

Lightbringer

In the wooded outskirts of a Carolina mountain town, a woman hurries out her cabin's front door. She carries two antique oil lamps; one held out in front against the thick dark of night, the other gripped at her side with white lace draped over its bronze metal and untouched wick. Her sheer, embroidered nightdress trails behind her bare ankles. A complimentary shawl of soft cotton--the only other item she bothered to grab during her departure--drapes her forearms and lower back.

She steps from the porch onto the dirt path headed off her property. Pausing at the weather-beaten mailbox, she turns as if to look back towards her home. The windows would be black and vacant, the front door standing open. She pauses before her eyes can track far enough behind her. A soft wind chills her body. Crickets trill, the forest rustles. She holds a shallow breath in her throat.

Behind her, the porch steps groan under a formidable weight loud enough to make her think they've sagged from the burden. She wants to look. The temptation crawls up her spine, slips into her skull, and burrows behind her eyes. The pressure urges them to peek over her shoulder.

Instead, she takes a step forward. The porch creaks loudly again, released from whatever weight had been there a moment before. She takes another step and listens as something drags itself three or four through leaves and dirt. The woman clutches her lanterns tight, straightens her shoulders, trains her eyes forward, and continues down the hill.

It isn't long before a modest two-bedroom home comes up on her left, tucked behind a thick brush. The place belongs to Charity Pritchett, a diabetic woman in her seventies. Charity once made weekly rounds to her neighbors distributing the freshest fruits, flowers, and vegetables from her garden. Some weeks her age and illness outweighed the need for her generosity, but she never did spend much time concerned for herself. It was her husband, Knox, responsible for reigning her in all those years. When a heart attack took him two years later, Charity raised more in that garden than she ever had before. So much so that her already spotty attention to health became downright paltry, until one winter

night she noticed the smeared trail of blood throughout her living room. The bottoms of her feet, covered in old, cavernous ulcers, could no longer be ignored.

She called the hospital and listened to a nurse's lecture on the dangers of ambulance travel north of Davis Mills: the afternoon's rain had iced over, and the risk of hefty vehicles on twisty roads without guard rails was simply too great. Charity waited until the next afternoon, when the sun shined and the way cleared, to ask one of her neighbors for a ride to the hospital. The doctors said she narrowly missed her window of opportunity, and by dusk both her feet were gone. She hasn't left her home in eleven years. Her garden, long since taken by the snow and cold like every year, stayed dead.

The woman makes her way down the curved road wrapped in a sphere of warm light. She can't discern much beyond the lamp's glow, but it's plenty. Mrs. Pritchett, this hill, these houses, and the town of Davis Mills had been her playground. The murmurous trees and owl hoots give her more direction than a compass ever could.

Half a mile later the trail bottoms out onto Main Street and her feet touch the split pavement of her birthplace. This section of town is a touch more modern and well-to-do, but truly just a touch. Colby Hanks' house a ways down the block had been renovated twenty-five years ago versus the rural area's average of forty. He'd grown up under anxious paycheck-to-paycheck parents who worried how they would live once retired, and by God he worked every job he could from his teens into his thirties for a down payment on a long-lasting family home. The kind of place that makes it into the corner of the Davis Mills' travel brochure, proud and respectable.

He signed the papers right on time for mom and dad to hit retirement age and surprised them for their fortieth wedding anniversary. By the forty-fifth his work ethic was in overdrive, and in another eighteen months not even his lifetime of discipline could keep the lights on. These days they're crammed in a one bedroom across town, one income and two Social Security checks combined to make rent for an unemployed landlord who owns five other properties.

The wind sharpens as the woman presses on into the heart of town. The sounds of the forest--firefly buzzes and animal chitter --surround her despite

being well into town by now. A couple of coyotes sing together a mile or so off. She can't be sure, but part of her wants to believe she hears the drag of something heavy several feet behind her. Shadowy houses loom close, her skin prickles with gooseflesh. She drifts to the middle of the deserted street as homes give way to storefronts.

For Davis Mills, 'downtown' is a quarter-mile stretch comprised of a bar, the local radio station, a billiard hall, the sheriff's office, a major national bank, a grocery store chain, and a handful of popular food franchises. The corporate hot spots were less than a decade old, yet easy to come by once the town lined the southern roads to the bigger cities with guard rails. They bought out the people they were going to put out of business anyway and moved right into their stores, except for Bill's Pizza.

Maybe if they had tried to railroad the founder of the place the sale would have gone through easy, but this was third generation Bill. The Bill who found deep honor in his grandfather's and father's legacy, who cleaned the place himself, who gave jobs to anyone on hard times with no questions. This Bill went down with his ship, and hand-delivered pizzas right up until there was no choice but to hang an Out of Business sign on the door. He moved away in shame and, if rumors were true, picked up a serious alcohol dependency. But the storefront remains, and as the woman passes by a large hand-painted window advertising the last special Bill ever ran, her jaw tightens.

The main drag behind her, she lifts her eyes to the great hill before her. The ridge's silhouette drifts along under the moon's pointed crescent. Even from here she can make out the brightly lit two story building at the top. Davis Mills' long-lived town hall, still true to form after forty years, currently shelters a public City Council session far after midnight.

She strides through the southern end of the city, where ruptured foundations and unsteady roofs struggle to protect the most desperate of families. The stories found here aren't ones people talk about unless they're drunk, high, or testifying.

Like one of the town's few Hispanic families who were bullied, harassed, and illegally searched by the Sheriff's office until, with no vehicle to their name, they walked out of town for fear of what would come next.

Like the young girl who got kidnapped from the area last year who resurfaced three months later violated and dismembered in a dumpster two towns over. No arrests despite plenty of physical evidence and a pricey cufflink found in one of the trash bags.

Like the mentally ill homeless guy who tried to rob the bank and received a bullet to the head from the security guard. The man's body went unclaimed and his ashes were "released" off the North Carolina coast, as per the law. After intense pressure from the townspeople for justice, the guard switched to night shifts.

In a few weeks these condemned homes will be demolished to make way for an apartment complex and more franchises. The council claims no responsibility for those being displaced. They have unanimously decided to never claim responsibility for anything.

The woman spots movement, looks closer at the neighborhood; myriad hooves, hides, and antlers rush past the gaps between homes. Wings flap louder and more numerous overhead. The distant howl of coyotes are no longer a duet, but a chorus. Perhaps the dragging behind her ceases, perhaps it's drowned out by the swarm of nature. Who can tell? Her covered lantern grows heavy, as if swollen to five times its size. She grits her teeth and slouches to accommodate. The road up to the town hall runs zigzag from base to tip, edge to edge. A straight line bypass will save her the most time.

She weaves through trees and trudges up the incline. Twigs snap beneath her feet, dirt jams under her toenails. Her lead lantern bounces off tough bark and swings wildly, but she's careful to keep the covered one steady. The wind kicks into a frenzy. Incoherent whispers hiss past her ears, the shawl around her shoulders vanishes. Her arms take deep scratches, the thick drops of liquid trailing from her elbow certain to be dark red. She slips on thick leaves, once mildly but the second time forces her to reel. The bronze lantern's heavy counterweight saves her from a vicious plunge back to Main Street. From there, a few more careful steps land her at the edge of a small parking lot full of new cars.

All around her, nature screams.

Coming into the stagnant, sanitized glow of fluorescent lights, she drops her lighted lantern at the double glass doors and pushes her way inside.

The wrathful night stays neatly outdoors and it becomes perfectly quiet. Three dozen plastic chairs sit in a half circle facing two long mahogany tables covered in files, papers, and a dozen microphones. The eleven men and two women seated at the tables stop their discussion to stare at her with unpleasant confusion.

The oldest of them, Bradley Davis, squints at the newly arrived woman through his bifocals. "Can we help you?"

Limbs weak and breath frayed, the woman drags her grimy, bloody feet across the linoleum. She approaches the old wooden podium between the audience chairs and the council table. Her covered lantern fits easily on the podium's flat top where she rests it. The woman rakes her eyes over everyone there, and with a steady hand rips away the white lace.

A dissonant boom shoves everyone back. Most are forced clear from their seats and onto the ground, where they clasp palms over their ears and struggle to their knees. The bass-like noise soon sharpens into a flat, relentless high tone. It doesn't take long for every eardrum to rupture and spurt blood. Noises of shocked pain are drowned out, but the sudden slap of fear on their faces is unmistakable.

The lantern sparks at its center. A bold white light fills the space. Hands fly in front of faces, fingers cover eyes. For a few drawn out moments everyone's shadows are brought into blade-sharp relief. The temperature climbs. The air grows thin. Frantic protests and confusion give way to naked panic. Sweat pours down raging, frightened faces. A few of them have enough presence of mind to head for the entrance. The heat spikes, inhaled start to burn. Surfaces feel like they were set on fire. Before anyone reaches the door there is one last incredible swell of roasting heat. Flesh wobbles. Noses turn soft. Everyone crumples to the floor.

Thirty seconds crawl by.

Guttural wails, high-pitched mewls, chest thumping sobs--anguish so tangible and complete it's remarkable they still live. If they were ever people, *human*, their identities swiftly dissipate. All that's left is a herd of shrieking animals.

The sputtering cries and moans garble, then choke off. Everyone claws at their throats, gulps for air. Once they're lightheaded, mouths drop open and a clumpy, dark ichor sprays from the back of their throats. They heave wave after wave onto the floor, the tables, each other. The few flopped on their back drown while skin sloughs into puddles and eyes drain out of sockets.

A brunette woman's manicured hand cracks backward against her forearm. A heavy man's spine fractures to a forty-five degree angle. Everyone else's hips, arms, and vertebrae splinter with a series of dull pops. In no time at all they resemble broken marionettes scattered across pale tile and sickly green carpet.

The weakest of them dies. Bradley Davis sprawls motionless under the tables, cufflinks shining in the overwhelming light, legs broken at several angles. His twisted jaw gapes with little skin left to speak of as glasses drip plastic into his empty eye sockets.

On the floor behind the podium, her skin burns. Her ears bleed, her bones break. A black fluid trickles from her mouth. The woman manages a smile before her neck snaps hard to the side.

She did it.

She lifted the veil.