



He should have brought his raincoat, but he didn't want to go back for it now. Here along the bank of the river it was even cooler. Vince pulled up the collar of his sport coat, pulled the lapels closed across his chest. His Instamatic dangled from his wrist like a charm. He was winded already, his breath gone short. Was he having a heart attack? No, he was just being silly, acting stupid. It had been 35 years, and now he was pushing around 35 extra pounds, most of it hanging off his stomach, since he'd been out like this. He needed to walk more, he knew that.

There was the sound of the water at the falls near the old lock; the hiss of traffic on the bridge. His footsteps scuffing along the dirt path. The cry of a distant crow. Otherwise, it was quiet here. Desolate. As he supposed it would have to be.



He had never been here before, across the river from the town. Had never been this close to the river before. Growing up in the town, he had been taught to stay away from the river. Besides the danger, it was a place where nice people didn't go. He had never understood the connection, but the admonitions had been real enough. That he was doing this now, taking off in the middle of the day like this, was exciting, an adventure. Maybe his life was finally starting to change. He grinned to himself, gave an extra bounce to his step.

Along the path, low brambles tugged at his pants legs. Across the river, the town, the mills and the factories, the valley's hills, lay open as if on a great stage. Both setting and audience for what happened here.



Foam, brown and salivary, lapped along the edge of the river. Looking at it from a distance, he would have never guessed. Old tires half in the water, half out. Plastic bottles bobbing in the froth. A condom hanging from a bush. A kind of trophy? Disgusting; good for you, friend.

Beyond the embankment he could see a line of roofs tucked back in a hollow, conjoined company housing from the days they burned coke here. A few shacks -- there was no other name for them -- further up the steep wooded hillside. Who would choose to live here, with the town just across the river? Rough people, no doubt, poor. Like hill people. Well, it was the tip of Appalachia, one step away, if that. Crushing poverty.

They said the little girl -- what was her name? Janice something -- lived nearby. Take away civilization and that's what you get. He looked around uneasily. Kept walking.



The strip of land between the embankment and the river widened as the train tracks curved closer to the valley wall. The path he was on split into two; through the brush and bare trees ahead, he could see the trails dividing again. A glimpse of a small pond, stagnant water; further on, another. A maze of wetlands and straggly growth.

None of it looked at all like the map they printed in the paper. The images on television. There had been a row of emergency vehicles, local and state police cars, the red and blue lights on their roofs flicking ineffectively in the sunlight. Clusters of men standing around talking among themselves. The colorful fall foliage, sumac and ironweed and chokecherry. Dappled sunlight sprocketing down.

Then the small group of men coming back through the trees. Making their way through the underbrush. Lifting the black rubber sack so it didn't drag on the ground. The remains in the sack light enough that it only took two of the men to carry it.



He continued along the web of trails. Keeping the river in sight as much as possible through the trees. The strip of land had grown to a quarter of mile wide, broken up with hillocks and depressions, the steep wall of the valley rising over all, sandstone and granite bluffs. Trees clinging to the cliffs, sprouting at right angles from clefts in the rocks. Weird, the force, the desire to live. Making do with what you have

He remembered reading that once there had been British troops in the area, during the French and Indian War. Scottish Highlanders, the Black Watch. The Indians at first thought they were another tribe of Indians from across the water; then when the Indians heard the pipes, they decided the petticoat warriors were beings from another world, another dimension. As any sane man would. He wondered how the highland laddies felt, sent here by an English king to fight a war not their own. A long way to come in those days, to die. In a strange wilderness. Alone.



And the Indians. Delaware and Shawnee and Mingo. The stories. They flayed their captives alive here on the river bank, in view of the fort on the other side. The screams of the women for days over the water. The story of the lieutenant they burned over a slow fire so he wouldn't die too quickly, alive for a day or more. Cutting off sections of his roasted flesh to eat before his eyes.

Hard to believe now. How could one human being do that to another? A history of violence to this place. Does the land remember? Did it attract violence now in memory from another time? Or was it always here. The forest primeval. Prime Evil.



Why did he come here? What did he think he'd find? He'd never done anything like this before, chase after a crime scene. As if to justify himself, he took the camera and tried to frame a few scenes. But there was nothing to focus on. All was a jumble of bare branches, dry twigs.

Across the river, beyond the veil of cattails and dry grass lining the bank, the life of the town went on, irrespective of what happened here. It went on, even as death was happening here. She probably saw the town in her last moments, was aware that help was that close. And that it would not come. That no one would help her. Perhaps on that very day, at that very instant, he had stepped outside the store, had looked at this very spot across the river. But he knew the world was cruel, uncaring, that didn't surprise him. That wasn't it... Wait, there was someone among the trees.



Out of the corner of his eye, for the briefest instant, he thought he saw something. Someone. Off the trail, in the scruffy undergrowth. He looked again, but there was no one there. He laughed at himself. That's all he needed. To start seeing things.

He turned inland, through the low brush, up a small rise, though he could still hear the river behind him. Something flashed, chirped through the branches, close to his head. He ducked; well, it seemed close. A mourning dove sat on a low branch a few yards ahead of him. He laughed again, this time out loud, in case anyone had seen him. (Who could see him?) The bird blinked stupidly at him, muttered something, then flew on through the woods, squeaking as it flapped as if its wings were loose on their hinges.

He climbed a little further, using the spindly trees for handholds, up onto a shelf of land. He was sweating, puffing hard. In the climb he had torn the sleeve of his sport coat. Great, now Josie would get after him when he got home. Something else for her to get after him about.

No, there was someone there.





There was someone standing in the tall grass at the edge of the trees. An older man, dressed in brown duck work clothes, long jacket and matching pants like buckskin, and a quilted mechanic's hat. In the crook of his arm was a shotgun.

"You startled me," Vince said. Aware that his voice cracked. "I didn't expect to find anyone up here."

The man standing along the edge of the trees, the grass up to his thighs -- he was the color of the dead grass and the bare trees -- looked as if he didn't expect to find anyone up here either.

"You a photographer?"

"No," Vince said. He held up the camera, dangling from his wrist like a flap of skin. Laughed uneasily. Shrugged. "I just brought it along. I don't know why."

The man shifted the shotgun on his arm.



The man was studying him, squinting, head cocked to one side. As if taking his measure. Vince wished he could still see the river. This seemed too much out of the way. But he was curious. Couldn't leave it alone.

"Who'd want to rape a little girl, and then bash her head in like that?"

"Is that what they're saying? That he raped her too?"

"Well, that's what everybody thinks must've happened," Vince said.

"Can't they tell for sure?"

"I guess it's pretty hard. There wasn't much left of her, after all that time."

The man spit the stem of grass from his mouth and started to turn away.

"Why would anybody want to do a terrible thing like that?" Vince said.

"Why would anybody want to come all this way just to see where it happened? Maybe take a picture of it?"



“Well, what’re you doing up here anyway?”

The man looked at him for a moment, then started to move away. Began to blend in with the grass and the trees.

“Hey, What’s your name?” Vince called after him. “Do you live around here?”

As the man reached a group of trees he looked back over his shoulder. Vince remembered his camera, put it to his eye. In the framed, lucid world of the viewfinder, the man almost appeared to smile when he saw what Vince was doing. He turned around to face the camera; then raised the shotgun to his shoulder and aimed it at Vince in return.

Vince slowly lowered the camera.



The man continued to sight down the barrel at him. When he finally lowered the gun there was a look of satisfaction on the other's face that sent a chill deep through Vince. It was the look of a hunter after he's taken his shot, after he's made his kill. He was looking at Vince as if Vince were already dead.

For a moment the other held the gun at waist level and waved the end of the barrel in a slow circle in Vince's direction. As if he were tracing Vince's outline with it. Defining him in some way. Then he disappeared on into the woods.

Vince stared at the place where the man had been. He was trembling, his clothes sweated through. When he came to himself again, he turned and ran back through the brush, back down the slope, crashing and slipping and stumbling as he tried to find the trail again, running toward the river, tried to find the way back again, back the way he came.