

Quiet Dell

“There,” Eric said. It was a left turn, a narrow, dusty track. The tops of cars shone black above overgrown banks of flowering weeds and brush. Automobiles were parked to both sides for several hundred yards.

Emily turned to see Duty struggling for perilous balance on the edge of the backseat and took him into her lap. She breathed in the crushed green smells of earth, wild mustard, honeysuckle, and then a darker scent. Eric pulled carefully onto an open dirt swath before the garage, which was rude and small, square, flat roofed, with wooden doors in front. The crowd—perhaps two hundred or more, men, mostly adults, a few women—stood quietly. All looked toward the back of the building.

Emily got out quickly, looping the dog’s leash around her wrist. She heard then the pounding of pickaxes and the slough of dirt, shoveled and thrown. The smell was the sewer ditch, uncovered. They are gone now, she told herself, they are not here, not even their bodies, but the men were still digging and the crowd was waiting. Eric photographed the throng pressed up to the sides of the building, constantly clicking the shutter as he framed the gathering.

The crowd seemed country people, in overalls, their sleeves rolled up; a few women in housedresses. A quiet restlessness moved among them; few spoke, and only in lowered voices. She followed Eric around to the back. The ditch, a deep gash perhaps four feet deep and three feet across, ran straight some forty or fifty feet from the garage to the back of the lot. A narrow sewer pipe showed along the bottom, and a sort of winch had been rigged near the exposed foundation of the building, for pulling up the bodies with ropes.

Duty struggled forward on the leash, dragging her to the very edge of the ditch. It seemed he might jump in, and the thought horrified her.

The ditch was muddy and wet, for it opened into a little creek whose dark green water

lay nearly still, barely visible through the towering, weedy growth along its banks. Scrub trees, purple weeds, stalky blooms taller than the men who stood near them. Was that Queen Anne's lace, grown to such a height? The white flowers were the size of parasols. A smaller ditch, the uncovered gas line, bisected the large one. The two indentions formed a shape very like a cross that emptied into the water. Now she saw men in suits and fedoras, and uniformed police, near the building, watching the work. A ladder lay propped against the back of the garage, and a solid row of spectators, some just boys, had seated themselves along the back of the roof and hung their legs over casually. One or two wore shirt and tie, as though they'd come from jobs in banks or drugstores back in Clarksburg.

There was Eric, standing on the roof behind the seated men, shooting the entire view of the ditch to the creek, and the still, empty field beyond the narrow band of water. She turned, pulling the dog with her, peering past the disturbed ground as far as the horizon. The creek looked no more than fifteen feet across, and she could see the water move, a glowing lip against the opposite shore and gently ascending meadow. The sun was low in the sky and the angle of light burnished the ground. Heavy-limbed trees stood silhouetted in the field, gravid, sentinel, their canopies subtly stirring. The sky was still pale blue against the darker earth, and the creek seemed to mark a line between one world and another. She imagined walking across the water, leading Duty on the leash to that other, empty meadow that lay bathed in the softest pearlized light, but could not bring herself to approach. None of them, on this side, were worthy of that place.

Annabel can dream when she's awake, and waken in her sleep, or she is never asleep, but always dreaming. She moves above or through the urgency of people moving and doing; she turns away at will and bridges great distances in the breadth of a thought. She is here, in the place Grandmother called below. Narrow dirt roads thread through the mountains. Drawn closer, she sees throngs of people crowded near the hunched garage. Lines of metal glint in angled curves: the tops of many black cars. The glass of

the wind - screens sparkles and catches the sun. She sees the long bright car that pulls up last. A tall blond man exits, heading straight for the crowd, flashing his silent camera, and a woman gets out, with Duty on the leash. Annabel hears the click of the leash moving, and smells the trampled grass, dung, and earth, and so many shoes and boots and mingled bodies. She knows she smells what Duty smells. She cannot feel the weight of him, or the warmth, but senses him intensely, for nothing separates her now from those for whom she longs so deeply. Duty turns his head, confused. His long mournful search is over; he has found them.

Emily stands beside the dark slash in the ground. Duty drags at the leash. He smells some remnant mixed in the earth and pulls Emily to the dirt edge of the gash; he would leap into the dark, roll in it and taste it, as with dead things at home: a squashed bird, a rabbit torn by cats.

Annabel waits in the meadow across the creek. There is no death here, no danger. Birds take wing like glimmers, rising up; rabbits wear their closed wounds like flowers. She knows the gash across the creek is dense and black, deepening, tugging at the crouched garage. The people standing near are quiet, as though gathered for a meeting of great import. She sees Charles O'Boyle walking up out of the ditch, carrying Grandmother's last meal up the stairs on the silver tray. His steps are measured, just as at home on Thanksgiving. He had turned on the landing, the tray perfectly

balanced, and caught her eye, for she stood above him waiting, just as now. Then she sees her mother in his arms, for Mother grew faint on Christmas and he carried her into the kitchen. Annabel hears water leap out of the spigot, splattering in the tin sink, but Charles is standing at Grandmother's window, looking at the play-house through the snow. It is the humid end of summer here, but Charles is putting the warm blouson hats on their heads at Christmas, the Canadian hats for the Canadian toboggan, and hers is banded and jeweled. How odd to think of it, and the light his camera made when he snapped their picture, with the snow falling so heavily.

Across the way, a light flashes from the roof of the garage, like an eye that opens while the ground is sifted and pulled. Deep in the gash, a glow begins. They have found something; they murmur that something is found. Annabel hears Duty barking as he used to bark at home; the crowd is shifting and moving, and she sees Duty pull Emily toward her, straining at the leash.

The dog seemed beset, and no wonder. Emily must work; she must get close to those in authority. She tore her gaze from the meadow opposite and addressed a policeman at the foot of the excavation. "Excuse me, Officer. Can you tell me who is in charge here?"

"That would be Chief Duckworth and Sheriff Grimm. Just there." He nodded toward the front of the crowd. A knot of men concealed the winch. Emily could hear it turning, and the grunts of the men working it. The men standing aside with their hands clean would be her men, and she saw them now, though no telling who was who. "Could you tell me, Officer, which is Chief Duckworth?"

"The tallest one, madam, with the broad-brim hat."

She nodded her thanks and began working her way toward them. She could see Eric on the roof, crouching to shoot the length of the ditch and the meadow beyond. She watched Duckworth, who was tall and quite thin, like a wraith; he wore a beige suit and

low boots, and his broad, high-crowned hat was almost laughable. The other man, who must be Grimm, looked to have stepped off a fashionable Chicago street. Perhaps he was counting on being photographed; his smart Panama hat was perfectly creased. She stood at Duckworth's elbow now, averting her eyes from the ditch. The two men were back of it just enough, standing to the side of the turning winch.

Emily began. "Chief Duckworth, I'm Emily Thornhill, from the Chicago Tribune."

He looked down at her warily. "You're here late, Missy. The press has been and gone, with the bodies."

"Sir, we have driven all night from Chicago. I bring you greetings from Chief Harold

Johnson, police chief of Park Ridge, Illinois, from Mayor William McKee, from William H. Malone, president of Park Ridge First National Bank.”

Sheriff Grimm tipped his hat, as though amused. “In other words, Clarence, treat the lady with a little respect.”

Emily pressed on, addressing them both. “I very recently interviewed Mrs. Elizabeth Abernathy, the children’s nurse, the last person to see them at home, and Mr. Charles O’Boyle, former roomer and friend of the Eicher family, who first notified Park Ridge police of his suspicions concerning Pierson, or Powers, as he calls himself here.”

“I see.” Grimm looked into the field opposite. “Powers is not homegrown. Married a woman from town a few years ago. He’s a cipher. Smooth talker. No accent.”

“You’ve talked with Powers, then?”

“Oh yes. We know how to interrogate a suspect. Your Park Ridge men were quite practiced in that regard as well.”

“You interrogated the suspect together?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No, you did not.”

“The interrogation is ongoing.” Grimm turned to her, lifting his head as though to fully impress her with his persona. He seemed a film star on location, in his three-piece suit, his banded

straw fedora. “Powers likes names that begin with P—Pierson, Powers—clearly American names. Cornelius brings Vanderbilt to mind, wealth, prestige, while Harry could be just about anybody. He’s not Powers, or Pierson. We’ll find out who he is. He’ll have a record, under one name or another.”

“You said he’s ‘not homegrown.’ You mean that such things don’t happen here—”

“Oh, one man kills another in a bar. Rarely, a husband kills a wife, or vice versa. But

never a multiple murder.” He looked around them, at the crowd. “You can see they’re fascinated, stunned. It’s as though a rocket full of horrors has buried itself in the ground. A disaster from outside is visited upon them.”

“Them?” Emily questioned. “What of the victims?”

He regarded her frankly, as though conceding a point. “It’s not of them, of us, so there’s not the element of mourning, or responsibility or shame, to make it more than a bizarre spectacle. It’s not that small towns or rural people lack compassion. Surely that’s obvious, to a big-city reporter like you.”

She looked at him, surprised at his astute description. He displayed a compact, wrestler’s physique; she could almost feel his muscles tense under his clothes as he met her gaze. Duckworth had handed her off to him and stood silent, staring into the ditch. “I believe you’re at the Gore, Miss Thornhill?” Grimm kept his tone smoothly noncommittal.

She merely raised her brows and said nothing.

“I did advise Mr. Malone on where to locate you. Regardless, I like to know who comes and goes in this town, though keeping tabs on strangers is about to get much more difficult. I’ll send over the police log for the past couple of months. Give you a sense of the community.”

“Thank you. That’s useful.” Emily sensed the shift of the crowd, but Grimm had planted himself squarely in front of the ditch, as though shielding her view. “Are you from here, Sheriff Grimm?”

He looked down the line of the ditch. “Raised in Charleston, capital of our fair state. Dropped out of law school in Baltimore to

become a gentleman farmer, but ran for sheriff ten years ago. At this point, I seem to be indispensable.”

“I’m sure you are.” Duty was jumping at Emily’s legs. She picked him up and he strained toward Grimm, barking his whispery bark. “This is the Eichers’ dog,” she told

Grimm. “He knows Powers; I believe Powers injured him, savagely kicked him, just before taking the children away. Might I have an opportunity, in your presence of course, to confront Powers with the dog, at the jail?”

“I’m afraid a dog’s ID won’t hold up in court, Miss Thornhill.” He smiled. “I suppose, at the right moment, it might get his attention. We’ll see. But I’ll lay my cards on the table, here at the start—the press will be a huge problem in this case. If you can work with me, I might work with you. I suggest we talk privately, soon, in whatever circumstances you prefer.”

“There it is,” someone called.

“Move back from here, now.” Grimm turned from Emily to shout instructions. “Officers, clear the way!”

“What’s happening?” Emily asked, but the smell assailed her. Directly across the ditch, she saw Eric, shooting the turning winch, which labored and creaked, dragging a burlap-encased mass through the moist earth. Workmen turning the winch heaved and sweated; Emily could see their wet shirts clinging to their backs. The Eicher family was discovered and gone, as Duckworth had so condescendingly informed her; what was this? She walked quickly to the foot of the ditch as the crowd moved toward the front. Eric, standing his ground, tall enough to focus over the shoulders of the police, had a close view of the bundled mass. Duckworth, tossing his head like a spooked horse, called for a stretcher, and then they were hauling it out, a human corpse wrapped in cloth and bandaging, the feet dark with crumbling earth. They were a woman’s feet, covered in hosiery, Emily could see, even at this distance. Something within her threatened collapse; it was the hosiery, in this dirt, buried so long.