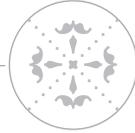


FROM

Southernmost

BY SILAS HOUSE



The rain had been falling with a pounding meanness, without ceasing for two days, and then the water rose all at once in the middle of the night, a brutal rush so fast Asher thought at first a dam might have broken somewhere upstream. The ground had simply become so saturated it could not hold any more water. All the creeks were conspiring down the ridges until they washed out into the Cumberland. There was no use in anyone going to bed because they all knew what was going to happen. They only had to wait.

The day dawned without any sign of sun — a sky that groaned open from a black night to a dull, purpling gray of morning — and Asher went out to walk the ridge and get a full eye on the situation. The news wasn't telling them anything worthwhile. He could hear the flood before he reached the top of the ridge. There he saw the massively swollen river supping at the edges of the lower fields, ten feet above its own banks, a foamy broth climbing so steadily he could actually see its ascent, and then he knew he had to go get Zelda.

They had all thought the last flood was as bad as things could get but the water hadn't risen half this quickly. He maneuvered his Jeep across two bridges whose undersides were being caressed by the river and by the time he got to her house the water was nipping at her porch. He had to park on the rise at the top of her driveway and wade into waist-deep water that took his breath with its iciness. Zelda stood on the porch like a statue of an old woman clutching a stack of picture albums. That was all she had grabbed.

"Come on!" Asher hollered. The river raged so loudly he wasn't sure if she could hear him and she made no motion to acknowledge she had.

But then Zelda took a step forward and froze; he could see she was terrified. Zelda had been on this very porch the first time he ever met her. She had risen from her chair to embrace him, holding him the way his own mother never had. Another memory, too: they had gone wading in the Cumberland on the hottest day of the year. “You’re like a son to me,” she had said, gathering her yellow dress tail in one hand so it wouldn’t get wet, and he had realized then that had been one of the main reasons he had married Lydia: to have a mother, to have arms around him to let him know he mattered.

The muck sucked at Asher’s legs as he offered his hand to help Zelda off the porch. He fought with his feet to keep from going any deeper. Finally she reached out, resigned to silence because of the swollen river’s roar. He pulled her toward him and latched his arm around her waist as they made their way back up to the rise where he had left the Jeep. Her body was hot and doughy to his touch. She sank in the mud and he had to pull her along and then carry her in some places. Butterscotch-colored water frothed around their legs, filled with tree limbs and garbage and all manner of debris they had to dodge. He helped her up into the vehicle and her fingers trembled in his grip.

Still the rain was falling in a torrent, washing across his windshield in a violence of nature he had never before witnessed. He had never seen it rain so hard, ever, and certainly not for this long.

Asher knew he shouldn’t drive through the water overtaking the first bridge, but they made it. The vehicle coughed up the hill, the engine choked with river but managing to recover just before it sputtered out. By the time they reached the second bridge it had disappeared beneath a pasture that had become a lake. Asher knew the land well so he switched back around and pulled onto the railroad tracks where they ricketed along—the Jeep shaking like it might fall apart, Zelda letting out little yelps every once in a while—until they had reached the road to his house. The whole valley was under water. From where they drove along the ridgeline they could look down and see it all spread out before them like the end of time had come to Cumberland Valley.

They watched a trailer home being swept away, the roof of a house, a pickup truck. Cows struggling to stay afloat. “Oh no! Asher!” Zelda said at that, as if he might be able to dive in and help the cattle find higher ground, but they both knew there was nothing to be done. So many trees, all with the

lush full leaves of late June. Chickens sitting in a calm line down the length of a white church steeple. It must have been swept from far up the river as it wasn't familiar to him; he knew by heart the looks of every church nearby.

Asher saw the brick walls of a house collapse and then the roof was swept down the widening Cumberland while two men stood on the hill, watching. He knew the house had only recently been built by a songwriter from Nashville. He hadn't lived in there more than a couple months and now the house was altogether gone. Asher kept driving. He had to get back to make sure their house was still high above the water line, to see that Justin was all right.

And there he was, waiting right on the porch for them. Justin leaned against the banister with his arms crossed. Still miffed because Asher had not let him go along, not knowing how dangerous the roads would be. He was eight, but small for his age, and more like an old man in his bearing and thinking. Just as they pulled in, Lydia stepped out of the front door as if she had been watching at the window and went to put her arm around Justin's neck, but he scrambled away from her, running out to greet his granny.

* * *

THEIRS WAS ONE of the lucky houses, situated on the ridge where the water couldn't reach them, although the river was far too close to put Asher at ease. The last flood had destroyed so much, but it had not threatened them. This one was licking awfully close and if the rain kept falling the Cumberland would have no choice but to keep rising until the water was seeping into their home. His church had been built on the highest point in those parts more than a hundred years before. But many in his congregation would be homeless. Some of them had only recently rebuilt from the last flood. He had no idea how he would handle all the care they would need.

Throughout the day Zelda and Lydia watched the useless television news while Asher and Justin watched the river rise, watched the rain fall. Justin would not leave his side.

"Are we gonna be okay?" he asked, his green eyes latched on to Asher's green eyes.

"Yes, buddy," Asher said, his hand capped over his son's head. "Don't you worry."

But Asher *was* worried.

Even worse than the rising water, even worse than the fact that he had not heard one siren or seen one helicopter or any sign of help from the government (they were alone out here, then, he realized, until the storm was over; help from the law always came *after* it was needed), even worse than when the electricity blinked out of being, even worse than Lydia doing nothing but praying in the shadowy cave of her room — was that they couldn't find Roscoe anywhere.

Asher stood in the doorway until Lydia said her quiet “Amen” then told her he was going out to look for the dog again. Although it was early afternoon her room was very dark; she hadn't opened the curtains. He could barely see her as she knelt beside the bed. Just when he was about to say that he was leaving he could make out that she had extended her hand toward him. “Won't you come here and pray with me?” she said.

He stepped into the shadows with hesitation; he wanted to tell her that faith without works is dead, that God doesn't hear those kinds of prayers. He knelt beside her at the bed and felt foolish in doing so. She had already bowed her head but now she laid her hand palm-up atop the bedspread. When he didn't respond right away she turned to look at him.

“What is it?” she whispered.

He intertwined his fingers with hers and bowed his head. She followed suit, the words trembling quietly on her lips: “Lord, we come to you to ask that you help our little dog . . .” In their tradition he was expected to say his own prayer aloud as well, their words mingling into a sort of woven chant. But he didn't pray aloud. He kept his head bowed and felt her sweaty hand in his own and all while she pleaded with God he could only think *Please please please*. That was the only kind of invocation he possessed now.

SOUTHERNMOST

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