


the
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of
forgotten
things

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For the men who built the Hawks Nest Tunnel,
the men whose breath was turned to stone.

May they never be forgotten.

For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;
they have no further reward,
and even their name is forgotten.
Their love, their hate
and their jealousy have long since vanished;
never again will they have a part
in anything that happens under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 NIV

one

Kline, West Virginia
Late May 1932

Sulley tore a rag into strips and wrapped each coin before tucking it into the bib pocket of his overalls. Wouldn't do to jingle as he made his way out of Kline after the sun went down. Was it his fault this place hadn't had a good rain since Noah started rounding up all the animals two by two? It'd take a miracle to find water around here.

But he'd made the effort. Put on a good show. The second well they'd dug had even produced a little wet down in the bottom. But it was just a seep—not enough to matter. Still, his time and effort oughta be worth what he was tucking away with such care. Of course, not everyone would see it his way. Which was why he'd promised to give dowsing one more try in the morning.

Except he wouldn't be here come morning. He'd written out instructions for them to dig a well near a snowball bush heavy with powder puff blooms. It was a long shot, but who knew? Maybe they would hit water and he'd be a hero.

A long-gone hero. He tucked the last coin away and settled back to wait for the moonless night to hide his leaving.



Jeremiah Weber was pretty sure Sullivan Harris couldn't find his own belly button with both hands. But his neighbors had gone and hired the self-proclaimed water witcher, believing he was going to transform Kline by finding wells up on the hills and ridges. Currently, most everyone lived within water-toting distance of Mill Run, which was the only reliable source of water. Even Jeremiah's well—one of the best around—typically ran dry a couple of times each year. But he always managed—there were springs for drinking and cooking. As for bathing, well, that could wait when necessary.

As if finding a few wells would suddenly bring folks rushing in from the cities. For pity's sake, did they even *want* that? He'd read about Hoovervilles popping up around the country, and they sounded terrible. But the deacons at church had this wild notion they could attract businessmen who'd lost almost everything in that stock market mess two years ago. They argued Kline could capitalize on a return to the land and farming—especially with the drought out west—if they could ensure a steady water supply.

Jeremiah shook his head as he stepped up onto Meredith's front porch. Why they wanted strangers and hoboes moving here and causing trouble, Jeremiah did not know. But then he'd never been one to rock the boat. As a matter of fact, he'd long been the one they looked to when the boat needed hauling to shore, so the hole in the bottom could be patched.

"Meri? You ready?" he called through the screen door. Arnold and Wendy tumbled out, each one grabbing ahold of a leg. The

boy was four and the girl almost three. They giggled and grinned up at him. “Alright then,” he said. “Got a good grip?”

“Yes sir,” Arnold crowed, latching on like a baby possum in a storm. Wendy just giggled some more and planted her little bare feet more firmly on top of his right boot. He began to walk around the porch, stepping wide and high as the children clung and laughed so hard tears ran down their cheeks.

“Jeremiah, you don’t have to do that.” Meredith appeared, wrapping a shawl around her shoulders and cinching it at her waist.

He shrugged. It wasn’t any trouble, and young’uns in Kline had little enough to entertain them. Of course, lately, they’d had a water dowsing putting on a show. And Jeremiah had a suspicion that’s all it was. “Why they’re giving that man another chance, I don’t know,” he said.

Meredith patted his arm. “Hope springs eternal,” she said. “I think today’s the day!”

“Hope so,” he grunted. Meredith was forever an optimist, which was a wonder when she’d married young, had two babies lickety-split, and then lost her husband to typhus. “Now if I can pry this pair of possums off my legs, we’ll go see if the third time really is the charm.”

They started down the road toward the church, enjoying the warmth of a bright spring day. Jeremiah was well familiar with the church building since it served as their schoolhouse during the week and he served as the teacher. It wasn’t something he’d set out to do, but while he looked like a lumberman, he’d actually gone to college and studied history. He’d meant to be a professor, until his widowed father took sick and he’d come home to look after him. It’d been twenty-five years now since Dad died and the locals asked him to teach their kids so they

didn't have to go so far for schooling. He always had been a soft touch when someone needed help.

Which was why he'd tried to help by suggesting they run Sullivan Harris off. Advice that fell on deaf ears. Just the day before, Sulley said he thought there was a likely spot for water out back of the one-room church, much to the delight of the deacons. Having a good source of water there would be a boon.

The dowser had slept on the ground the night before, claiming it helped put him in "synchronicity" with the water. Jeremiah thought it was all blather and said so, but he'd been outvoted when he suggested they ask for their money back and run Sulley out of the country.

As they approached the church, Jeremiah could see a tight knot of people out front. When Joe Randolph—head deacon—looked up, he saw him blanch.

"Found water already?" he called as they drew closer.

Joe pulled away from the group, his eyes darting all around. "Well, no. It would seem Mr. Harris has left us instructions on where to dig."

"Instructions? What kind of nonsense is that? Where is he?"

Joe swallowed hard and stuttered, "I-it would s-seem he's not about."

Jeremiah knew his face had turned stormy. Joe held both hands up. "Now, the note said he'd stayed for as long as he could. Probably has family eager to see him."

"Then why in tarnation wouldn't he have mentioned that before?" Stomping around back, Jeremiah sized up the situation. There was no camp. No bedding laid out by a fire ring. No signs of someone spending the night. "Couldn't find water so he ran off with your money," he announced to the group trickling

around the corner of the building. “Nothing but a swindler. I told you we needed to ask for that money back!”

Joe licked his lips and looked nervously around the group. “Let’s not jump to conclusions. He left us information about where to dig.” He held up a piece of paper. “It seems to me we shouldn’t call the man a swindler until we’re certain of the facts.”

“Horsefeathers!” Jeremiah hollered. “When did you get to be so doggone trusting of strangers?”

“But what can we do?” This from another deacon who was wringing his hands. “We borrowed some of that money we gave him from the General Conference. We have to pay it back in a year. Getting a well was supposed to bring more folks in. Help fill the collection plate.” His eyes were wide, and he looked like he might be sick.

“We’ve got our tools ready,” Joe said, sounding like he was gaining confidence. “Best thing is to dig where he said, see if we hit water, and go from there.”

“You’re wasting your time,” Jeremiah said. “Go after him is what I’d do. And quick, too, before he has a chance to get very far.” As soon as he spoke, he realized his mistake. Hope dawned in several eyes, and Meredith stepped closer to curl a hand around his arm and bat her eyelashes at him. “You’d do that for us?”

“I wasn’t . . . what I meant to say was . . .” He looked at the expectant faces around him. These folks scrimped and saved to be able to pay someone to find them water. Never mind that he thought they’d been taken for fools. He let his shoulders fall. “Alright then, dig your well. Here’s hoping I’m wrong.”

By dinnertime, Jeremiah felt pretty sure he hadn’t been wrong. And by suppertime everyone else was in agreement.

The well started dry and stayed that way, hope fading with the day's light. Jeremiah might have enjoyed feeling vindicated if it weren't for the hopeful looks everyone kept throwing his way. Last thing he wanted to do was light out after some charlatan with a good head start.

Joe, who had stripped to his undershirt and was now covered in grime, hoisted another bucket of dirt from the well and added it to the mound. Jeremiah had taken his turn down in the hole and was now leaning against the side of the church, watching. Joe sighed and ambled over.

"I'm afraid you might have been right about Sullivan Harris." He wiped his face with a dirty handkerchief. "Thing is, we're stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea here. Did you mean it when you said you'd go after him?"

Jeremiah felt a knot forming in the pit of his stomach. "I was just saying what I'd do if it were my money. Wasn't exactly offering."

"Even so." Several other folks gathered around, hope shining through the dirt and weariness of the day. Meri and the kids had gone home, but he could still see their woeful faces in his mind's eye.

"We'll look after your place for ye." This from Able Stevens, his eighty-two-year-old neighbor who could outwork most men half his age. "School's about done, and we'll help out with gasoline."

Jeremiah closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, then let the air out like he was rationing it. "*Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*" He'd often thought that verse was extra hard. "Alright then." He let his shoulders drop low. "Too late to start today. I'll head out come morning." He was pretty sure he was going to regret this.

two

Mount Lookout, West Virginia

June 1932

Sulley squinted into the sun as he ambled down what passed for Main Street. Hands shoved deep in the pockets of his new overalls, he whistled tunelessly as he took in every detail of the place from beneath the brim of his straw fedora. He flicked the brim, making sure it sat just right to shade the sun from his eyes. He had a good feeling about Mount Lookout. He'd surely find what he was looking for here. And at the moment what he was looking for was a few coins to rub together.

He'd had more than a few thanks to the good folks of Kline, but some good meals and a few needed items meant his funds had now run drier than those failed wells. He'd kept moving south and west ever since just in case those church folk were mad enough to come looking for him. He didn't think anyone would follow him this far, although he kept a sharp eye out just the same. Of course, keeping a sharp eye out was always a good idea.

"Howdy." He smiled and let his blue eyes spark at the farmer's wife stepping out of the general store. She flushed and smiled

back before ducking her head and hurrying on. He smirked. He could charm a snake out of its skin if he needed to.

He swung through the door of the Mount Lookout General Store, willing his eyes to adjust faster. First impressions were important—the ones you made as well as the ones you took in. He blinked and was glad to find the space mostly empty of people. There were shelves of dry goods, a long wooden counter with items on display alongside a gleaming cash register, and glass cases with gewgaws to tempt the ladies of the town. A colored girl, maybe thirteen or so, gave him a shy smile as she ran a dustcloth over the shelves. In the back, he saw a postal counter. A petite woman with dark hair in those short waves all the women seemed to wear these days stepped into view and narrowed her eyes at him. Sulley ducked his head and headed for the tobacco display as though considering exactly which one of the three kinds on offer he'd most like to smoke.

“Has anyone seen my granddaddy’s watch?” A voice roared out from the back of the room as a stout man with a balding head and bushy eyebrows stomped into view.

The woman behind the postal counter leaned forward. “George, there is no need to yell like that. We can hear you perfectly well.”

The man began rummaging around the cash register, moving things and muttering under his breath. “Had it this morning . . . can’t trust . . . things going missing.” He glared at the colored girl, who stood there frozen, a look of fear painted across her face.

“George.” The woman darted a look at Sulley as she hissed the man’s name. “You have a customer.”

Sulley quickly looked away and lifted the lid of a wooden cigarette display box. He picked up a pack of Lucky Strikes, plan-

ning to look thoughtful before putting them back—as though he were indecisive instead of broke. Something glinted as he lifted the pack. “Hey.” He spoke loudly enough to attract attention. The woman frowned at him, and the man came closer, clearly trying to compose himself.

“May I help you?”

“Might be I can help you,” Sulley said and held up the gold pocket watch he’d found inside the cigarette box.

“That’s it!” George almost lunged for the watch, and Sulley dropped it into his hand. “How’d you find it?”

Sulley shrugged. “Always have had a knack for finding things.”

“Well, you’ve saved me a whole heck of a lot of aggravation.”

Sulley could see how the girl who’d been holding her dustrag like a shield relaxed her grip and began dusting again. Although she didn’t take her eyes off the two men.

George stuck his hand out. “Name’s George Legg. I own this place, and if there’s anything I can do for you, just let me know.”

Sulley gripped the man’s hand and let a smile spread slow and easy. “Sullivan Harris. And as it happens, I’m passing through and sure could use a spot to rest up a bit before I hit the road again.” He let the smile fall. “I’d be proud to pay my way, but doggone if somebody didn’t steal my purse out there on the road.”

George slapped him on the back. “Don’t think a thing about it.” He shook his head with a frown. “Country’s overrun with hoboes and bums these days. All sorts passing through. Especially with that tunnel job down at Gauley Bridge.” He drew back and gave Sulley a hard look. “That where you’re headed?”

“Nope. I’ve got an aunt over in Charleston.” He winked and lowered his voice. “I’m her only kin, and she’s rich as Croesus. Seemed like a good time to visit.”

George guffawed and elbowed Sulley. “Right you are. Come on to the house with me and the wife’ll give you a hot meal and a soft bed.” He turned to the woman who was sorting mail as though she weren’t tuning her ears to pick up every word they said.

“Keep an eye on Arbutus. You know she’ll lay off if you don’t keep after her.”

The woman drew herself up, and even though she was shorter and smaller than either of them, Sulley had the distinct impression that she was looking down on them. “I have every confidence in Arbutus’s work ethic, but I will indeed keep an eye out if only so I might praise her when she does well.”

Sulley saw the girl stand a bit straighter, even as George rolled his eyes. “Come on,” he said, motioning for Sulley to follow. “Getting close to dinnertime.” The words were music to Sulley’s ears. He nodded to the woman behind her postal counter as they left the store. She nodded back without the least change in expression, but the look in her eyes made Sulley feel as though she’d seen through every lie he’d just spouted.



Gainey watched the stranger leave with George. While she loved his wife, Susan, like a sister, George grated on her nerves. And she’d be willing to bet—if she ever bet—that the handsome man with the piercing blue eyes and shock of sandy hair beneath his too-new hat was one of those very hoboes George complained about. He’d been sniffing around for a handout and had been wise enough to press his advantage when he happened to find the lost watch.

“Arbutus, didn’t I see Myrtle’s grandson handling that cigarette box this morning?”

“Yes’m. I think them other boys dared him to filch a cigarette, but he done lost his nerve when he saw you lookin’ at him.”

Gainey tapped a finger against her upper lip. That boy went from one scrape to the next. She wondered if he’d been stealing a cigarette or something more valuable. Regardless, what were the odds a stranger would walk in and find George’s watch just as he was looking for it? She glanced at Arbutus, worry creasing her forehead. And if she wasn’t mistaken, George had been on the verge of accusing his young employee of theft.

“Arbutus, be careful . . .”

The girl gave her a puzzled look. “What you want me to be careful about?”

Gainey shook her head. “Never mind. You’re one of the most careful people I know. I’m probably borrowing worry.”

“They’s sure enough of that to go around without needing to borrow any.”

Gainey smiled. “There certainly is. Thank you for the reminder.” But even as she resumed her duties, she thought this Sullivan Harris would bear watching if he didn’t move along in short order. Aunt in Charleston indeed.



Jeremiah flipped up the hood of the Model T and waved away the steam rolling out. Heaving a sigh, he fetched out a can of water and topped off the radiator. He’d been spending far too much time rambling around the country trying to track down Sullivan Harris. He was about ready to give up. Every time he thought he was on the right track, the trail ran cold. You’d think a rapsallion like Sulley would leave a trail of grief in his wake, but he was apparently lying low.

He’d gone out every other day in the beginning, counting

on Meredith to help as school wrapped up. But now, a good month later, he only ventured out if he thought he had a likely lead. Which is why he was broken down outside Summersville, miles from home, using up precious gasoline he didn't have to spare. Meri's cousin's neighbor here in town said someone had passed through offering to dowse for wells just a few days ago. She told Meri he was a real charmer with the prettiest blue eyes that made her almost wish she needed a well. If that wasn't Sulley Harris, he'd be a donkey's hind end. Which was what he felt like anyway.

Closing the hood, he pulled the choke and turned the hand crank. He was lucky that the nearly ten-year-old automobile wasn't too finicky about starting. Just a few miles farther along, he pulled in at a feed store and parked. He'd go around town on foot to save gas. If he didn't, he'd have to find a horse or a mule and turn his car into a Hoover wagon in order to get back home.

"Howdy," he called out to a man tossing sacks of feed over the wooden slats on the sides of a beat-up truck. The man nodded without pausing in his work. "Use a hand?"

"Always." The man didn't slow.

Jeremiah hopped up onto the loading dock and helped load the last few sacks. The man nodded, handed a ticket to the driver, and headed for the store.

"Got a minute?" Jeremiah asked.

"Nope, but if you're bound and determined to take one, I'll let you have it anyway."

"I'm looking for a fellow says he can find water."

"Can he?"

"If he can, he decided not to. Took some money from good folks and disappeared. I aim to get it back. One way or another. Heard he'd passed through here a few days ago."

“Whole country’s passing through from one place to another these days, and none the better for it.” He shoved his hat back and scratched his head. “Although come to think about it, there was a fella come through here who acted kind of slick.” He snorted. “The kind that’d do well with the ladies whether he had two nickels to rub together or not.”

“Blue eyes and curly hair?”

“Not that I paid much attention, but that sounds right.” He leaned in through the door and hollered, “Say, Jenny, you remember that good-lookin’ fella stopped off here the other day? Wanted to trade some roots or something for a handout?”

A stout woman with work-roughened hands and a square jaw walked over. She laughed from deep in her belly. “Boy, do I ever! Charm a bird off its nest.” Her already-ruddy cheeks flushed a shade darker. “Talked foolishness, but I’ll confess it was a pleasure to listen to him. Said he was good at finding things—water, missing trinkets, that sort of thing.” She slapped her hands together. “Told him all I was missing was my youth and good looks.” She shook with laughter. “And durn if he didn’t make me think I’d found ’em for a while.”

Jeremiah stepped closer. “When did he leave? And did he say where he was headed from here?”

“Headed out first of the week. Didn’t say where to, but he walked off to the south, whistling as he went.” She got a distant look in her eyes. “Gave him food and a place to sleep for a couple of nights and wished he would’ve stuck around longer, even though he weren’t no more use to me than teats on a boar hog.” She flashed Jeremiah a grin. “You find him, tell him he’s welcome to eat at Jenny’s table anytime.”

Jeremiah figured this was the closest he’d gotten to finding Sulley. And with him on foot and Jeremiah in a car, he just might

have a chance to catch up. He tugged at his ear, trying to think what to do next.

“You going after him?” The man he’d helped load feed was watching him closely. “He steal your woman, too?”

Jeremiah huffed a laugh. Sulley hadn’t shown a minute’s interest in Meredith once he saw her kids. “No, just the town’s money.”

“Shoot, these days, that might be worse, scarce as cash money is.”

“I ought to go after him, but I won’t have gas enough to get home if I do.”

The man eyed him up and down. “You’re a stout feller. I need a new outhouse hole dug and the old one covered over. It’s raw work, but I’ll trade you a can of gasoline for it.”

Jeremiah knew that as desperate as men were for work these days, the offer was a generous one. “Appreciate it. I’m Jeremiah Weber by the way.”

The man stuck his hand out. “John Fagan. I own this place, such as it is.”

Jeremiah nodded and followed John out back to start digging. But he promised himself that if he hadn’t found Sullivan Harris inside of two days, he was going back home and staying there.