

Masthead Logo

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# Family

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## Family · *Lance Olsen*

ZACH HAD BEEN SPLITTING WOOD most of the morning down by the shed when he first sniffed the familiar scent of his father who had died five years ago in a mining accident. It was early spring. Pale green buds fuzzed the birches along Amos Ridge and the ground was soggy and almost black with runoff. Zach straightened and let the axe swing down by his side. He sniffed the air again like a cat suddenly aware of chicken livers on the kitchen counter. The intimate aroma was hard to pin down. Some honey was in it. And some salt. Cinnamon was there. And maybe some sourdough and pine needles. Beyond that, precise words didn't work well. Something sweet. Something acrid. Something like rum and something gamy and musty and earthy and clean all at the same time. He hadn't smelled anything like it for half a decade but he knew it right away, down behind his stomach, down behind his knees. It didn't frighten him and it didn't gladden him. It was more interest that he felt.

He turned and squinted a little into the intense sunshine fanning through the branches around him and saw his father standing with his hands in his pockets in a misty golden nimbus of light near a wild dogwood. He looked just as he had on the day he left the cabin for the last time, wearing overalls and olive-green rubber tie-up boots and a stained undershirt and yesterday's beard. They stood there eyeing each other for several heartbeats. Then Zach nodded slightly in a gesture of acknowledgment and his father's ghost nodded back slightly in a gesture of acknowledgment and Zach turned and picked up his axe and picked up a foot-and-a-half pine log and set it upright on the stump before him and started splitting wood once more because there was still a good part of an hour left until lunchtime.

Strip mining had peaked outside of Frenchburg, Kentucky, in the late sixties and early seventies and then it began falling off. Houses went up for sale. Ken's Market, one of the two grocery stores in town, shut down. The lone car dealership burned to the ground one night and for nearly two years no one seemed to have enough money to clean up the charred remains. But Zach's father didn't have much else that he felt comfortable doing so he decided to stick with mining as long as mining would stick with him. The company had brought in a mechanical monster called Little

Egypt to make the job of digging more cost-efficient. Little Egypt was a machine the size of a small hotel. It was several stories tall and several stories wide and it was covered with gears the size of most men and it looked more like something people would use on Mars for space exploration than it did like something people would use in Menifee County for mining. Its sole purpose was to dig into the earth, slowly, clumsily, relentlessly, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three-hundred sixty-five days a year, processing coal as it went, eating, gnawing, wheezing and clanking away with a deafening sound. Zach's father, who was fifty-seven at the time, was part of a team of men responsible for keeping the huge gears of Little Egypt clear from crushed stone and grit and keeping them oiled and running smoothly. One day in late summer during his lunch break Zach's father sampled a swig too much of shine a buddy of his offered him, turned tipsy, and tripped as he was shinnying among the intricate workings of the behemoth. Instantly he was pulled into the innards of the creaking, banging, raucous colossus, kicking and screaming, and was never seen in one piece again. Until, of course, that spring day.

At noon Zach's wife, Amelia, called him for lunch. She had made bean soup and black bread and apple cobbler. He washed his hands at the spigot outside and walked around his dark blue Ford pickup truck and went in and sat at the table near the stove and began to eat. Amelia told him how she was going to Frenchburg to pick up some things and Zach told her how he was going to start patching the aluminum roof on the shed that had blown off during a big storm last November. Amelia told Zach how she had phoned Madge at the next farm over and how Madge and Opal's dog Mork had been bitten by the first copperhead of the season and how the dog's snout had grown a lump that made it appear as if it were raising a plum under the flesh. As Zach listened he became aware of another presence in the kitchen. He glanced up and saw his father standing by the refrigerator, hands in the pockets of his overalls, watching the couple talk and eat. Zach's father wasn't smiling and he wasn't frowning but his eyes seemed a little more yellowish than usual and they seemed infinitely sad. He didn't speak and he didn't move. He just looked on as Zach raised a forkfull of apple cobbler to his mouth and then washed it down with a gulp of water. Amelia noticed Zach was staring hard and long at the refrigerator and turned to see what he was looking at.

"Your father's here," she said after a moment.

“Yep,” Zach said, cutting himself another bite of cobbler. “I reckon he is.”

And that’s how it started. Zach’s father just appeared one beautiful spring day in a misty golden nimbus of light and Zach and Amelia acknowledged his appearance and then they didn’t say a whole bunch else about it. After all, they had a lot of other things to think about. The field down the road needed plowing and planting. The shed needed mending. The winter wood needed tending to. And if they knew anything about Zach’s father they knew he could take care of himself.

In the beginning Zach had the impression his father had come to tell him something he didn’t already know. Maybe some secret about life that fathers come back from the dead to tell their sons because it’s so important. Maybe some word of wisdom that would suddenly illuminate the world for him and release some vise that had been clamping his head so he could see things in a way he had never seen them before. But Zach’s father never spoke. In fact he never made any sort of sound, not even when he walked across the wooden kitchen floor in his olive-green rubber tie-up boots. Zach waited two weeks, thinking his father might be trying to find the right words in which to stick his wisdom. And when at the end of that time Zach figured maybe his father could use some coaxing, he prompted him one rainy night by asking, “So what do you have to say for yourself?”

His father had nothing to say for himself. His facial expression didn’t change. His eyes continued to look more yellowish than usual and infinitely sad and they focused on Zach’s moving lips and then on Zach’s blue eyes and then it occurred to Zach that the problem was that his father couldn’t hear a word he was saying. There must have been some kind of interference between this world and the next. So he went and got a slip of paper and a pencil and he came back and wrote down his question and tried to give it to his father but the paper just passed through his father’s extended hand as though it were no more than colored air and it fluttered to the floor.

When Zach told this to his wife, she told him she was convinced his father had come back to visit them because death was such a lonely place.

“Death isn’t a lonely place at all,” Zach said. “Lots of people are dead. He should have lots of company where he’s at.”

“That’s all you know, Zach Ingram,” she said.

Amelia smiled a considerate smile at Zach’s father as you might at any

infirm elderly parent or parent-in-law and let him accompany her from room to room and when she went outside to hang clothes and clean the outhouse. The ghost followed her at a respectful distance and took what seemed an exquisite interest in the simple chores of daily life: baking muffins, boiling potroast, frying potatoes, scrubbing the skillet, folding down the quilt on the bed, hanging the winter coats in the back of the closet until next fall. She set a place for him at dinner and even put scraps on his plate although he couldn't sit at the table without falling through the chair and although when he bent down and tried to pick up a crumb with his tongue the crumb passed right through his jaw. She lit a candle for him at night and put it on the kitchen table and bought a newspaper for him to read every Sunday when she headed into church even though she knew he wouldn't be able to hold it. Every night he stood in their bedroom door when they were ready to go to sleep until they said goodnight to him and turned off the lights and then he would wander into the living room and stand by the window and wait for the first gray glow of dawn. Sometimes Zach would come upon him standing at the end of Amos Ridge on Whippoorwill Point amid wild blueberry bushes and sassafras shrubs, looking out over the limestone cliffs and pines and cedars below, or kneeling by the thousands of large amazing jelly-bubble sacks of frog eggs in puddles that collected in ruts along the dirt road that lead up to the cabin.

They had no idea how good his presence made them feel until one morning in July Amelia went into the kitchen at six o'clock to grind some coffee and discovered he was gone. She thought he must be in the living room at the window watching the orange sun roll up behind the trees but when she checked no one was there. She stuck her head into all the closets and then she went outside and searched the shed and the outhouse and the area around the woodpile. She woke Zach and told him what had happened and he immediately dressed and headed down to Whippoorwill Point and called out his father's name and when he didn't see him there he walked all the way to Madge and Opal's farm before understanding somewhere under his lungs that he had lost his father a second time. It hurt Zach terribly, like a hole in the heart hurts, like a hammer in the head hurts. He slowly walked back into the cabin and told Amelia what he hadn't found and then sat down in a foldup chair on the porch and didn't get up for three weeks.

He sat there with his left ankle on his right knee and his hands in his lap and he looked out over the ridge and waited for his father to return. The hot hazy sky purpled at twilight. Crickets chirruped. Stars blinked on in the sky. And after a while he put his chin on his chest and fell asleep. In the morning he didn't eat his breakfast. In the afternoon he didn't eat his lunch. In the evening he didn't eat his dinner. Gradually he became as quiet as his father had been. Amelia told him he was getting thinner and more pathetic every day and when he didn't respond to her she began to eat his meals in addition to her own. First it was simply a way not to let the food go to waste. Then it was a way to express her own grief, her own pain, her own sense of absence. She gained five pounds the first week. She gained eight pounds the second. She gained ten the third.

Late in August as Zach watched the burning ball of the sun dip behind the treeline he noticed two figures walking up the road toward him. Through half-closed eyes he took them to be Madge and Opal coming over to check on them. But the closer the couple came the easier it was to tell they couldn't be Madge and Opal: the man was too old and the woman too short. Zach squinted and then he cocked his head to one side and then he shut one eye and then the other and then he opened both of them and then it struck him that he was looking at his parents, both of his parents, walking arm in arm up the road as they often did after dinner. His father was still wearing the same clothes he had on the day he fell into Little Egypt. His mother was still wearing the nightshirt she wore the day she said living without her husband was a stupid foolish thing and crawled into her bed and pulled up the quilt and turned her face to the wall. The couple mounted the porch and walked by Zach and he rose and followed them and saw them halt in the bedroom door, watching Amelia, chubby, soft, round, and wide-eyed, watch them back from the bed.

Zach's parents were extremely considerate. They always stood in corners, out of the way, arm in arm, or, at night, by the window in the living room from which they could see the first gray glow of dawn. They never asked for anything, never offered advice, and never nagged. They took obvious delight in the woodgrain rippling through the kitchen table; the black-and-white patterns on the wings of the willet that magically appeared on the roof of the shed one cold autumn afternoon; the yellow-green leaves of tobacco ready for harvest in the field down the road; the five-inch long acorn-brown lizard that perched every morning on the top

step, head raised with dignity and alertness, reptilian grin frozen on its face; the short stubby ochre squiggle near the woodpile, looking at them with its black glassbead eyes. Sometimes at dusk they craned their heads slightly and closed their eyes and sniffed at the cool evening air filled with honeysuckle, jasmine, wet grass, endive, pine, moist soil, leafy mulch, a hint of cantaloupe rinds. Sometimes in the afternoon they bent over near a tall curl of wild grass and studied the shiny blue body of the dragonfly arched just above it.

Zach and Amelia barely noticed it when his mother disappeared for two nights, returning with cousin Virgil who had died at thirty-one when his sleek black Toyota pickup skidded off Route 641 one rainy night in 1984 and smashed into a tree at eighty miles an hour. Or when Zach's father disappeared for nearly twenty-four hours, showing up cradling a baby in his arms, the Armstid's little girl, who had died last year when she was two weeks old because she had been born with some of her insides backwards. Amelia was startled to see her uncle Ferrell, who'd been killed in 1968 somewhere in Cambodia although the government had always said it had been in Vietnam, and her aunt Helen, who'd taken her own life in 1963 when she caught her husband Tom fooling around with that cheap blond Bobbie Ann Stills. Zach tried to shake hands with his nephew Billy, whose spine had snapped during an accident on his Honda three-wheeler RV in 1987, and he tried to hug his mother's friend, Mildred, who'd been bitten by a rattler while picking raspberries in 1956 on Madge and Opal's farm. Zeb, whose tractor engine fell on him two years ago while he was trying to tighten a bolt under it, showed up after all the leaves had dropped off the trees on Amos Ridge, and Abel, who choked on a chicken bone while watching the 1979 World's Series Game, appeared just as the skies turned the color of a field mouse's neck and the first light snow began to fall.

"House sure is gettin' mighty cramped," Zach said when he stayed in on Thanksgiving to watch the Macy's parade on television.

'Family's family,' Amelia said.

Her voice was simple, kind, and firm.

Somewhere in his chest around where hope is kept Zach knew she was right and didn't say anything else. He felt good. He felt complete. He felt a system of networks, harmonies, symmetries forming around him and had a tremendous sense of being somewhere, and knowing where that place was, and knowing what he should be doing and why and how. Only

he had to confess at the same time that it was hard to see the tv set, what with little Dinamarie playing tag with Hazel and Gladys and Grace and Gary Bob and Johnny Jim in front of it and Angie smooching with George over at the kitchen table and Susie and Flinn bopping each other over the heads because Flinn had decided to appropriate Susie's favorite rhinestone pinky ring which he wouldn't give back and aunt Beryl was trying unsuccessfully to bake and uncle Gus was trying unsuccessfully to clean his 38-gauge shotgun on the living room floor.

Sleeping was difficult too because the children wanted to be in bed between Zach and Amelia and many of the adults felt the need to stretch out on the floor nearby. Zach couldn't turn over or get up to visit the outhouse and he could never show his affection for Amelia who had never stopped eating two portions of each meal every day and was now the size of a large flaccid dolphin. Little Ainsley and Harlan and Jake and Remus wanted to help with all the chores but they continually got under foot. More than once Zach bruised an ankle or knocked a knee, tripping because he didn't see one of the children waiting right behind him like a shadow. Amelia fared no better in the kitchen where her mother-in-law and aunts supervised all her cooking, which she now performed nearly fourteen hours a day. Although no one except Zach and herself could eat, Amelia felt it only courteous to make enough for everyone. Sometimes at three in the morning she would rise and begin cooking breakfast and sometimes after midnight she would still be cleaning dishes. Over time she turned big as a baby elephant with wrinkled skin. She turned big as a bear whose stubby arms could no longer touch its sides. She turned big as a small whale which plowed through the cabin, shaking the foundation, moving ponderously yet carefully because she had lost sensation in her extremities and could no longer feel whether or not she might be bumping into things or people. Her neck disappeared and she forgot what it was like to bend from the waist and she only vaguely remembered what her once beautiful red-painted toenails had looked like.

By February the food supply had run down and Zach felt more tired than ever before in his life and Amelia could no longer walk. She could no longer fit through the bedroom door. Zach arranged pillows and blankets for her to lie in on the living room floor and he began feeding her through a funnel because she could no longer lift her hands to help herself. The voluminous flesh of her face tugged at her tiny miraculous brown eyes and



made her look a little oriental. Fat from her arms and legs puddled near her on the rug and made it appear as though she were melting. All the ghosts were fascinated by her lying there gazing at the ceiling, unable to speak just as they were unable to speak, unable to partake of the world just as they were unable to partake of the world. They seemed to understand that Amelia was eating for all of them now, that her metabolism was lovingly digesting for the whole family. The adults solemnly kneeled by her. The children frolicked on her body as though it were an astonishingly soft playground. They burrowed under her breasts and they slid down the wonderful smoothness of her thighs and they curled by her massive head to nap.

Every day more relatives appeared: Samuella who had fallen down a well when she was three; Rachel who had cooked up some bad mushrooms when she was twenty-seven; Ferris who lived until he was ninety-four and would have lived until he was ninety-seven if he hadn't strained trying to pick up those logs in the autumn of 1934; Selby who shot Seaton because Seaton had knifed Seldon because Seldon had got Leanne with child when she was fourteen. More relatives than Zach could count. More relatives than he could squeeze into the space of his imagination. More relatives than he could squeeze into the space of his cabin. They spilled out onto the porch and they spilled out into the shed and by the middle of March they were sleeping in the woods all the way down to Whippoorwill Point and Zach couldn't go anywhere without stumbling over them, being surprised by their faces, finding them staring back at him from around a corner or under a bush or behind a birch. He gave up all chores except feeding Amelia and he gave up all food except Amelia's food and he went out of the cabin less and less and he stayed in his bed more and more. The hot weather settled down and he realized he should have planted months ago. The cool weather came and he realized he had nothing more for Amelia to eat and nothing more to grow next year and no more firewood for next fall and winter.

In September as the sky blanched Zach walked down to Madge and Opal's and borrowed some tools and supplies and began to construct a mobile pulley near his dark blue Ford pickup truck. At first the gizmo looked like an eight-foot tall oil well. Then it looked like an eight-foot tall oil well on a sturdy wooden base with wheels under it. When it was done Zach removed the skeletal braces and rolled the contraption over to the

sliding doors that led off the living room. He padded the sturdy wooden base with pillows and blankets and then went to the shed and got his snow shovel. He returned to the living room and gingerly navigated among the ghosts until he reached Amelia sprawled in the middle of the floor. He shoved his snow shovel under a lump of fat that he took to be her flank and heaved. Haltingly, falteringly, agonizingly, he began to roll his gigantic doughy wife across the floor. She could not move herself and she could not speak but each time she found herself on her back she looked up at Zach with her exquisite brown oriental eyes which were infinitely sad. Zach avoided her gaze and put his back into the work. He rolled her through the sliding doors and rolled her onto the porch and, having removed the banisters there, he rolled her over the edge and onto the padded mobile pulley which groaned and wheezed and shook under Amelia's enormous weight. Then he struggled and pushed and heaved the mobile pulley around toward the front of the cabin.

Half an hour later Amelia flooded the back of his mud-spattered dark blue Ford pickup. Her rubbery arms and squelchy legs draped over the sides. Whitish flubber oozed all around her. She stared up at the trees above her. Zach climbed into the cab and turned on the engine and eased down the peddle. The shock-absorbers creaked and swayed. The pickup lurched and began to crawl down the dirt road. When it tapped the first bump the metal belly scraped sand and gravel. But Zach didn't pay any attention to the bump and he didn't pay any attention to the sound. He already felt his heart expanding. He already felt a lightness entering his stomach. He blinked and smiled and looked up into the rearview mirror. All the dead people had collected outside the cabin behind him. They were watching the mud-spattered dark blue pickup creep down the driveway, winding its way toward Madge and Opal's and beyond. Zach saw them all raising their hands and waving goodbye. And, as he turned the corner, Zach caught a glimpse of them begin to follow.