Angel's Rest

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Extract

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Chapter One



People said he was crazy. He'd come down from Angel's Rest a couple times a week and folks cleared the sidewalks when he passed. Hollis lived alone in a tar-papered plywood shack halfway up the mountain next to the reservoir. Most of the town was scared of him. I was, too, even before Daddy died and rumors started floating all over town. For as long as I can remember, my mother told me to stay away from Hollis Thrasher. I asked why, she gave me her most severe look and said nothing. I once asked Dad about Hollis, too, got the same look, and he said I'd better leave that poor feller alone.

I'd occasionally see Dad speak to Hollis or give him a ride from here to there. I remember seeing him almost every Tuesday night when our small library stayed open past seven o'clock. Mom worked there in the evenings to help kids read and I'd walk down there with her sometimes.

Hollis would barricade himself in a corner with a fort of stacked books. He had a look about him that said stay away and his face looked hard as a split chunk of firewood behind that brushy beard. He couldn't hide his eyes though. They were shiny and black and looked like the eyes an animal that hunted at night would have. I guess that's why some called him Wolf.

I was maybe seven or eight when I got the nerve to walk by Hollis Thrasher as he sat on the floor in the far corner of the library. Most people thought it better to walk to the other end of the long bookcase rather than disturb Hollis. I did, too, but I'd become curious as to what kind of books a man like him would read and besides, I got dared to do it.

I paused going by to take a look, he caught me staring and I wanted to run, wishing I'd taken my Mom's advice. But I couldn't move. He looked like a wax museum monster sitting there so big and still with dead eyes that never blinked.

I finally ran and found Momma in the back storage room, and I locked the door behind me when she wasn't looking. She was fixing old books people had borrowed but not taken good care of. When it was time for her to tell everybody the library was closed, I looked down every row and Hollis was gone. I was glad he was and we never saw him on our walk home, either. I was even gladder of that.

The next day I told and retold my tale of courage at school. I still had friends back then. It was one of those moments of glory everyone has.

About the time I was finishing fifth grade, I noticed that

I hardly saw Hollis anymore. He didn't come to the library much and he'd quit thumbing on the corner of Main Street. Every now and then I'd see him trying to sell a sack of firewood he'd tote over a shoulder, or he'd be sitting on the bench in front of the Piggly Wiggly. Once I saw him swinging an axe one-handed behind the hardware store where Dad said he'd bust up pallets for bean money, but that was about all. Hollis only had the one good arm because the other one got shot up in a war, Daddy said.

Like most people in Sunnyside, Virginia, I grew up on the side of Angel's Rest, too. It was a big, blue-green wave that met the sky and went on forever with ridges that blocked out the sun in the afternoon. Mom told me folks named it Angel's Rest because it was so high the earth's caretakers took breaks on the peaks before they came down to help those in need of God's assistance. I'd never been all the way to the top. Mom said it was always cold and windy up there. I didn't mind the cold and wind, but I wasn't in a hurry to meet a resting angel.

Our town had one stoplight, a grocery store and two filling stations that hoped to catch people with empty gas tanks on either side of the town limits. There were lots of gravel and dirt side streets, most of them dead ends, but one road with paint on it would take someone in or out of that narrow valley.

Sunnyside could have been a pleasant place to grow up. In 1967 that small town was slow as drying dew, but there was plenty for young boys who didn't know anything different.

Some new people moved up near the reservoir the spring

that Daddy got killed. Out of the seven kids they had, I eventually became best friends with one of the middle ones, named Jimmy.

Jimmy Peyton was my best friend. The Peyton family was poor or near it like the rest of us in Sunnyside, so they immediately fit in and I became friends with Jimmy one day after Sunday school when he asked where the good fishing holes were on Catawba Creek.

Jimmy was one of those tall, raw-boned boys who'd be good in school sports if he ever played them. He had a birthmark the size of a Sunday-school coat button on the center of his forehead and everyone in his family called him Spot or Bulls-eye, but Jimmy didn't like either of those names so I called him Jimmy.

Some folks just don't talk much, and Jimmy was that way but when he did people tended to listen. He was a couple years older than me, but we were in the same grade.

Jimmy and me ran the creek banks and ridges of that rural, green county. His mom didn't seem to care that he was gone all the time and after a while Jimmy started sleeping at my house a lot. We played war and built lookouts and lean-tos and started our own Boy Scout troop. We didn't have any uniforms or any adult leaders. We did have a ragged scout book that I'd swiped from the library, and one day after Jimmy and me swam in Miller's Pond, I flipped a lucky penny squashed on a southbound train track to see who the troop leader would be. He won but I wanted him to anyway.

We tried to get some of my old friends into our troop

but after a day of recruiting, we could only muster up Jimmy's brother, Alvin, and the Wilson twins.

Alvin was with us all the time anyway because Jimmy always had to take his kid brother along. I made up the secret initiation oath—Jimmy said I had a talent for that sort of thing—and he poked the holes in everyone's finger with a pocketknife he'd stolen from Barton's store once when he found the knife case unlocked.

Alvin was the first to enlist by taking the blood oath. He almost flunked the test when he started crying and had a hard time swearing his loyalty while sucking on his finger at the same time. The Wilson boys didn't have any friends and we didn't, either, so we let them join, too. I can remember them being pretty excited when we told them about our troop.

Harry and George Wilson were strange from day one. About the only thing I can remember about first grade is those two boys showing up on the first day wearing matching red capes that their mom had sewn a big letter "S" on. The teacher told the class not to make fun of Harry and George because they both wore masks and stuttered something fierce, and we didn't until they both locked themselves in a closet and stayed there all afternoon until the teacher finally convinced them to come out.

They quit wearing those capes before they joined our troop or we wouldn't have let them in.

Once the whole troop had taken the sacred oath, Jimmy and me went up on the mountain to find a spot for our fortress. The Wilson twins were sent home to fetch hammers,

saws and nails, and Alvin went home to steal a tin of snuff from his grandmother.

We all met a couple hours later at the reservoir, and it wasn't long before we found the perfect site. The five of us stood, kicked dirt and looked for treasure when I walked down to the stream and took a cool drink. "It's paradise," I said.

The name stuck.

Paradise was located on a flat spot in a hollow off an old grown-over path. It was beside a small mountain spring and was about a fifteen-minute hike from the end of the town road. The best thing about Paradise was there had been a house there at one time, because there was a burned-out chimney and some old, charred boards we could use to build our fortress.

We worked all day, me and the rest of the boys, building walls while Jimmy carved a big chair out of an old stump. By afternoon, Jimmy had made a lopsided table where we could talk troop business.

I'd been camping with Dad a few times but was surprised that evening when I asked my mom if I could camp on the mountain with just my friends. I found her in bed like she was so much of the day since Daddy was killed. She had an arm covering her eyes. I hated the way she stayed in that dark room so much and couldn't hardly stand going in there for any reason anymore but I had to.

"Hi, Angel," she said real quiet.

I'd planned what I was gonna say and started telling her who all was going and how careful I'd be with matches and stuff like that, figuring she wouldn't be in a mind to let me go unless I put it to her right.

She interrupted me and said, "It'll get chilly tonight so take a couple of blankets from the hall closet. And you may want to take a tarp—"

"I know what to take camping, Momma."

"Okay, baby."

For the first time that I could remember, I felt like a grown-up and it scared me for a minute. I would have sworn she'd have said no.

I didn't dare say anything else, figuring I needed to get out of the house quick before she changed her mind. I threw a can of soup, a big hunk of corn bread, two blankets and book matches in a sack and headed out the door for Jimmy's house, where he and Alvin were waiting ready to go. The three of us waited at the reservoir until almost dark for the Wilson twins, then figured their mom had said no, and headed up to Paradise without them.

When we got there, Jimmy didn't want to build a fire in the burned-out fireplace because he said we should make a fire like the Indians and trappers used to make. Right in the middle of that flat spot, we made our first big fire and hung our cans of soup using wire and propped sticks and put our toes as close to the flames as we could until we had to pull away. We all agreed how good it was to be in a troop. After everybody ate their supper and it started getting quiet, I thought about telling a ghost story but it had already gotten dark and I didn't want to scare myself, so I didn't. I wondered if everyone else had the same thought because nobody told any stories about women in white dresses floating above the fields or places in the forest that the devil has

claimed. It was unusual on a camping trip not to hear something that keeps you up half the night. I did make the motion that we should take turns as lookouts to keep the fire going until morning. Jimmy agreed, so everybody else did, too, and I volunteered for the first shift 'cause I couldn't sleep anyway.

None of us had a watch but I guess it was around midnight when I heard the far-off sounds of breaking branches. It got quiet for a spell after that except for the normal sorts of strange utterances a mountain says at night. I couldn't see or hear nothing, but a feeling came over me slow and all over—like what happens when you get too cold—that something was out in the darkness watching me. I tried to tell myself I was imagining things until leaves started crunching way down in the hollow.

The sound of those leaves got closer and then the breeze shifted and it seemed like what was mashing them was miles away. Then it got completely still until I heard something breathing. I knew I wasn't scared half to death for no good reason.

I could see a good ten yards with the fire and full moon and the knot in my throat got tighter by the second. I stood up with my guard stick, couldn't get out any words to wake up Jimmy so I kicked him and he jumped up all addled because I kicked him a lot harder than I meant to. Alvin crawled out of his blanket, threw more wood on the fire and we waited as the noise got even louder. It got to where I couldn't hear from my heart beating in my ears and I looked at Jimmy and saw the back of his dungarees shaking.

I got really scared then.

The large form of something appeared and it stopped. Alvin screamed and I may have, too. I thought it was a bear until the huge, dark shape got closer and I saw the overalls and looked into the black eyes of Hollis Thrasher.

Everybody saw the chunk of lumber in his right hand except for me. I stared at those eyes. Tiny flickers of flames began reflecting back at me.

"Boys, I own this piece of ground and it's special to me," he said.

Hollis kept looking at us and nobody could say anything. Then his eyes leveled on me and he took a step closer to the edge of the fire.

"Stay tonight, just move your camp a ways down the hollow or up on the ridge next time."

As soon as he turned to leave, Alvin'd already wet his britches.

"What're we gonna do, Jimmy?" Alvin said, crying. "He might come back and kill us."

Jimmy turned and peed on the fire, I threw a jug of spring water on what was still alit, and in one motion, we all looked at each other, took off running and yelling like our butts were a-blazing and didn't stop until we got to the reservoir.

I got home that night and the door was unlocked. It surprised me 'cause Mom had gotten real serious about locking the door after Daddy was shot. I walked in and there was a note on the kitchen table. It said that a lot of boys come home early on their first camping trip and there was rhubarb pie in the refrigerator.

I lay in bed the rest of that night awake because every time I closed my eyes, I saw a huge man-wolf standing alone on a windy mountain ridge with fire in his eyes. And if I weren't seeing that, I found myself in the middle of that awful nightmare where I was standing in the kitchen as my mother screamed and screamed and screamed wearing a bloody apron.

I guess I did eventually get to sleep because Mom shook me the next morning to go to Dad's old shop. I jumped out of bed and was glad I didn't have to sleep or try to sleep for another whole day. I liked daytime a whole lot better than nighttime after Daddy was buried. I only dreamed in the dark, you see.