



the
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of
fool

A NOVEL

SARAH LOUDIN
THOMAS

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For Larry Phillip Loudin

AUGUST 1941—APRIL 2020

Thanks for the stories, Dad.

I'll take it from here.

Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs,
rather than a fool in his folly.

Proverbs 17:12 RSV

one

BEVERLY, WEST VIRGINIA

JULY 1934

The day's heat lay close to Loyal like a quilt he couldn't push back. He imagined the cool, dark current of the Tygart River. But Mother would never let him go swimming by himself. He loved diving deep, feeling the pressure of the water press against his face and ears so that he heard a whooshing thrum. At least that was what he thought he heard. He could almost remember . . .

But Mother never let him go anywhere alone. He'd been home from school for weeks and weeks, and she rarely let him leave the house without her. He wasn't a baby. He'd turned thirteen back in May, was well on his way to fourteen. He'd be a man before long. Like Father. He bet Father would let him go swimming. If he were here.

If he were ever here.

Mother was at one of her church meetings. He glanced at the tall clock wagging its tail behind glass. She'd be gone another hour at least. And while she told him not to go any farther than the back garden with its rows of corn, beans, and tomatoes,

the thought of disobeying seemed less and less terrible as the airless day hemmed him in. He grunted. He would do it. It was time he acted his age.

Delphy pushed a strand of damp hair back from her face and sighed. Did they really need to discuss plans for decorating the church for Christmas in such detail this far in advance? The discussion as to whether or not to have a “greening of the church” service or to simply put the decorations up on the Saturday after Thanksgiving was grating on her nerves. Didn’t they have more important things to discuss?

“Delphy, will you supply the cedar branches?” Genevieve Slater laid a cool hand on her arm. How was her hand cool in this heat?

Delphy pushed a smile up from the place where she stored manufactured emotion. She’d been forcing smiles since the town realized her husband spent more time on his beloved Rich Mountain than he did with his family. He still came down to see them but only on his own indecipherable schedule. Maddening. “Of course,” she said. As if she had the only cedar trees in Beverly. Yet it wasn’t worth pointing out. She’d learned to save her energy for battles that mattered. And goodness knew the battle she was fighting to convince the town that her family was intact required the bulk of her energy.

Genevieve smiled and turned to a discussion of the Christmas pageant and the timing of the Christmas Eve service. Delphy spotted one of the funeral home fans tucked behind a hymnal and began stirring the thick air. At least no one had made a pointed remark about whether or not Creed would help cut the cedar and bring it to church. She supposed she should be grateful for small blessings.

The cool water was every bit as delicious as Loyal had imagined. His clothes lay piled on the bank next to a piece of toweling he'd found in the ragbag. If he didn't stay too long, Mother would never know he'd been gone. The sheer joy of being alone—of being free—washed over him. It was even more refreshing than the water. He dove again, then surfaced drawing air deep into his lungs. He could smell damp soil and moss. He floated on his back and let the sun bake his face as he watched a few puffy clouds drift through the washed-out sky.

A movement on the far bank drew his attention from the blissful river. He treaded water, watching. It wouldn't do to be caught by someone who would tell Mother. There. A flash in the trees. He moved closer so he could crouch in the edge of the river among water-worn stones where the water lapped at his legs. The figure looked familiar . . . Michael Westfall.

Loyal ducked lower, grateful that Michael was rushing along a path and paying no attention to the river. The older boy had teased Loyal more than once, made fun of how he talked with his hands. Loyal wondered why he was in such a hurry on this hot day.

Michael paused, looked over his shoulder, and beckoned someone on with a *hurry-up* gesture. He glanced around wildly and then stuck something in a rotted-out stump. As he straightened, a girl with russet hair sped into view. It was Michael's sister, who was the same age as Loyal. They would be in the same class too, if Mother would ever let him go to the school in town. He had always found Rebecca to be her brother's opposite. Kind, still, peaceful—always ready with a smile and a wave for him. Plus, she was pretty.

Now, though, the girl was gasping for breath. Her hand pinched her waist as she ran after her brother. She glanced over her shoulder, fear in her eyes. Loyal glimpsed another movement—higher up the mountain—but before he could focus on it, he saw the older boy's hand motions get bigger

and his lips move. Loyal saw the word *hurry* take shape over and over. What was wrong? Michael grabbed his sister's hand and tugged her forward, then released her and rushed ahead. Rebecca looked back again and paused, panting. She closed her eyes and bowed her head. When she lifted her face, she turned toward the river, and Loyal had the notion she saw him. Her eyes were full of something . . . a secret maybe? He rose up just a little, and her eyes widened. He lifted a hand the way he would when signing *your*. She lifted her hand in the same way, and he understood that something terrible had happened. Then she turned and sprinted after her brother.

Creed headed out to the only spot near the cabin that got good sun. He planned to pick a mess of beans where they climbed the stalks of corn he'd planted in his garden patch. He wished for Delphy's good pork roast with sweet potatoes, but he'd eat his beans and be glad for them. As a boy there'd been more than one lean year and he knew even now folks in cities were going hungry. The country was in a pickle, and he wasn't so sure President Roosevelt was going to get them out of it.

There'd been rumors in town about some homestead project Eleanor Roosevelt was championing. They were talking about setting one up on mostly empty land out near the Westfall place. Word was, they'd pay good money, but there were plenty of folks who valued their land more than empty government promises. And Hadden Westfall was one of them.

Creed felt an ear of corn to see if the darkening silks were telling the truth about it being ripe. He grunted and added the ear to his galvanized bucket. He might even dig a few early potatoes. He ought to leave them to grow until the tops frosted and the tubers hardened off, but they'd sure be tasty cooked with the beans and a piece of salt pork.

Pausing, he peered down the mountain through the trees to

where he could glimpse the Tygart twisting along the wide valley below. He stretched his back and took in the view. It was a good place—the valley shaped like his grandmother’s long wooden dough bowl. The bottomland was gentle and rich, softly curving up to the steeper hillsides, offering plenty of room for a man to make a life if he were so inclined.

Creed turned back to his garden. Some days it was lonesome up on Rich Mountain no matter how much he appreciated the peace and quiet. No matter how many times he told himself his family was better off with him up here.

The mountain was where he could keep an eye out for ginseng to dig each fall so he could sell enough to pay Loyal’s tuition. No one could accuse him of depending on his wife’s inheritance. Then, in the spring, he’d gather the morels folks were happy to trade for, and he could always sell a mess of fish if he needed to buy the boy some new shoes or books for that special school he went to.

Not such a boy anymore. The thought flicked through his mind as he went back to gathering his supper. Loyal had turned thirteen a few months back. Some places he’d be considered a man already, but Loyal was different. He was special. Creed didn’t know what was going to happen to him, what he was going to be. Maybe, if he learned enough, he could be a teacher at that school he went to. He was plenty smart—at least Delphy said he was. Creed hadn’t much learned how to shape the boy’s language.

He broke off another ear of corn and dug out those potatoes, then strode to the cabin to set everything to cooking. Who’d have thought he’d be the chief cook and bottle washer in his own house? When he married Delphy, he’d supposed she would do that from then on. And then Loyal came along and Creed took his own father’s advice too much to heart. Pushed the boy too far. Demanded too much. And now . . . well, it wasn’t worth dwelling on. Dad wasn’t here to see how far he’d fallen, and that was a relief.

Creed started nipping his beans and breaking them into a pan. They'd need to cook the longest. He lost himself in the rhythm of the simple task, thinking about how many times his grandmother had done the same. She'd stepped in when his mother died bringing him into the world, and she was the only person Creed had ever seen stand up to Dad. He smiled at the memory of the petite woman in her perfectly starched apron, dressing his father down. She'd laugh to see Creed doing women's work now.

No, he thought, she'd fuss. She would not approve of a married man baching it up on a mountain while his wife and son lived just a few miles away. He made a point of going into town to attend church with them most weeks and he even spent the night now and again, but mostly he felt more at ease here on his mountain and suspected Delphy and Loyal were more at ease once he was gone. Still, it might be nice if . . .

Movement along the path leading to the cabin caught Creed's eye. He noticed a puff of smoke rising from the path and jerked to his feet. Had some fool started a fire?

Setting his pan aside, he laid a hand on the rifle leaning against the doorjamb. He cradled the long gun in the crook of his elbow and watched to see what—beyond the smoke—had drawn his attention. Not many ventured this high up the mountain without having a purpose in mind.

When he saw it was a boy, he relaxed. Then he recognized Loyal and every sense went on alert. Delphy never let the boy wander on his own, and she rarely set foot on the mountain. What in the world?

Loyal got close enough to make Creed out, and his eyes lit with fire. He hurried on, sticking his hand straight out in front of him and flapping it—the funniest-looking wave Creed had ever seen. He formed a fist with his right hand, the thumb sticking up in the air, and smacked it into his left palm. He did this several times, moving both hands toward his chest, eyes pleading with Creed.

“What’s the matter, Loyal? What’s wrong?” Creed spoke slowly, locking eyes with his son.

Loyal made a sound of frustration. He fanned the fingers of his right hand, touched the thumb to his forehead, and lowered it to his chest. Then he held both hands flat in front of him, one palm up, the other palm down, and flipped them both over to his left as though turning pages.

Creed felt his own frustration rise. He’d never taken the time to understand what Loyal was saying. He knew the boy could understand him by watching his lips, but how to make sense of what Loyal wanted to tell him? He was clearly upset, and Creed realized the boy’s hands were shaking as he made those motions over and over, as if Creed would suddenly grasp what they meant.

“Where’s your mother? What are you doing here alone?”

Loyal screeched and stomped his foot.

Creed held up both hands toward his son. “Wait,” he said. “I know what.” He patted the rough boards of the porch. “Sit. I’ll be right back.”

Loyal groaned and slumped onto the porch as if carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders and expecting his father to relieve him of his burden. Creed might not know sign language, but he knew body language and it tore at his heart to see his son unable to communicate with him.

He darted inside and grabbed several sticks of kindling. Back outside, he crouched down and smoothed a patch of mountain dirt. Loyal brightened and grabbed a stick. He knelt down beside his father and began to mark in the earth.

M-A-N

He made the motion with fanned fingers and thumb touching his forehead, then chest again.

“Right, you want to tell me about a man.”

Loyal nodded and looked serious. He made the flipping motion with one hand and then scratched some more.

D-E-A-D

Creed felt his eyebrows shoot up into his hairline. “There’s a dead man?”

Loyal nodded like his life depended on it.

“Are you sure he’s dead?”

The boy dropped the stick and made the flipping motion some more, frowning and shaking his head. Creed tried the motion himself, and Loyal nodded solemnly.

“You’d best show me where,” Creed said.