it to him when they were married. It had "Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Blake—1968" etched into the back. On my eighth birthday I asked about the watch again. I think it made him remember Momma, and he let me study it. He told me that one day it would be mine.

When I got the box out that night, I realized that Pap hadn't told me where the key was that opened it. I didn't want to bust it in case I damaged the watch and anything else in there that I might be able to sell. I searched under Pap's bed and up in the roots of the ceiling. I felt around the hole that led to the stage-two area. After a while, I gave up and sat with the box between my legs on the hide pile.

The fire in the stove went out, and I didn't feel like starting it again. The shelter grew cold and damp and dark. I thought I would have nightmares if I slept, so I tried to stay awake and imagine what it would be like in Alaska. But I got so lonely that I decided nightmares were worth it. I closed my eyes and slept.

The next morning I woke before daylight and went to pick up the traps and release or throw away anything that was caught in them. There were two dead coons with stiff, matted hides. I pulled them from the steel jaws and tossed them into the brush because the meat was spoiled. When I returned, I packed the traps in the two wood boxes we used to store them and stacked them beside the shelter.

After watching Pap die, I found that his finally being gone had made things easier on me. I still felt a deep, lonely hole, but as much as I missed him, I could now concentrate on what he'd told me to do and get started to Alaska.

I put my box on the floor of Mr. Abroscotto's store and sat on it. I was tired and breathing hard.

"You all right, Moon?" Mr. Abroscotto asked me.

I nodded at the floor.

"You carry that box all the way from your place by yourself?"

I nodded again. Finally catching my breath, I looked up at him. "I was hopin' you might wanna buy the stuff in it."

"Where's your father at?"

"He's dead."

Mr. Abroscotto put his hands on the counter and leaned towards me. "Dead!"

"Yessir."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"How?"

"He broke his leg and it got infected."

Mr. Abroscotto frowned and shook his head. "I guess he didn't want you comin' after a doctor."

"Nossir. He always said when it—"

"I know what he always said. You wait here while I call the constable."

"You don't need to worry about that, Mr. Abroscotto. I already buried him up in the cedar grove near Momma."

"Moon, you can't just go off buryin' somebody without lettin' the law know about it."

"Pap wanted it that way."

"Well, your pap wanted lots of things that don't make sense. I don't mind tellin' you that." Mr. Abroscotto walked over to the wall and lifted the telephone receiver.

I stood and grabbed my box off the floor. "If you call the law, they'll take me away. I don't aim to go with 'em."

He watched me for a moment and then put the receiver back on the hook. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. "Put your box down," he said. "Get that chair behind you, and pull it up here."

I did as he said.

"What do you want to eat?" he asked me.

"I don't have money for extras. I gotta save it."

"That's all right. It's free."

"Bologna and cheese."

"Mustard?"

"No thanks. That's all."

Mr. Abroscotto began to fix me a sandwich. My mouth watered at the bologna, cheese, and bread that I only saw when I came to his store.

"I'm sorry about your father, Moon. I didn't mean to sound like I wasn't."

"That's okay. He said I'd feel better after a while."

“Where you headed when you leave here?”

“Alaska.”

“How you plan on gettin’ to Alaska?”

“Sell the watch and things in this box. And I’ve got the money left over from last time we were here.”

“I see. What are you gonna do when you get there?”

“Pap said there’s other people like us there. He said you can get away from the government out there. Said you can homestead.”

“That’s what he said?”

“Yessir. So that’s where I figure I’ll go.”

Mr. Abroscotto handed me the sandwich and leaned on the counter watching me eat.

“You know how cold it is in Alaska?”

I chewed and shrugged my shoulders.

“You’re not worried about freezin’ up there?”

“Pap said there’s a lot of people like us in Alaska that I can stay with. He said there’s more than ever these days.”

“You ever thought about school, Moon?”

“I study my books almost every day.”

Mr. Abroscotto shook his head. “That’s not what I mean. With other children?”

“Pap said he could teach me better than any school.”

“You know how to read?”

“Sure I know how to read. I can whip somebody three times my size, too. And I know everything I need to know to live on my own.”

He bit his bottom lip. “Uh-huh . . . Tell me, what type of people are you lookin’ for in Alaska? What does your father call the type of people that are like him?”

“People that hate the government.”

“And he just expects you to make it from here to Alaska and find these people on your own?”

I nodded.

Mr. Abroscotto sighed and looked out the store window, then back at me. “I’m gonna tell you somethin’, Moon. Your pap was an unreasonable person. Anybody that expects their ten-year-old son to try and make it from the middle of Alabama to Alaska on just a few dollars is either crazy or plain mean. You need to find a home with a good family that doesn’t live out in God-knows-where with a dirt floor. You’ve—”

I felt anger flash through my head. I jumped up on the seat of my chair and leaped across the counter to land on Mr. Abroscotto. He fell back into the shelves behind, and I started hitting him with my one hand that wasn’t holding on to him. I pounded him on the cheek over and over as fast as I could. Once he got his balance, he clamped his arms around me so that I couldn’t move my fists.

“Moon!” he yelled at me.

I kicked him in the knee. “Mother mercy!” he yelled.

“I don’t mind the way we lived!” I yelled at him. “Pap and I always got along!”

Mr. Abroscotto twisted me around and held me out by the shoulders so I couldn’t see or kick him. “God, that hurt!” he said.

“Me and Pap were good friends!” I yelled. “Best friends.”

He held me there for what seemed like a long time. I heard him catching his breath behind me, and I stared across the store. Finally, his breathing slowed again, and he talked to me.

“You gonna settle down?”

“If you stop talkin’ about my pap like that.”

“I’m gonna turn you loose now, okay?”

“Okay.”

“You’re gonna sit back down on that chair, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’m gonna set you down now.”

“Okay.”

Mr. Abroscotto put me on the counter and I climbed back down into my chair. He ran his hand through his hair and rolled his head around on his neck. He took a deep breath. “Man my age can’t take somebody jumpin’ on him like a wild monkey. What’s gotten into you Moon?”

I picked my sandwich off the floor and stared at it without taking a bite. I was nervous. I’d never acted like that to Mr. Abroscotto. “Don’t talk like that about Pap,” I said to the floor.

“Listen, Moon, I’m not tryin’ to be disrespectful of your father; I’m tryin’ to help you out. I’m worried about your sense of reality.”

I thought about what he was saying and made sure there wasn’t anything I didn’t like about it.

“You don’t know any better,” he said. “If your pap just up and dies of a broken leg because he won’t see a doctor, what do you think would’ve happened to you if you’d have broken your leg? It’s things like that that aren’t reasonable, Moon. Refusin’ to see a doctor when you’ve got the responsibility of a son to take care of—there’s somethin’ wrong with that. Now he’s dead, and you’re out walkin’ around on the highway wantin’ to go to Alaska.”

I stood and took a step backwards. My hands were shaking and I didn’t know what to do. “Nobody ever said anything bad about Pap,” I said.

“Heck, who would? Who did he ever let you see that might say it?”

I set the sandwich down. “Are you gonna give me money for this stuff or not?”

Mr. Abroscotto shook his head. “Suit yourself.”

I waited while Mr. Abroscotto walked to the back of the store to get a chain cutter. My head spun in confusion, and my hands still shook from being nervous. It was hard to think straight, so I walked to the front of the counter and stared at the box.

When Mr. Abroscotto returned, he clipped the lock from the box and opened it. He pulled out a small roll of money, some photographs, and the watch. There was nothing else to sell. He thumbed through the photographs and studied each one, back and front, for several seconds. He finally showed one to me and asked if I knew any of the people in it.

“Nossir.”

He looked at the picture again. “This fellow here looks an awful lot like your pap. I’d even say he was his brother if I was to make a guess at it. He ever tell you that you had an uncle or talk about his brother or anything like that?”

“Nossir.”

“He ever talk about any family?”

“Said I had a grandpappy that died. Talked about Momma a lot when he didn’t think I was listenin’—when he was workin’ on stuff and talkin’ to himself.”

“Maybe you’ve got other relatives that hate the government. You might have someplace to go.”

“I just want the money for that watch there.”

Mr. Abroscotto raised his hands in the air. “All right,” he said. He opened the register and took some money from it. He put the bills, photographs, and the watch back in the box and shut the lid.

"I'm not gonna take that watch your pap left you. I stuck some money in there with the rest of it. Th should help you out. You can pay me someday when you get back from Alaska."

"Thank you," I said.

"Anything you need in the way of supplies before you get goin'?"

"Nossir. I can get most everything I need from the forest."

"I reckon you can, Moon."

"I'll see you later, then," I said.

"You be careful."

I nodded.

I saw Mr. Abroscotto through the store window as I walked back up the road. He had picked up th phone and was talking and watching me leave. I figured he called the law, so I tucked the box und my arm and ran for the trees.

Dear Pap,

I think the law is after me now, so I am going to start for Alaska tomorrow. I meant to ask Mr. Abroscotto if he had a map, but I had to whip up on him for talking mean about you. I'm afraid if I go back again the law will be there waiting for me.

Before I left he gave me some money and I added it to the money that you already had in the box. I don't know how much it is because I haven't counted it, but I didn't have to sell your watch.

He said you might have a brother, but I know you would have told me about that. He said you might have let me die if it was me that had broken my leg, but I know that's not true, either.

I'm trying to listen to the sounds outside, but I don't think I'm as good at it as you are. I went out to take a leak a few minutes ago and there was a coon swimming around in the curing barrel. You'd have thought I'd have heard that.

I wasn't lonely today, but I am tonight. I wish there was someone else out here to talk to. Maybe you can talk to me soon if you get a chance.

Love, Moon

That night I started a small fire in the woodstove and burned the letter. After the letter was just ashes, I put out the fire so that no one would see the smoke. The only light left was that of the grease lamp we'd made in a can that flickered and put shadows on the walls. I wondered if I'd ever have a place as nice when I got to Alaska. Then I tried to imagine what the person I would live with looked like. I wondered if any boys my age were there. I felt the loneliness creeping over me, and lay on the hide pile with my jacket covering me and my hat pulled down low. I hugged my knees to my chest and listened to the night sounds.

Eventually the grease lamp went out and it was so dark that I couldn't see my hands in front of my face. At one point I heard something moving outside and fear bolted through me and I hugged my knees tighter. It wasn't like me to be scared of creatures moving in the night, but I wasn't myself with all the loneliness in that dark hole.

"Pap," I whispered, thinking that maybe he was out there. Maybe he was going to talk to me and make me feel okay again. I took off my hat so I could hear better and held my breath and listened. Whatever creature had been moving outside stopped.

"Pap, can you hear me?"

I heard the creature scurry off through the leaves. Then I started thinking about the good times I had with Pap when we'd swim in the creek and make flutter mills and scratch tic-tac-toe in the dirt. All these memories poured on me like a waterfall until I was shaking and crying. Then I couldn't talk anymore and leaped off the hide pile and ran out into the night. "Stop!" I cried after the creature. Even if it was just a coon or an armadillo, I wanted something to be with me that night. "Don't leave! Come back!" But my shouts made the rest of the forest creatures duck away and grow silent. I was le

standing in the clearing with only the sound of the wind in the treetops. Then I imagined that the law was all around me. I started breathing hard and staring into the darkness beyond the trees. Suddenly I was running as fast as I could. Spiderwebs covered my face and tree branches slapped my cheeks. Every time I thought about slowing, I imagined people running behind me. I wasn't taking any trails that I knew of, but following the gaps in the trees. Sometimes the ground would fall from under me and I'd roll down a hill, only to get back up at the bottom and keep going. I crashed through a creek and climbed up a steep bank by clutching tree roots. At the top of the bank was a clearing that I dashed across and then ran on again beneath the tall pines.

Eventually, I broke from the trees onto the lawyer's new road. It felt better to have clear space around me where I could see that nothing was hidden and watching me. I started down the road, and the air whistled past my ears and my moccasins padded on the soft dirt. I kept on until the new lodge rose in front of me. The sight of it made me stop and stare up at the windows on the second floor.

"Hello," I said, but not loud enough for anyone to hear.

The lodge was dark except for one lit room on the corner. I stepped sideways across the clearing and saw a man sitting in the room reading a book. I sucked in deep breaths to calm myself the way I always did before I pulled the trigger on a rifle, and my panic began to go away. It made me feel better to watch the man, even though I didn't know him and didn't want him to know I was outside. I couldn't see there was at least one other person in the world besides me.

I sat against a tree at the edge of the clearing. The wind rustled the treetops and reminded me that I'd left the shelter without my jacket and hat. I pulled up my knees to keep warm and watched the lit room.

It was just breaking day when I opened my eyes and saw the man standing over me with a rifle. He leaped to my feet and stared at him.

"What are you doing out here?" he said.

I was too startled to reply.

"Are you lost?"

I shook my head.

"You're the boy who buried his father, aren't you? The constable's been out here looking for you."

"I didn't do anything wrong."

"I didn't say you did. I was just about to step off into the woods and do a little hunting. I saw you sitting here."

"I'll go now."

He put his rifle over his shoulder and motioned towards the lodge. "Come on inside. I'll fix you something to eat. I can go hunting tomorrow."

"I better not. The law's gonna be after me soon."

"I've got a chime that goes off if anyone drives through my gate. I'll know if somebody comes for you. Besides, from what those surveyors said, it would take an Indian chief to find your shelter."

I didn't know what a chime was, but it made me feel better to hear that the constable wasn't close.

"Are you Mr. Wellington?"

"I am."

"I got scared out there last night. I shouldn't be here."

"Do you like sweet rolls?"

"I never had any."

"Let's go get some, then. I've got one left on the counter that I didn't eat."

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