

THE NOTHING WITHIN

ANDY GIESLER

humble quill 

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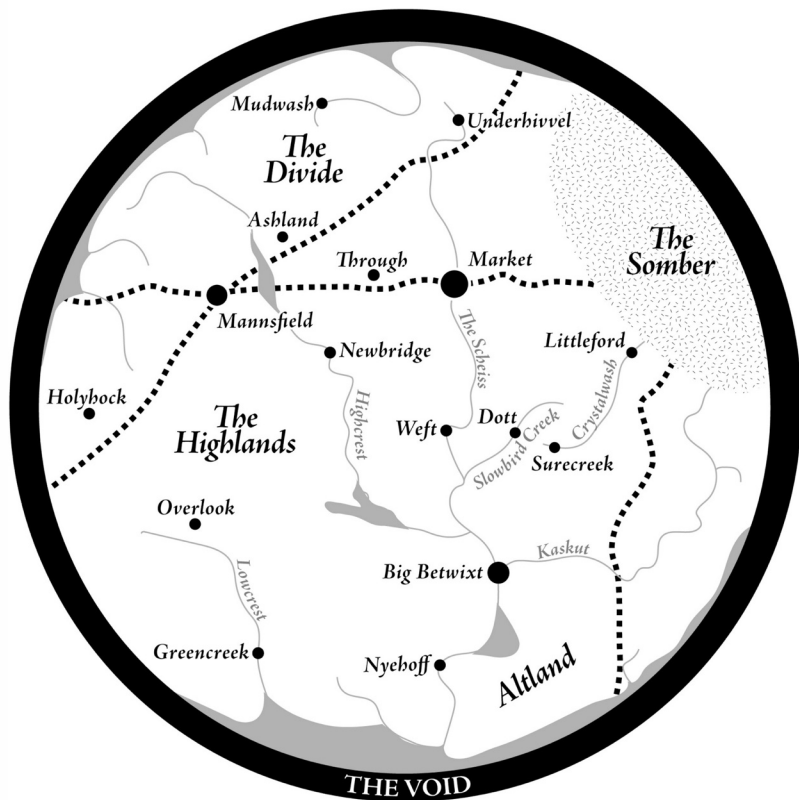
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The World That Is



A Day's Road
Journey
┌───┐

Old Way
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PROLOGUE

My name is Root.

I was seventeen when I first heard the voice no one else could hear. I feared I might have the Nothing within me.

But by the time my village burned me alive in the Pit? Well, gracious. By then, we was all pretty sure.

CHAPTER I

**WORDS FROM THE
RECKONING, SO VERY
LONG AGO: MORTON AND
AURA LEE**

MORTON AND AURA LEE AT THE END OF ALL THINGS

January 27, 2163

“No,” Lee said, leaning against the stone wall, her arms crossed.

Morton sat on the edge of his desk. “This is our fault. You and me. We bought our own bullshit. All the safeties, all the controls. We were wrong.” He left that hanging. Almost a question.

“True,” she agreed after a pause.

“Your plan could go wrong. Mine could, too. Maybe everybody will die no matter what we choose. Everybody who’s still human, anyway.”

“I hate it down here,” Lee said, looking toward the ceiling.

“Building Haven was your idea.”

“Fuck you.”

Morton rolled his neck. Sighed. “Both our plans might leave every human being on the planet dead. The difference is, my plan’s safer. Forcing a cascade is our best chance.”

“The difference is, a cascade murders the entire mother-fucking human race,” she replied, her voice calm. “Dick.”

“Not the entire...”

“Oh yeah, sorry.” Lee stood straight. “It’s only *mostly* geno-

cide. Anyway, we're done. I listened like you wanted. We're doing it my way. If you try your way, I can stop it. Shit, *cabron*. You so much as dream of a cascade, I'll stop it."

Morton rubbed his eyes. "I know. That's why you're here."

"I *was* here." She walked to the door. When it didn't open, she palmed the override plate. She palmed it again, then tugged the manual latch.

"You could stop it," he said softly.

Lee faced him, frowning. "Why the hell did my feeds just go dead?"

"You could stop a cascade. That's why we're meeting down here. This room's secure now. No signals in or out." Morton nodded toward the ceiling. "We've spun up the shield around Haven. Livv used the chaos of the Collapse as cover. She hacked nearly every nanofactory in the Western Hemisphere and brought them here. Trillions. There wasn't enough government left to understand what was happening or stop it."

"Morton," she said.

"After the cascade, we'll send out the 'factors to carve a canyon circling north-central Ohio. The cascade..." He paused. "The cascade hits in about four minutes."

He waited for her reaction. Any reaction. But she stood there, quiet, facing him. Impassive, her head a little to the side.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He had the flickering impression of her in midair and then he was on his back, on the floor. It's like that when someone has a military-grade naughtwork. Their naughts make them too fast. You can hardly see them coming.

Lee straddled Morton's chest, all four foot eleven of her, her face puckered into an unfamiliar grimace of rage. With her right hand, she cradled the back of his head almost tenderly, lifting it gently from the floor. Then, in the instant of peace that lay between, he realized: there wasn't much mass behind her. She was anchoring herself with her own right arm. She was going to make this count.

Then she was pounding him with her left.

It was like getting hit with a bowling ball. The first blow fractured his jaw. The second dislocated it. A crash of agony smothered all thought until his naughtwork dialed down his pain receptors.

He felt more than heard the grating sound as his cheekbone shattered. Another blow—blood filled his mouth, and his right eye went dead. Another, his ear. He couldn't tell whether the next crunch was her hand or his skull.

But he didn't mind. If he survived, his naughts would heal him.

And if she killed him, he wouldn't have to face what he'd just done.

CHAPTER II

**WORDS FROM THE
RECKONING, SO VERY
LONG AGO: RUTH
TROYER'S JOURNAL**

JANUARY 17, 2163

9 winter sparrows
6 juncos
4 chickadees
4 nuthatches
3 wrens
2 cardinals
Too many crows

Please watch over us, just as you watch over these little ones.

Sunny today, windy. Started above freezing then snapped much colder than expected.

Monday, washing. Clothes froze on the line. Would have salted the rinse water if I'd known it would get so bitter cold. Hands are raw.

Just observing. Not complaining.

Eli worked late. Josiah, Hannah, and Atlee did Eli's chores while Waneta minded the baby. Eli's had three late nights in the last week. Can't keep up with orders from Lehman's. Even with the economy collapsing, there's great demand for Amish craftsmen like him. He says the English who still have money or

goods to barter are suddenly real interested in wood stoves and such, what with things being how they are out in the world. Don't guess most of them have ever made a fire.

Maybe Eli should include instructions on what a match is for.

CHAPTER III

**WHEN I WAS SEVEN:
FESTIVAL**

A GOOD-OLD STORY

The World That Is

Children, this is the shape of the World That Is.

The World That Is is a great circle. Within its circle we have troubles aplenty, but we have weavers to guide us and shepherds to protect us.

Around the edge of the World That Is lies the Void. A void dug by the Wrathful Spirits so very long ago. A void as broad as a great village and filled with churning waters far below.

And beyond the Void is the World That Was. We cannot go to the World That Was. We would not go even if we could. It is the endless village of Gebohra Muerta, who loves us more than she loves herself, and who would destroy us if she could.

Children, this is the shape of the World That Is.

GATHERING

Before I start, I'd like to thank you good folks of Humblewash for your hospitality. You've warmed this old woman right to her toenails. I have kind recollections of this little village from so many visits through the long years, and you've added enough more recollections to last to the end of my days.

Well.

So.

Would you like Old Root to tell you her story?

Gracious. Sounds like you would. All right, then. Squirm into a comfortable spot. This'll take a while.

Now, the grown-ups here know this story, but it'll be new to you young ones. I have only one rule for you little nubbins to follow: if you have a question, ask it. I mean it! Folks are so shy. You just holler, "Old Root!" and say what you wonder. It's real important that you understand this story, because I'm telling it for a reason.

You know why we tell stories? We tell them because they're *about* something.

Maybe you'll think I'm telling this story to entertain you. That it's about mighty shepherds and raging chimeras and the

mysterious Hidden Folk, and about fear and fights and escapes. And it's got those things.

But that's not what it's about.

This story is about choices. It's about the choices we make, and why we make them, and how they touch the lives of others. And the reason I'm telling you this story is that we still have important choices to make. We do. You'll see.

I'm not such a prideful fool as to think my story stands alone, neither. So very many stories came before mine. I'll share some of them with you. Not just the good-old stories and rhymes folks have told one another for generations. I'll read you words wrote down by Shepherd Gabriel, who saw my story happen, but who saw his own side of it. I'll read you ancient words from the Reckoning, so very long ago—words from Ruth Troyer herself, who suffered through that awful time.

And if we take all these stories into our hearts? And if we learn their lessons, and make choices that are wise and true? Well, then, we can hope that more stories will come after these. We can hope that any folks are left to tell them.

Anyhow, we'll never get to the story's end unless I start it, now will we?

Let's see.

Guess I'll start where it starts, with the first thing I can recall, back when I was just a little nubbin like some of you are.

Candler Heddie didn't like me.

That wasn't unusual. Few folks in Surecreek did. They all thought there was something awful wrong with me. I didn't listen. I didn't agree. I asked why. The wrongness went much deeper than that, of course, though none of us knew it back then. But Candler Heddie's dislike was different. As though I'd done something awful to her and she was going to make me pay for it without crossing my ma too bad.

My very first memory is of Candler Heddie leaning down and putting her face right up close to mine, the smell of beeswax

wafting 'round her. Even her breath smelled of beeswax, like she not only made those candles but ate them. Her breath touched my face and tickled 'cross the top of my smooth-shaved head as she said the words I'd hear so often. The words that'd follow me for all my years in Surecreek, til Surecreek finally died.

She leaned down, or crouched down, I couldn't tell which, but she got her face up close to mine and she said, "Your problem, Little Weaver, is the Nothing within you." Then she stood and spat and walked away with her skirt rustling. To this day when I smell beeswax, I hear the hate as she said those words.

The Nothing within me.

I had no idea what I'd done to set Candler Heddie growling in my face. Had I broke something, or spoke back to her, or asked a question no decent person ought to ask? Years later I learned why she hated me so, but back then it was a hurtful mystery.

It would be pure cruel and unkind to hope somebody would burn to death in the Goodafter Pit. For all my great many faults, I'm not cruel nor unkind. But Candler Heddie made me wish I was cruel and unkind so that I could hope for her to go to the Pit.

Ma must not have been with us that day, or Candler Heddie would never have dared to speak so harsh, though in later years folks got bolder. How much harder might my life in Surecreek have been if I wasn't the village weaver's daughter?

Oh, now. There I go, showing proud with my misfortune.

Some folks in Surecreek got on with me fine. I guess a few even liked me. Mender Vernie. Woodsmith Abram. Leeleh. Her mother. Runner Zeekl was kind to me almost 'til the end. Others, too. Sometimes I recall things harder than they was. There was good and joyful things, too. Many of them!

And back then, when I was so young I can scarce recall it, I suppose my greatest joy was my time at Learning.

LEARNING

It distressed me plenty when I realized I'd have to walk past Candler Heddie's every day on the way to Learning, what with her house being right beside the Common hall. I swept past her house quick as I could, holding my breath from worry and also to keep out the beeswax smell. For all I knew she watched me every morning with poison churning inside her.

Once I was in the Common hall, though, things was better, even if I did still smell Heddie's candlemaking when the wind was wrong. Learner Ned was patient with me, and I sure don't know why. Grandmother Root must have stood with her hand on his shoulder all day long, whispering patience and kindness into his heart. He had little reason to be kind, because I exercised his patience more than I did most folks'. And that's saying something. Truly it is.

Learner Ned was a short man with a kind voice and an easy laugh that reached all the way inside you. He noticed the wonderful things we did even when they wasn't so wonderful, and if he noticed our failings, he kept them to hisself. We loved him.

Leeleh told me that when her ma was a little girl, Learner Ned's pa (also named Learner Ned) taught in the Common hall.

Elder Learner Ned was nothing like our Learner Ned. He was poor of patience and thin of good cheer, and he scolded the children cruelly. In his later years he turned so cruel that Surecreek had to burn him in the Goodafter Pit. Folks said Elder Learner Ned had the Nothing within him too. Just like me.

But anyhow. However Learner Ned ended up so kind after fruiting from such a twisted branch, we was awful glad he was our learner and not some other.

One day—I know I was seven since it was my first week at Learning—Learner Ned was teaching us of the Reckoning and what came after it, setting with us in a small corner of the great, echoey Common hall. The first thing, as always, was to recite the names of all the villages that had died. Greenhill, Goodbrook, Hoverplatz, New Erie, Sussgrasser...well, there's nearly twenty and you've heard the names, too, so I won't recite them for you. All those villages had questioned too much and sought too far and tried to remake the World That Is, so Grandmother Root guided the Wrathful Spirits to wipe away their wrongness. So we thought.

That was the greatest sin when I was young. To do something in a new way. To create a thing like none that had come before. To remake the World That Is instead of living in it like it was meant to be.

Mender mends,
 Drover tends,
 Mason shapes,
 Tanner scrapes,
 Cobbler laces,
 Runner races,
 Baker bakes.
 None remakes.

Or at least that's what Learner Ned said, because it's what

everybody said, because it's what we all believed in that long-
agone time.

The most recent village to die was Greenhill. It died not long before I was born. Greenhill's miller found a faster way to get words on paper, or at least that's what Settie heard from her pa, Runner Aimis, whose trade took him all over the World That Is. We had no idea what it meant to get words on paper faster, though today you'd call it a printing press. But that's about when Greenhill died, so we figured that's why it died. The sin of remaking. After Greenhill died, folks was careful to put words on paper real slow indeed.

When we finished reciting the names of dead villages, Learner Ned moved on to more joyful parts, leading us in some good-old rhymes and stories. First off was a Rover Jon story, one of so many we loved because they made us laugh. You must know this one. It ends:

Whither, whither, Rover Jon?
Seeking things past where his reach is.
Callow, callow, Rover Jon, might
Seek the stars yet lose his breeches.
Why now, why now, Rover Jon?
Out there yonder, what's to find?
Foolish, foolish, Rover Jon
Gains nothing but a cold behind.

Of course, there could be no such person named Rover Jon, because there was no trade called roving. Roving would serve no purpose, or so we thought back then. You might as well have laughing or dreaming as your trade. I suppose that's part of what made his stories so funny.

Next, Learner Ned taught us a good-old rhyme I didn't know yet, so it wasn't old to me. The other children recited it along with him, smiles in their voices, while I sat still and listened for the first time:

The World That Is, is safe and round.
 The World That Is, has sun and rain,
 The World That Was, it has no end,
 The World That Was, has bitter pain.

“Well recited, well recited children!” Learner Ned tapped his feet in appreciation. “Shall we say another?” The girls and boys nodded quietly, I suppose. Leeleh reached over and took my hand, hers cool and damp and thin, and squeezed with secret joy. Saying good-old rhymes instead of the usual recitations was a treat.

If I was a good girl, I would have been excited, too. But I wasn’t, so I wasn’t. Because I hadn’t finished with the first rhyme yet. “Learner Ned?”

The room went quiet with the hush of little boys and girls who’d stopped breathing like dead’uns. I figured everybody was just listening to me real careful. The daughter of the village weaver might expect as much, and I did.

“I, ah...yes, I wonder whether Young Root might have said something?”

“Learner Ned,” I said, “is that rhyme about the world beyond the Edge, across the Void?” Leeleh’s hand startled. It let go of mine. “Root,” she whispered so soft I doubted nobody else could hear it.

Learner Ned made a chuckle that sounded uncomfortable, though I couldn’t imagine why. “Ah...yes, Young Root. It’s about the World That Was.”

“Who poisoned it?”

“Poisoned?”

Of all the things I knew at that age, which was probably less than half of what I thought I knew, most was about rootcraft. And I’ll confess it now: I was proud of what I knew. “Of course, Learner Ned,” I lectured. “Because some things that’s bitter is good for you, and some things that’s bitter is bad for you, but only the very worst ones of all give you pain.”

Learner Ned chuckled again, though not so uncomfortable now. “Young Root, I see what you’re thinking, and I see why you’re thinking it. The good-old rhyme mentions bitter pain in the World That Was. And though Gebohra Muerta did give the People poison gifts so very long ago, the rhyme doesn’t mean bitter as a taste. Bitter pain means suffering. Endless torment.”

“But not from poison?”

“Not from the poison of rootcraft. From the poison of pride and seeking! The World That Was, Young Root, is the world of light without heat. Of heat without light. A world created by wicked folks who stood too proud and sought too much and wished to remake all things.” Whatever had made him uncomfortable before, he was warming up to it now. “The World That Was is a place we cannot go, and a place we would not want to! It’s the endless village of Gebohra Muerta and her children, the chimeras. Grandmother Root set us apart here in the World That Is, to protect us all from the downfall of those wicked folk in the World That Was.

“The World That Is, is safe and round!” he called out, a smile in his voice. The other children, apparently breathing again, took up the chant, though a little unsteady-like. “The World That Is, has sun and rain. The World That Was—”

“But Learner Ned...”

Somebody gasped. The others stumbled to a halt.

“Young Root,” said Ned with kindness, “you are new to Learning, so—”

“But Learner Ned, how do we know?” An older child behind me—Sadie, by the sound of her voice—whimpered, though again I couldn’t imagine why.

Learner Ned’s voice sounded like a bull hog bumping at the pen, frantic to get out. “We know because the rhyme says so, Young Root. We know because we’ve been told, by our parents and our weavers and the shepherds. Now, as I was saying, you are new to—”

“But what if there’s something useful across the Void? What if we ought to go there? What if the rhyme’s wrong?”

The room was still for maybe three heartbeats. Then from behind me came the sound of an older child weeping softly. And from my right came a trickling sound and the smell of somebody’s bladder loosing itself.

A moment later, Learner Ned took my hand and pulled me real gentle from my chair. “Young Root, you...you’re new to... ah, we...” As he stammered, he breathed faster than folks usually do. Finally he managed to say, “Please, for today, please go to your house and tell your ma, tell Weaver Root what’s happened here. She...she’ll know the best thing for...for this...”

Then he was drawing me to the door, his hand in the middle of my back, pressing me toward home.

LITTLE WEAVER

Weavers sort out folks' disputes. They guide the village Elders. They teach what's proper. They use their rootcraft to help their village. They pilgrimage to holy places. They judge who needs to visit the Goodafter Pit.

But my ma didn't weave. In all my years I've never known a weaver who did.

So I had no idea why weavers was called weavers. I know now, but back then I didn't. Nobody did, not even the weavers themselves. Once I asked Ma and she said, "Because my ma called herself a weaver."

Almost every weaver I've known was a decent and compassionate person. Kind, in their own way. Even so, I suppose a weaver is the scariest person in a village between what they're able to do, what they must do, and their hardness of body and will from doing it.

There's no greater symbol of that hardness than the shepherd's staff. Runners have their clubs and slings to protect them on the roads, and folks who must go beyond the village wall carry such things as well. But the shepherd's staff was for weavers and shepherds alone. Hickory, hardened, and head-

high, they use it to walk rugged paths in the wild, and when they swing it in the Shepherd's Dance it can keep them alive among all the awfulness that lurks out there.

The Shepherd's Dance is a beautiful and wondrous thing, a thing given us by the shepherds, a thing with the sound of the wind and joy of leaping and a feeling like warm water running slow down your back. Maybe the most beautiful thing there is for all I know.

Beyond the village wall, a weaver has her daughter take up the staff as a child. That's just good sense. All year-round, the weaver visits holy places as she must, and she goes out there with no protection but her staff and her earnest hope that Grandmother Root's smiling on her. And once her daughter's old enough to come along, they're on pilgrimage together. So the weaver gives her daughter a little staff to protect herself, too.

You might not think swinging a tiny staff would make much difference for a babe in the woods if she's set upon by, say, a razorback or a wolf. But I'll tell you this: A poke in the eye feels pretty much the same to a wolf as it would to you. And unless it's well beyond hungry, it's awful easy to convince your typical wolf that it's better off chasing rabbits or squirrels or some other critters that won't poke it in the eye with a stick.

But even though most weavers' daughters take up the staff real young when they're on pilgrimage, they most certainly do not carry it 'round in public til they're done apprenticing and become worthy weavers.

Because some things just ain't done.

I wasn't quite two years old when I started carrying a little staff 'round Surecreek. That wasn't from miraculous skill, nor even from pure cussed stubbornness, of which I had plenty. I just needed it to get around.

The good folks of Surecreek could see the sense in that, and it didn't raise so much as a single hackle on a single neck. But they didn't comment on it, neither. Because on the one hand,

everybody knew you didn't carry the staff unless you was a weaver or a shepherd. But on the other hand, since I couldn't see, they knew it kept me from tripping over things all day long. But back on the first hand again, that sort of thing really. Was. Just. Not. Done.

Well, when something both must happen and mustn't happen, anybody with good sense just ignores it and notices the weather instead. And if the good folks of Surecreek had nothing else, it was an abundance of good sense and plenty of weather to notice.

So I went 'round our village with my tiny staff, swaying it back and forth in front of me to know what was coming, and everybody in Surecreek earnestly pretended I wasn't doing no such thing.

Til our shepherds visited.

Because shepherds wasn't cautious about what shouldn't be noticed. They was shepherds after all. If they hadn't done unusual things, I suppose all the People'd be dead by now. So when our shepherds, Rachel and Lydia, saw this little nubbin walking 'round Surecreek with a toy shepherd's staff, they didn't pretend to notice the weather like all the deeply sensible folk of Surecreek did.

They laughed and called me "Little Weaver."

And somehow that made it all right for everybody else to relax a touch, and maybe even to notice a little bit that I wasn't able to see. So that's how I came to be called Little Weaver before I so much as knew what a weaver was.

I often wondered whether somehow that staff of mine, tiny though it was, helped folks to put up with me a little more than they would have otherwise. Because whatever the size, a shepherd's staff meant authority, even though I'd earned no such thing.

I also wondered whether that staff pushed all the other children of Surecreek just a little farther from me. But I didn't fret

about that overmuch. Because when you can't stop asking questions that no decent person ought to ask, and you're stubborn, and you can't see, and your head's shaved smooth as is the practice with weavers and their daughters—well, since so many things set me apart from the good folks of Surecreek, I doubted one little staff made very much difference at all.

NEWS FROM MARKET

The day Runners Aimis and Zeekl heard at Market that Shepherd Gabriel was making Festival rounds, word spread through Surecreek.

I knew Shepherd Gabriel almost never visited, but that was all I knew about him. Nope—I knew one other thing. I knew that even though shepherds always traveled in pairs, Shepherd Gabriel always traveled alone. I didn't know why.

Our village shepherds, Rachel and Lydia, visited once or twice every year. Mostly they visited because we asked them to. We'd send runners to fetch them because poultry or livestock or folks was being murdered by one kind of beast or another. Rachel and Lydia would go out in the country for a spell, then they'd come back and the murdering would stop. So when our shepherds showed up I got awful excited, even though everybody else wasn't excited so much as they was terrified and hiding in their homes.

Shepherd Gabriel, though, seemed to come only when it pleased him, and to hear my ma tell it, he mainly asked a whole pile of questions and then shared much less than he knew. Folks found his visits comforting and wished he would stop by more often, since his was shepherd visits that didn't involve the

chasing of hungry, murderous beasts. But his visits sounded awful dull to me. To hear all the other children chitter like squirrels, though, it seemed a Festival was much better than a regular visit by Shepherd Gabriel. Which I supposed it would have to be since his regular visits was a miserly gruel.

Festival came once every thirteen years—thirteen being Grandmother Root’s holy number. Leeleh was only two years older than me, so like me, she wasn’t even born by the last Festival. But her brothers, Honeydipper Bekk and Apprentice Honeydipper Sett, they was old enough to remember his last visit, and they’d told her all about it.

So Leeleh did her best to explain it to me. Leeleh had always been sickly, her hands weak and cold, but when she talked about Festival she held my hand so hard it very nearly hurt. “It’s as if...well, there’s so much food you can hardly imagine, and then, it’s...it’s like when Learner Ned leads us in good-old stories, but there are so many of them, all right in a row, and well...then things go flying through the air, and...”

Young Aizik was listening in on Leeleh. Aizik wasn’t even born for the last Festival neither, but he felt wiser since he’d missed it by less. So he stepped in on Leeleh’s words with a loud sigh and said, “Bless it, Leeleh. It’s like listening to Little Weaver describe a sunset.”

Leeleh got real quiet.

That made me mad. I didn’t care about the sunset thing, but this swelled-up sow’s butt was teasing my gentle friend. Too many children teased Leeleh, shy and sickly and too kind to tease back. Some called her “Honey,” which to grown-ups might have sounded kind. But the children meant she was a honeydipper’s daughter, her family cleaning our privies and modesty pits, with the unfortunate smells that can bring.

Aizik even called her “Twitch” once or twice, since she sometimes got twitches in her arms or legs. Once she had a fit of the shakes right in the middle of Learning, drooling and jolting on the floor, bleeding from her mouth where she bit her

tongue. But Ma caught wind of Aizik's teasing and spoke with him about it, all alone. So Aizik didn't say that no more. Some things are not good ground for teasing.

I started to stand up to discuss Aizik's unkindness with him, but Leeleh's damp, thin hand squeezed at mine, and she whispered, "Root, not with Festival coming." Because she knew if I finished standing up, it would end with Aizik setting down real hard. Then I might get punished, or we all might, and none of us wanted to risk being stuck at home when Festival happened.

So instead of teaching Aizik a lesson about kindness to others, I started a clapping game to cheer Leeleh, and she joined in, though she was soft at first. It's a good-old rhyme. You must know it here in Humblewash, too. The children among you can clap it with me if you care to. Goes like this...

Little Lillit liked to ponder,
What she'd find out there beyond her
Pretty village. "Why," she'd wonder,
"If I want to, can't I wander?"

So she did, she went off yonder,
Til she came upon the Somber.
Smiling sweetly, in she wandered,
Then in dusk-light looked around her,
Saw that something Fell had found her,
Tried to flee but it was stronger.

To its chamber it did bring her.
On her fate we will not linger,
All they found was one small finger.

Young ones, young ones, if you ponder,
What's out there beyond the yonder,
Mind your business lest you squander
All you have, to vainly wander.

Little Lillit was my favorite good-old rhyme. Still is. I always thought she had the right idea, even if she did get eaten by a chimera.

By the time we finished the clapping game, all the other children had joined in, and by then I think Leeleh felt a bit better, too. Well, all the other children joined in except for Aizik. But then, Aizik always *had* been a swelled-up sow's butt.

Not to speak unkind of the dead.

FESTIVAL

The first two days of Shepherd Gabriel's visit was just as exciting as his other visits, which is to say he might as well not have been there for all I could tell, but that didn't keep the other children from talking of nothing else. I kept trying to knot myself up about it like everybody else, tried trusting that it would be as wonderful as they said, but it didn't work.

Of all my failings, which I confess I have a prodigious number, one of them is greater than all the others. Come to think of it, it's the source of a great many lesser failings, too. It's my reluctance to accept something's true just because somebody says it's true. So if you won't pardon me for it, at least you might understand why I was unimpressed with all the Willim-what about some visiting shepherd who seemed not quite as interesting as bread mold.

As for whether Shepherd Gabriel's visit was, in the end, worth all the Willim-what?

Well, I will say that I had no idea there was so much food in Surecreek, nor so rich nor tart, nor spiced nor gentle, nor waftingly scented.

And I will say I would never have guessed my village's voice could be so beautiful and interwoven when folks rose together

singing beloved songs, climbing from Woodsmith Abram's shuddering bass all the way up to Honeydipper Sadie's lilting descant, and with nearly two hundred weaving, lifting, winding voices wrapped between them.

And I will say that I wept to hear those voices, not only for their heart-aching music but also in anger, to think they'd been hid in our village all the short years of my life. That nobody had made the effort to set those beautiful things free except for two-by-two and three-by-three.

I will also say that once Shepherd Gabriel took the center in a clearing with folks on all sides 'round him? Well. I had no idea there was so many good-old rhymes and stories in all the world, stories that warned of the evils of roving and remaking, whether they warned us with laughter or fear; nor that there could be jokes so funny they'd leave you aching in the sides and gasping for air; nor that such an ordinary voice could be so interesting that you'd have happily listened if it was just reciting sheep's names. He was at center for so long, it must have been 'til near midnight, and had it been 'til midnight tomorrow, we'd have still thought it too brief by half.

Then something wondrous happened, though I couldn't tell just what.

All of a sudden, the whole gathering went quiet as wool, then there was this *whhhishhh* going up into the air so soft I could hardly hear it, but every soul in that gathering gasped in quiet wonder, except for me. I sorely wished Leeleh was with me so she could've told me what was happening. But folks sat with families for Festival, and my family was just the village weaver. She was up front at the edge of the clearing near Shepherd Gabriel, presiding over such an important affair. Woodsmith Abram, having no family, was kind enough to set with me. But I didn't care to interrupt his quiet joy to ask. And what with him being a dry, old bachelor woodsmith, though a kindly one, he didn't think to offer.

So I listened with everybody else for five or six heartbeats,

with the howl and yip of a wolf lonely in the quiet distance, 'til there was the *fip!* of what sounded like Shepherd Gabriel catching something that had gone into the air quite some remarkable distance. There followed the roaring shush as the whole village tapped its feet in appreciation, a tapping like none I'd heard in Surecreek, during which time that sweet nubbin Josiah, not far behind me, sounding afraid, whispered, "What is it mama?" To which his mother, Butcher Abbie, answered real soft, "Just a ball, lamb, a wooden ball like yours." So then I knew, too, same as everybody else.

Then the low roar of tapping feet cut short with another *whhhishhh* and another and another and another and another, and what followed was a sound so crisp and rhythmic that I felt I'd never hear its like again, which I'm not sure I have yet. From all I could tell he was throwing those balls in the air—so high I couldn't imagine—and catching and re-throwing them in wondrous patterns.

I heard the soft pats of his feet touching the ground ever so lightly, back and forth, and somehow all those sounds, the *whhhishhhes* and the *fips* and the pats was not only so fast and tight together but also so loose and flowing that it was hard to understand how a mere fleshy human body could make them, so much like the Shepherd's Dance but spread out wide, and they wove a pattern like some beautiful music nobody could ever hope to describe. Yet here I am trying.

That's how shepherds was, and that's how shepherds moved. In years to come, I'd hear other shepherds move like that for far less joyful reasons. Shepherd Gabriel's Festival was the only place I'd ever hear a shepherd move like that just purely for the delight of others.

After some little while, he stopped still. Yet Surecreek didn't praise him with joyous foot tapping as I'd expected. It sounded like folks was still waiting on something.

Which they was.

The next thing I heard was a rustling up front, and the older

children murmuring, and the grown-ups clucking with knowing chuckles, and then there was a high, dry fluttering whistle and a tiny *pip* not far from me, and a young girl giggled. Then something whistled to another child elsewhere, and another, 'til it sounded like the air was full of dragonflies whizzing past our ears, and each one went to a child who gasped or giggled. I heard Tanner Serrie's son, Mark, call out loud, losing sight of what was proper in his excitement, "Right in my lap! Did you see it?" followed by a motherly swat.

Then there was a *pip* next to me, then one behind me, and sweet Josiah asked real soft what it was, and his mama said, "It's to suck on, lamb, hard like a stone and sweet like honey," and that was right about when I nearly jumped up off the ground in surprise because something landed in my lap. Two somethings, my fingers found. Two small hard somethings—wrapped in fine rag-paper no less, if you can imagine the extravagance.

At that moment I was pretty sure, and I'm pretty sure to this day still, that the other children had gotten not two somethings, but only one.

I closed my hand on them and wondered whether Shepherd Gabriel had made a mistake, if shepherds even *could* make mistakes, or whether he'd treated me special. Which should be an embarrassment, as it's something polite folks don't do to one another in public. But somehow this was private, so I wasn't embarrassed.

FESTIVAL'S END

Afterward, Shepherd Gabriel moved through the crowd and spoke with the folks of Surecreek and its outlying farmsteads, graciously deflecting their lavishly understated praise. He made his rounds for a good while.

I didn't mind a whittle, because it let me hear what everybody else was talking about. When I heard Eldest Mason Jhohsif right next to me talk of Shepherd Gabriel as "grandfather Gabriel," I almost laughed, but laughing might have told him I was listening, so I tamped it down real tight. It was still funny, though, because Jhohsif was just about the oldest person in Surecreek, very nearly sixty, while Shepherd Gabriel sounded not near so old. But then as I listened, Jhohsif seemed to be favorably comparing this Festival with one that Shepherd Gabriel gave when Jhohsif was just a little cricket like me. That puzzled me real deep.

After a bit, Leeleh made her way to me, breathless from finding me in the crowd. Her cat, Hiccup, came with her, rowling and rubbing on my leg. Hiccup was older than I don't know what and must have birthed half the cats in Surecreek. But she still got around, and she stuck to Leeleh like a fly on a

sow. “Root!” Leeleh said. “Did you get one? Did you get a sweet?”

Part of me wanted to tell her I’d got not just one, but two. But the rest of me didn’t want to sound proud, nor to make my gentle friend feel she’d been treated less than me. So I just said, “Yep.”

We talked for a while about Festival, her telling me all the things I hadn’t seen. From what she said, it was a wonder. But it had sounded a wonder, too. Then her folks collected her, Hiccup trailing behind them. I lingered about, waiting for Ma to collect me.

Whether Shepherd Gabriel spoke with every single person in Surecreek? Well, I just don’t know. But I do know this: Along the way he spoke with me.

In the first moment, I didn’t understand what was happening. I heard a voice, and the voice was not only pointed at me, but it was down at my level as though it was crouching there, and it was real quiet, just exactly loud enough for my sharp ears to catch it over everybody else’s murmuring, like it was meant only for me. Then there was a soft touch on my arm. I’m not sure what the first thing he said was, but the second thing was, “Are you able to hear?”

“Yessir.”

“You’re Weaver Root’s daughter.”

“Yessir.”

“I suppose that means you’re Root, too.”

“Yessir.”

“What’s it like for you?” he asked. “Not seeing?”

And you know what? In my whole life nobody had ever asked me that.

A child born without sight had her toes dangling over the edge of the Goodafter Pit, even if charity compelled folks to tolerate her. On the whole, her village would just as soon not acknowledge that she couldn’t see—specially when she was the weaver’s child. As a rule, folks don’t cross the woman who can

send them to the Goodafter Pit. Not that my ma would ever send somebody out of spite. When she finally sent me to the Pit years later, there was no spite in that.

So what it was like not to see? Well, that was exactly the sort of thing decent folk just did not discuss. But like I said, shepherds didn't always act like decent folk.

"I...I don't guess I'd know, really. It's just how it is. Seems like some things is easier for others than for me. But maybe some things is easier for me than for others, too." Then I do not know what came over me, because I said something to him I never would have said to nobody else. I said, "But it sets me apart, and everybody knows it, and I wish they'd just come out and say it!"

"A good friend of mine couldn't see."

That had my attention for sure. Few folks was without sight, and I'd never imagined one could be friends to a shepherd. Then a thought surprised me, so I asked, "Was your friend a shepherd, too?"

"She was," he said. "Her name was Lee. I'm pretty sure she was the best of us."

"She died?"

"She died."

"What was it like for her?" I asked.

"She told me it set her apart," he said. Then, after a brief pause, he went on with a smile in his voice, "And she told me it made her stubborn. And although I'm only *mostly* sure she was the best of us, I'm *absolutely* sure she was the most stubborn."

I giggled. He chuckled too, just a quiet whuff of air through his nose.

"I suppose you'll be Surecreek's weaver one day?" he asked.

I laughed again, this time a great round laugh. Couldn't help it. "Hard to imagine that," I said, but then I quieted and thought about it real serious for a moment. He seemed content to wait. Finally I said, "Maybe I could be the weaver. Or maybe I could be something different." I thought another moment, and

again he waited patiently. Then I said, “Maybe I’ll be a shepherd.”

I mostly expected him to laugh, but he just said, “Hm”—real short like that, like it surprised him a little and it was worth thinking on. After a pause he said, “Root, I can tell you like to say and hear things straight, just as they are without hints or fluff. Most folks don’t, and no doubt they scold you for it. Even so, saying things straight is important, so long as you mean well when you do it. So I’ll tell you how it is. Straight.

“Shepherds are shepherds. Nobody else ever will be a shepherd. But it won’t surprise me if you end up being something different. And I look forward to seeing what that is.”

I heard and felt him stand, and he moved as though to step away, but then he turned back and crouched again. “What’s the most wonderful place you know?” he asked.

That didn’t take any thinking at all. “A little fall in the woods northwest of here. Half a morning’s walk, up by Dott, off Slowbird Creek. I love the rushy sound of it, and the feel of falling water.”

“Oh sure. I know that waterfall. I’ll tell you a shepherd’s trick. It’s one I use myself. A wise person taught it to me so very long ago. The next time you start feeling apart from everyone, or angry, or just plain stubborn, sit down and take three slow, deep breaths, then ignore everything around you and just imagine yourself in that place for a while.”

“That’s a shepherd’s trick?”

“It is.” He patted my arm. “And you know what? Sometimes it even helps.” He snorted again. “Peace on you, Young Root, and Grandmother Root smile upon you.” Then he turned and left to speak with Tanner Serrie and her family. Louder this time, and not so private as he spoke with me.

When we got home that night, I asked my ma, “Did you know Shepherd Lee?”

“Yes,” she said. She said it in the way that told me it was time to stop asking questions.

So I asked, "How did she die?"

"I didn't ask when Shepherd Gabriel told us some years back. She was one of the eldest shepherds, or at least she looked to be. Skin goes smooth on elder shepherds, and hers was so very smooth, like Shepherd Gabriel's." Which I thought strange, since the skin on regular folks goes the other way through their years. "So I figured it wasn't my business to ask him about it. We needn't fret over old folks passing. We needn't puzzle over it." And there was something in her voice that struck me funny, that made me wonder what she wasn't saying. But she also clipped her answer real hard at the end, making it entirely clear no more questions was welcome.

So I asked, "Did Shepherd Lee get along real well even though she couldn't see?"

To which Ma just replied, "Don't be foolish, girl. Of course she could see. Now stop poking at shepherds' business. Get to bed."

And I'll tell you, that confused me something awful.

No one hardly ever lies, and when somebody shades the truth, I can usually feel it. Shepherd Gabriel didn't strike me as the type to lie, and he had no reason to lie that I could imagine. Excepting maybe pity, but he didn't strike me as the pitying type, neither. And in all her life, although Ma didn't always tell me everything I wanted, when she did speak, I'd only known her to speak the clear, sharp, hard truth.

That night, my first Festival, was when I stopped trusting shepherds quite so much. It was a silly thing, really, and not worth fretting over. Whether a dead shepherd was able to see? Pshaw. But knowing Ma as I did, all I could figure was that Shepherd Gabriel had kept the truth from me, and I couldn't figure why. And that rubbed me raw.

In the end, turned out I was pure, dead wrong. Ma and Shepherd Gabriel had both told me the truth about Shepherd Lee. But it'd be a good many years before I finally untangled that knot.

CHAPTER IV

**WORDS FROM THE
RECKONING, SO VERY
LONG AGO: RUTH
TROYER'S JOURNAL**

JANUARY 19, 2163

7 winter sparrows
7 juncos
6 starlings
5 chickadees
2 mourning doves
1 cardinal
Too many crows

Please watch over us, just as you watch over these little ones.

Mostly sunny, still very cold.

Wednesday, shopping. Monthly trip to the tooLow. Hannah came with me, Waneta minded the baby. The callcar arrived at 9am as it should. A pink one, not black as requested. Hannah's first trip in a callcar, and her first time at the tooLow.

It used to be that only us Amish and some Mennonites shopped at tooLow, since most people shopped virtual or printed at home. That's not counting the English who went there to gawk at us plain people and our old-fashioned store.

But today, a line out the door. No tourists. Plenty of English who'd never been before. Some probably can't afford their stuff-printers anymore. Some probably don't trust shopping virtual

because of deliveries getting unreliable. Many gawked at us plain people. I managed to not gawk back at them. Hannah did not manage.

The shelves were sparse, and sharp rationing rules were in place, but we found rice, beans, tortillas, yarn, cloth, thread, coffee, and a few other useful things. Prices were up twenty times or more from last year. I'm grateful Eli's work is still in demand. Along with whatever we can get in trade for my weaving, we'll make do. I made my allowance stretch to cover the expense somehow.

As we left the store, a chimera rushed up and attacked those waiting outside. I think it had been a woman to start with, though it was now corrupted with other things. Goat and some kind of rodent, it seemed, along with big, clawed hands and patches of blonde fur at the shoulders. It wounded about a dozen people, two badly, a toddler among them. tooLow's automated security managed to put the chimera down, though with some difficulty. Those exposed blood-to-blood were taken to IFB for treatment, lest they should go chimeric, too.

Did what we could to comfort the injured while waiting for medical. In the confusion someone took one of our bags. Mostly sewing and weaving goods. The coffee. We'll get by.

Eli and I have each seen two chimeras before, but Hannah hadn't. She froze up at first, but after that she was obedient and well behaved. Was quiet on the way home, though at one point she said Waneta might like to come in her place next time. I didn't scold her. Think she was joking.

Home by noon. Afternoon chores.

The children are asleep now. I've finished my weaving, but Eli isn't back yet. I might be asleep by the time he gets home. Or I could pretend.

JANUARY 21, 2163

7 winter sparrows
6 chickadees
5 wrens
4 juncos
2 cardinals
2 mourning doves
1 towhee
Too many crows

Please watch over us, just as you watch over these little ones.

Cloudy, even colder.

Missed writing yesterday. Nothing particular to report from yesterday, just the usual sewing and mending. Finished my weaving last night and was about to write when Eli came in late. I hid this journal before he saw it. Devil was in him. I'm thankful my bruises aren't where the children will see.

Friday, baking. Three loaves (two white), three pies (one sugar cream, two apple), two friendship breads. Waneta helped with the pies while Hannah minded Martha. We'll bring one of the sugar creams to Hochstetlers on Sunday.

JANUARY 22, 2163

8 chickadees
5 juncos
4 winter sparrows
3 wrens
2 starlings
2 mourning doves
2 cardinals
Too many crows

Please watch over us, just as you watch over these little ones.

Still cloudy, but a little warmer. Flurries in the afternoon.

Saturday, cleaning. Hannah washed the windows inside; too cold to wash outside. Boys washed the floors upstairs. I did the rest while Waneta looked after the baby.

Dr. Habib visited for the baby this afternoon. Said she's doing as he'd expect, though the way he said it was "within expected variances". Okay that she's not walking nor talking yet, so long as we're doing the reading and the stimulation, which we are. He says with extra care up front, she'll have a full life ahead of her despite the Down syndrome.

Eli saw three more strays on the far side of the south field this morning. They just watched him a while then went back in the woods. Looked hungry, he said. More of them around lately, what with the problems in the cities. And in small towns now too I guess. I'll pray for their safety. And for ours, from them.

JANUARY 23, 2163

11 winter sparrows
4 chickadees
3 juncos
2 mourning doves
2 cardinals
Too many crows

Please watch over us, just as you watch over these little ones.

Less cold, but very windy. The buggy bucked and shook.

Sunday, Lord's day. It's third Sunday, so we had worship service at Stoltzfus's. After the meal, we visited with Hochstetlers.

We were late getting night chores finished. Didn't weave much tonight.

JANUARY 25, 2163

2 wrens, dead of cold
Not one single crow

Please watch over us, just as you watch over these little ones. Or maybe watch over us a little closer.

Bright and bitter cold. I don't recall a colder day in years.

Tuesday, ironing. Waneta has been doing more of the ironing. Burned herself badly. Butter helped. Thankfully, there was plenty of cold outside for compresses.

Mother ewe's due to lamb any day. Spring would be better. These Merino-Plus do pick awkward times to breed. Waneta and Atlee check her first thing and last thing every day, and probably several times between.

After the children were in bed this evening the devil was in Eli. Maybe he's fallen asleep during my weaving. Maybe he's not up there waiting. We'll see soon enough.

JANUARY 26, 2163

6 winter sparrows
5 chickadees
3 juncos
2 mourning doves
1 starling
1 cardinal
Too many crows

Please watch over us, just as you watch over these little ones.

Strays came onto our porch today. The same three Eli saw last week, I expect. Two big pale brown-haired fellows, maybe brothers, and one short and dark-complected. All with shaggy hair and tattooed faces, as is the style. All skinny with hunger.

They had fancy coats and gloves and colorful hats and scarves and boots that looked expensive under all the dirt. They also had the look of men who sorely missed their screens and desks and electric shavers and twinkling modern gewgaws. I wonder what they were before the economy crumbled. Engineers maybe. Bios. Lawyers. Something well to do.

They asked for food. Eli has forbidden me to give any to strays. They said they'd eaten nothing but dry crabapples in

three days. Three days was about right from the hollow look of them. I gave them a loaf of bread and welcomed them to use our well. I apologized it couldn't be more, said we had little enough for our own.

Their mouths thanked me. Their eyes wanted more.

They left east-southeast, so must be holed up at Beilers' old place. I've seen smoke that way the last couple weeks. Hope they don't burn themselves to death.

Told Eli when he got home. He waited til after the children's bedtime to share his displeasure with me. I weaved later than usual tonight.

JANUARY 27, 2163

Crows. So many crows.
Lord, protect us.

Smoke to the east all day. Or clouds? A wall of darkness. Earth to sky, north to south, as far as I could see. Like something from the Old Testament. Like God's Wrath.

Eli came home from work before noon. He heard something big was happening. Lots of guessing, but nobody knew what. All the equipment stopped working at his shop, all at once. Then he saw there was no electricity anywhere. That shouldn't be possible with the Wicc power network reaching everywhere. It's not like we live in the twenty-hundreds.

Eli said folks were awfully spooked. Heard about looting in New Philly. Maybe killing, too. There's talk of I-77 ending into empty space down south, and Route 30 ending just east of Canton. That can't be right. But something serious is happening.

Eli got my Remington up from the cellar. I forgot we still had it. It's been down there gathering dust since I was a girl deer hunting with Grandpa Solomon. Twenty-five or thirty years,

now. I wish I'd remembered it was there. I might have found a use for it.

No. I don't mean that. He's my husband and I'll honor him. Forgive me for thinking it.

I broke down the Remy and cleaned it for Eli. He wouldn't actually shoot anyone, of course, but the sound might be enough to scare someone off. At least I don't think he'd shoot anyone. He's outside now, sitting up with my Remy on the front porch.

As troubling as all this is, I know we'll get by. Always do. "Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

I couldn't weave much tonight. Time to try sleeping now.

