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Opening Extract from...

The Cove

Written by Ron Rash

Published by Canongate Books Ltd

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First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

www.canongate.tv

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First published in the USA in 2012 by HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

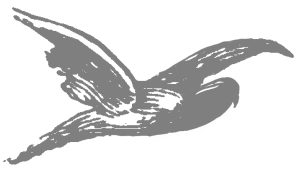
ISBN 978 0 85786 261 7

Designed by Mary Austin Speaker

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

This book is printed on FSC certified paper





I

CHAPTER ONE

At first Laurel thought it was a warbler or thrush, though unlike any she'd heard before—its song more sustained, as if so pure no breath need carry it into the world. Laurel raised her hands from the creek and stood. She remembered the bird Miss Calicut had shown the class. A Carolina Parakeet, Miss Calicut had said, and unfolded a handkerchief to reveal the green body and red and yellow head. Most parakeets live in tropical places like Brazil, Miss Calicut explained, but not this one. She'd let the students pass the bird around the room, telling them to look closely and not forget what it looked like, because soon there'd be none left, not just in these mountains but probably in the whole world.

Sixteen years since then, but Laurel remembered the long tail and thick beak, how the green and red and yellow were so bright they seemed to glow. Most of all she remembered how light the bird felt inside the handkerchief's cool silk, as if even in death retaining the weightlessness of flight. Laurel couldn't remember if Miss Calicut described the parakeet's song, but what she heard now seemed a fitting match, pretty as the parakeets themselves.

As Laurel rinsed the last soap from her wash, the song merged with the water's rhythms and the soothing smell of rose pink and bee balm. She lifted Hank's army shirt from the pool and went to where the granite outcrop leaned out like a huge anvil. Emerging from the mountain's vast shadows was, as always, like stepping from behind a curtain. She winced from the sunlight, and her bare feet felt the strangeness of treading a surface not aslant. The granite was warm and dry except on the far side where the water flowed, but even there the creek slowed and thinned, as if it too savored the light and was reluctant to enter the cove's darkness.

Laurel laid Hank's shirt near the ledge and stretched out the longer right sleeve first, then the other. She looked around the bedraped granite, her wash like leavings from the stream's recent flooding. Laurel raised her chin and closed her eyes, not to hear the bird but to let the sun immerse her face in a warm waterless bath. The only place in the cove she could do this, because the outcrop wasn't dimmed by ridges and trees. Instead, the granite caught and held the sunlight. Laurel could be warm here even with her feet numbed by the creek water. Hank had built a clothesline in the side yard but she didn't use it, even in winter. Clothes dried quicker in the sunlight and they smelled and felt cleaner, unlike the cove's depths where clothes hung a whole day retained a mildewed dampness.

They'll dry just as quick if I ain't watching, Laurel told herself, and set down the wicker basket. She remembered how Becky Dobbins, a store owner's daughter, asked why the farmer killed such a pretty bird. Because they'll eat your apples and cherries, Riley Watkins had answered from the back row. Anyway, they're the stupidest things you ever seen, Riley added, and told how his daddy fired into a flock and the unharmed parakeets didn't fly away but kept circling until not one was left alive. Miss Calicut had shaken her head. It's not because they're stupid, Riley.

Laurel followed the creek's ascent, stepping around waterfalls and rocks and felled trees when she had to, otherwise keeping her feet in water and away from any prowling copperhead or satinback. The land steepened and the water blurred white. Oaks and tulip poplars dimmed the sun and rhododendron squeezed the banks tighter. Laurel paused and listened, the bird's call rising over the water's rush. They never desert the flock, Miss Calicut had told them, and Laurel had never known it to be otherwise. On the rarer and rarer occasions the parakeets passed over the cove, they always flew close together. Sometimes they called to one another, a sharp cry of *we we we*. A cry but not a song, because birds didn't sing while flying. The one time a flock lit in her family's orchard, the parakeets had no chance to sing.

But this parakeet, if that's what it was, did sing, and it sang alone. Laurel sidled around another waterfall. The song became louder, clearer, coming not from the creek but near the ridge crest. As quietly as possible, Laurel left the water and made her way through trees twined with virgin's bower, then into a thicket of rhododendron. Close now, the song's source only a few yards away. On the thicket's other side, sunlight fell through a breech in the canopy. Laurel crouched and moved nearer, pulled aside a

last thick-leaved rhododendron branch. A flash of silvery flame caused her to scuttle back into the thicket, brightness pulsing on the back of her eyelids.

The song did not pause. She blinked until the brightness went away and again moved closer, no longer crouching but on her knees. Through a gap in the leaves she saw a haversack, then shoes and pants. Laurel lifted her gaze, her eyelids squinched to shutter the brightness.

A man sat with his back against a tree, eyes closed as his fingers skipped across a silver flute. All the while his cheeks pursed and puffed, nostrils flaring for air. The man's blond hair was a greasy tangle, his whiskers not yet a full beard but enough of one to, like his hair, snare dirt and twigs. Laurel let her gaze take in a blue chambray shirt torn and frayed and missing buttons, the corduroy pants ragged as the shirt, and shoes whose true color was lost in a lathering of dried mud. Sunday shoes, not brogans or top overs. Except for the flute, whatever else the man possessed looked to be in the haversack. A circle of black ground and charred wood argued he'd been on the ridge at least a day.

The song ended and the man opened his eyes. He set the flute across his raised knees and tilted his head, as though awaiting a response to the song. Perhaps one he would not welcome, because he appeared suddenly tense. His eyes swept past Laurel and she saw that no crow's feet crinkled the eyes, the brow and cheeks briar scratched but unlined. The eyes were the same blue as water in a deep river pool, the face long and thin, features more hewn than kneaded. Laurel tugged the muslin on her left shoulder closer to her neck. Then he closed his eyes again and pressed his lower lip to the metal, played something more clearly a human song.

Up this high, the rhododendron blossoms hadn't fully wilted. Their rich perfume and the vanilla smell of the virgin's bower made Laurel light-headed as minutes passed and one song blended into another. The sun leaned west and what light the gap in the trees allowed sifted away. The flute's sparkling silver muted to gray but the music retained its airy brightness.

It felt like she'd listened only a few minutes, but when Laurel got back to the outcrop Hank's shirt was almost dry. She gathered the socks and step-ins, her other muslin work dress, and Hank's overalls. A purple butterfly lit on the stream edge to sip water. A pretty hue, most anyone would say, the same way they'd speak of church glass or bull thistle as pretty. Just not pretty on white skin, though she hadn't known the difference until first grade. When she was eight, the taunts had gotten so bad that she'd scrubbed the birthmark with lye soap until the skin blistered and bled. With that memory came another, of Jubel Parton. Laurel placed the one-wristed army shirt in the basket last, its damp shadow lingering on the granite. Up on the ridge, the music stopped.

He could be coming down the creek, Laurel realized, maybe glimpsed her through the trees. For the first time, she felt a shiver of fear. As beautiful as the music had been, the man's scratched face and tattered clothes argued trouble, perhaps a tramp looking for a farmhouse to rob. Maybe do worse than just steal, she thought. Laurel looked toward the ridge and listened for the crunch of leaves. The only sound was the murmur of the stream. The music resumed, coming from the same place on the ridge.

She pressed the wicker basket against her belly and made her way down the trail. The air grew dank and dark and even darker as she passed through a stand of hemlocks. Toadstools

and witch hazel sprouted on the trail edge, farther down, nightshade and then baneberry whose poisonous fruit looked like a doll's eyes. Two days' rain had made the woods poxy with mushrooms. The gray ones with the slimy feel of slugs were harmless, Laurel knew, but the larger pale mushrooms could kill you, as could the brown-hooded kind that clumped on rotting wood. Chestnut wood, because that was what filled the understory more and more with each passing season. As Laurel approached her parents' graves, she thought of what she'd asked Slidell to do, what he said he'd do, though adding that at his age such a vow was like snow promising to outlast spring.

Laurel set the basket down and stood in front of the graves. One was fifteen years old, the other less than a year, but the names etched on the soapstone had been lichened to a similar gray-green smoothness. Laurel knew those who avoided this cove would see some further portent in such vanishing. But the barbed wire and colt and calves were portents too, good portents, though the best was Hank surviving the war when most people believed this place marked him for sure death. But Hank hadn't died. Missing a hand, but other men from outside the cove had fared much worse. Paul Clayton had been in a Washington hospital for two months and Vince Ford and Wesley Ellenburg had come home in flag-draped coffins. Soon Hank was going to get married, another good thing.

It would be an adjustment deciding who cooked or who cleaned, who swept the floors or drew the water. There'd be times she and Carolyn might get huffy with each other, but they'd figure it out. They'd become like sisters after a while. Carolyn was a reader, Hank had said, everything from her daddy's newspaper to books, so they'd have that in common. As Laurel left the woods, she saw Hank and Slidell stretching

barbed wire in the upper pasture. Eighty-one, but Slidell tried to help Hank an hour or two each day. With so many men conscripted, hired hands were scarce, those few around unwilling to work in the cove. Only Slidell would, and he refused money, only took an occasional favor in return. She watched as Hank set the wire in the crowbar's claw and pulled against the brace, enough strength garnered in that one arm and hand to stretch the strand tight as a fiddle string. Hank's right bicep was twice as big as the left, the forearm thick and ropy with blue veins that bulged with each pull. He was so much stronger than when he'd first returned from Europe. Strong enough that even one armed, no one, including Jubel Parton, would want to cross him.

Laurel stopped at the springhouse and set a quart jar of sweet milk and a cake of butter atop the clothes. Past time to start supper, but once on the porch she lingered and watched the men work. The pasture fence was nearly a quarter done, the wire strung and the locust posts deep rooted and straight, more proof to Carolyn's father, who sometimes watched from the notch head, that even with one hand Hank could support a wife and children. Hank remained tight lipped about his exact plans, the way he was about a lot of things, but last month Laurel had passed his room and seen him studying what their mother had called the wish book, a pencil in his hand. Later she'd taken the thick catalog off of Hank's bureau and found the pages he'd corner-folded. Penciled stars marked a Provider six-hole cast-iron range, Golden Oak chiffonier, and Franklin sewing machine. She'd been about to close the wish book when she saw another fold. This page showed a three-quarter-carat diamond ring. Beside the words *Must include ring size* Hank had written *6*.

Laurel went inside. She took the dough tray off its peg and set it on the cook table. As she opened the meal gum and scooped out flour with the straight cup, Laurel debated whether to tell Hank and Slidell about the man with the flute, decided not to.