

A movie poster for 'Rebekka's Children'. The background is a sunset over a landscape. In the foreground, there are three people: a woman with dark hair and blue eyes on the right, resting her chin on her hand; a woman with dark hair and brown eyes on the left; and two children with blonde hair, one in a denim jacket and one in a red shirt, looking towards the camera.

Rebekka's Children

FRANK MARSH

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Frank Marsh

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For Marty, Cathy, Terry, Hank, John, and Mollie

“Come to the edge,” he said.

“We are afraid,” they said.

“Come to the edge,” he said.

They came.

He pushed them and they flew.

—Guillaume Apollinaire

Prologue

The year was 2007. The evening shadows had already rolled in from the surrounding mountains covering the valleys in an eerie darkness. Monica Gill couldn't remember a spring night so black as she hurried across the Williams's campus to Mellon Hall and Professor Edwards's evening class on nineteenth-century literature. Even though crimes of any sort were non-existent at the bible college, she always avoided using the isolated and dimly lighted side entrance leading downstairs to the classroom in what was a renovated storage room. Being a young, first-year assistant professor in a small southern private college, David Edwards had been quickly initiated into the academic pecking order by being awarded the most despised classroom on the campus.

When Monica reached the entrance to the stairwell and started down, a shadowy body darted from the surrounding blackness like an apparition and entered the stairwell behind her carrying a large brown garden stone in his right hand. The attack was silent, swift, and violent. A loud terrifying scream followed by the sickening thud of a falling body, and Williams Bible College had experienced their first crime since opening the campus in 1956. But Bryles County had experienced its first crime against a black victim since the turbulent days before World War II when the hooded Klan rode unchecked across the rolling hills and deep valleys of East Tennessee, spewing their venomous hatred. In time, Monica Gills would recover, but the enigmatic saga that followed such a senseless crime and the evil that rained on Bryles County would be talked about for years to come by the good people there.

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Grovenor McVey stared in disbelief at the latest memo from Mark Howard, laying out the additional work expected of him before Monday's trial. Monica Gill's assailant would be tried that day. From the beginning Grove didn't want any part of the case, but not because Monica was a black woman, at least that is what he kept telling himself. What he didn't want was a high profile criminal case coated with an icing of racial overtones that could delay his retirement in two months. "Every race has its problems," his father would say when questions were raised about color, "and when you mix them together it'll take a day in hell to straighten them out." Ten days in hell would not be enough for Grove to undo the infusion of evil that would soon swirl and dance around him like the playful Greek gods of fortune.

No African-American had appeared in the Circuit Court for Bryles County as a victim during Grove's twenty-five years as Assistant Attorney General. But Monica Gill's case already had become choice fodder for the local media to chew on as the trial date approached. Knowing that rural justice is often rationed out by how many "kin folks" fill up the courtroom seats, the NAACP was right behind, dispatching a representative to Greenhill to monitor the case and raise a little hell if necessary.

Ringed by the Appalachian Mountains and squeezed back into a deep valley between Greene and Washington Counties, Bryles County was the smallest, poorest, and most racially charged county in East Tennessee. While most other surrounding rural counties kept their racial preferences hidden just below the surface of civility,

Bryles County didn't. Beautiful in scenery but isolated in thought, the county paid no heed to the winds of change. Centuries-old values had been plowed and sown deep in the fertile fields of the county, keeping the people nourished with a steady diet of prejudice. The fields were no longer plowed, but the diet remained. No one could explain the lasting harvest or much cared to try. The few black families still living in the county were no bother, good ancient folks who kept to themselves, tenaciously clinging to the land their ancestors had gained and scratched out an existence on when emancipated. Nothing new came to Bryles County because everything and everyone seemed to pass through without stopping.

Having quieted his silent anger over Mark's memo, Grove reluctantly opened the case folder. The forensic evidence defied any rebuttable arguments and he would leave that alone for the time being. Grove was dismayed at the paucity of the sheriff's report. Seven months had passed since March 22, the date of the crime, and Sheriff Dawson's brief penciled notes still had not been transcribed into the official record. At best, they were a pitiful elementary summary of the terrifying events that transpired that fateful day.

Turning on the small desk lamp, he began reading the abbreviated handwritten notes left by the sheriff on a crumpled sheet of yellow notebook paper.

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Victim's name—Monica Gill—coed at Williams College.

Race—African-American.

Address—unknown. Student witness thought victim lived in NCar.

Attack on victim around 6:30 P.M., Thursday, March 22, 2007

Mellon Hall, Williams College.

Victim hit on her head at South entrance by assailant using large rock.

Assailant's name—Esau, no last name.

Address—unknown.

Assailant had no identification cards, driver's license, or SS number when arrested.

Finger print databases showed no matches.

Langley databases to be run tomorrow.

Victim taken to Lee Hospital by ambulance. Lab reports—to follow.

Deputy Maris stated that when he arrived at the scene two male students were holding the assailant keeping him from escaping.

No eyewitnesses to the assault on the coed.

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Reading nothing new, Grove turned to the carefully crafted forensic lab report linking the assailant's DNA to the victim and the weapon used in the attack. As he did, the 147-year-old domed court house clock began banging out its own claim to eternity in Greenhill, signaling noon had arrived peacefully once again. Old and weathered and professing a mind of its own, the historic clock continually defied any mechanical rationale for striking noon at the proper time. It was useless but loved by the good people of Bryles County because it was the past.

When the seismic vibrations from the ringing stopped, Grove walked to the ceiling high office window to see if he could recognize any newcomers hurrying along Rose Street two floors below. People gawking at noon, like the rest of his life, was a rehearsed ritual he had steadfastly followed from the first day he was assigned the small office as the new Assistant Attorney General for Bryles County. With its warped and creaking wooden floors, charred by the town fire of 1890, the office still greeted visitors with the numbing stench of ancient "tobacco spit" that in its day fell everywhere but in the "spitter's" intended designation—a lonely brass spittoon, sitting and waiting untouched and shiny clean. The spittoon had long been removed but the tobacco stains and stench had become one with the floor for all to enjoy or avoid, according to whichever pleasure a visitor favored.

"You can't remove the smell of history anymore than you can change it," Grove would tell anyone who complained.

History is a ghost that still walks the streets in Greenhill. Looking out the window, Grove could see to his right the revered cannon ball graciously lodged deep in the front court house wall by Union artillery when they chased a Confederate company occupying the town back across the Nolichucky River and into the distant mountains. There never was a major battle, only brief skirmishes leaving one or two young dead boys behind for a 'Christian burying' by which ever army occupied Greenhill. Like the winds of the changing seasons, the North roared into Greenhill one March for good, leaving the cannon ball eternally lodged in the front wall of the court house as a blessed symbol of all that was good and right for the generations to come.

The beautiful county is split right down the middle by Drew Creek, which meanders through and around the green rolling farmlands before emptying into the Nolichucky River. The creek actually runs north and south for much of the county. Far back in the folds of history, North favoring folks lived on one side and South favoring folks on the other side. Depending on which side of the creek you lived, old friends either stayed old friends or became bitter enemies. Scotch-Irish blood flowed through the area like a winding mountain stream, connecting family to family. When the news of General Lee's surrender reached the county, the bitterness bared its fangs like a mad dog. Posse like gangs of farmers, merchants, and about anyone else who would ride with them, stormed across Drew creek arresting and jailing and lynching some of the most rebellious of the southern sympathizing folks even though they were old church friends. Grove's great-great-grandfather Isaac, who believed Robert E. Lee to be Jesus Christ reincarnated, was one of the first to be strung up and left hanging from the rafters of his tobacco barn alongside his freed slave, Jessie. No one knows why they chose to hang Jessie too, except he once belonged to Isaac and that made him fair game along with the livestock and tobacco crop. Together they swayed ex-master and ex-slave before being cut down the next morning by a small band of passing barefoot Confederate soldiers who quickly stole their shoes and clothes and anything else they could carry, before moving on down the road towards the mountains and North Carolina.

Like everyone else in the county, Grove grew up prejudiced and probably still was, but he knew it was wrong. He had struggled against it most of his life but its lure was strange and powerful and whet his senses. He finally decided that life is nothing more than a bowlful of rituals and prejudice was in there somewhere. It is not something you can just leave behind; you bring it with you whether you want to or not. His father was prejudiced too, but Grove never heard the 'n—word' used by him until one Saturday evening when his father was watching a Harry Belafonte special show on television. Belafonte, sitting next to his guest star, Julie Andrews, leaned over and kissed her cheek after they had finished singing a duet. The "kiss" was the first time any black man had taken such liberty with a white woman while millions watched on national television. Grove was in the bathroom when he heard the explosion.

"Did you see what that damn n—did!" his father screamed.

"Everyone knew this would happen...the mixing has begun and will only get worse."

Grove remembered his only question then, "What will get worse, there are only three Negro families in Bryles County?"

But his father had stormed out of the house—on his way to nowhere, only to try and understand what was suddenly happening to his settled world. All he knew was that a boundary line had been crossed in a distant studio somewhere in the country and his world had trembled and crumbled in the after shock. No one mentioned the incident in the household when he returned but Grove saw the change in his father, as only a child's eyes can.

The years tumbled by fast after that and the Belafonte incident, as Grove liked to call it, faded into memory. He was fifty-four now, on the cusp of middle age. With two miserable marriages behind him, he both welcomed and hated the solitude of single life. Yet he still carried himself with a large degree of youthful pride. Tall and lanky and glib of tongue, he presented an imposing figure in the courtroom. But it was the combination of his whaleish Scottish nose and height that quickly set him apart from everyone else when he entered a crowded room. The men loved him but so did the single ladies and a few married ones too in Bryles County.

Returning to his desk, Grove began reading through the official forensic lab report. The report was precise and exact. Two different blood types were found at the scene, the victim's and the assailant Esau's. Added to this evidence was the incriminating notation that DNA found on the stone used as a weapon in the assault matched the assailant's. The stone was clean of fingerprints, which Grove quickly dismissed as unimportant since the DNA was absolute.

Before he could finish the report, a young willowy deer-eyed woman with long flowing jet-black hair and an inquisitive face appeared in the doorway to his office.

"Mr. McVey? I am Monica Gill," she said, speaking in crisp, short sentences with only a slight hint of nervousness in her voice.

Grove took notice of the young woman's "proudness" and self-confidence as she walked to the closest chair, sitting down with the aplomb of a queen.

"Miss Gill, yes..." Grove mumbled looking down at the file.

"...the trial is Monday. No problems on the surface, the case should be a rare treat."

"I beg your pardon...a rare treat?"

"Sorry, wrong word. I meant case, yes a rare case...it's been a long time since a black victim has appeared in court around here."

Looking more closely at the personable young woman, Grove could see the hidden terror from the attack still spread across her young eyes like a lost child desperately searching for her mother's face.

"Tell me about yourself...I know you're not from around here."

Quickly thumbing through a small, red folder, Monica took out two handwritten pages from among several and handed them to Grove. Then much to his amusement, she began rapidly reciting their contents with some anxiety in her voice as if he was the teacher and she was making a class presentation.

"I jotted down most of the information I think you want. My full name is Monica Merriweather Gill. My father was an African-American and is dead. My mother is Cherokee, which makes me a scrambled minority. I am twenty-one, a senior at Williams Bible College, majoring in literature with a minor in music and I will be enrolling next year as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Let's see...oh yes, I live near Boone at the foot of Hawksbill Mountain."

"Do you live on campus?"

"Sorry...left that bit out. I drive over the mountain two times a week. I was on my way to an evening class when the attack occurred."

"How much do you recall about the incident now?"

"Very little...starting down the side entrance stairs at Mellon Hall and that's about it."

"You're a very lucky young woman."

"I know," then challenging Grove with her candidness, Monica asked,

"Now tell me something about the man who attacked me; I know nothing except what I read in the newspapers."

Grove begrudgingly fumbled around with his notes for a second before responding to this precocious and beautiful young African-American woman, an experience he wasn't quite ready for.

"Let's see...the defendant is a homeless drifter named Esau...no last name as yet, or where he's from, or anything else for that matter...no police record in the national data base and no fingerprints of record anywhere. So we know very little about the man."

"That's it?" Monica asked incredulously, taken back by the sparse information.

"How about this. The old guy was lit up on sterno juice and smelled like a moonshine crock when arrested. Sheriff Dawson is still

trying to get the old man's smell out of the back seat of his cruiser, driving around with all the windows open and the air conditioner running full blast," Grove chuckled, trying to lighten the conversation.

"To tell you the truth, Miss Gill, I don't think I've ever been around a more offensive smelling person. His brain is so fried he has trouble putting two words together."

"Well, at least I wasn't raped or..."

"I know. I'd say he was after money or it was a hate crime,"

Monica's expression turned to one of angered amazement at Grove's remark.

"A hate crime? Where have you been? You can count the number of African-Americans and other minorities living around here on one hand."

"That's the problem young lady, the rest of the country may have moved on, but not Bryles County."

"Well it should. Martin Luther King's day was forty years ago. I would hope by now that the color of a person's skin is no more significant in Bryles County than the color of her eyes."

"Well it is and that's that," Grove said firmly shutting the door on the conversation. He hadn't bargained for a lecture on civil rights, especially from the lips of a young black woman.

"The trial is Monday, Miss Gill," he said coldly walking to the office door, indicating the meeting was over. "But I may need to run over to Boone on Saturday to talk with you and your mother about what we expect to happen Monday if it becomes necessary."

Monica remained seated, her eyes settling on Grove's face as he struggled to find some common ground to ease the rising dislike swelling up in his stomach against this very smart young black woman. Her smartness and the color of her skin had stirred the roots of his prejudice, making it difficult for him to continue.

"The drive over the mountain is always special to me," he finally said in an effort to dampen the building tension.

"Has been since I was a boy. There's a mammoth cave about the size of a football field stretching out along the side of Old Bald Mountain. We would always go there to hunt rattlers in the summer cooling themselves deep inside the cave. I'd always keep the biggest and meanest snake apart from what I didn't kill and skin and sell it for a dollar to the crazy snake handlers over in Cocke County."

Monica became transfixed by Grove's sudden nostalgia and flashed a warm smile.

“I know the cave well. Cherokee hunting parties stopped there during violent thunderstorms. I’m sure some of my mother’s distant kin must of stayed there at one time or another. I’m told runaway slaves holed up there also.”

“It seems you know your history.”

“Mostly from my mother...very little from my father. Most African-Americans were cheated out of knowing their history, but the Cherokees know theirs.”

An awkward silence followed, the kind where shame rests in the air, before Grove was able to collect his thoughts.

“Tell me, did you see the defendant anytime before the attack hanging around the campus?”

“I think so. Maybe two days before, sitting under the large hemlock tree on the north corner of the campus. Two other homeless people were with him.”

“Do you remember anything about them?”

“Not much. One was a dirty and scraggly bearded old man, the other a heavy-set woman wearing a huge straw hat. You know, the kind field hands wear around here when tying up tomato plants or stripping tobacco leaves.”

“Evidently his traveling cronies took to the road again—we haven’t been able to find them, and...”

Before Grove could finish his sentence, the office door opened ushering in a ruddy and prissy faced man of medium stature who quickly caught the eye of Monica sitting to the left of Grove’s desk. Without waiting for any introduction he began speaking in a choppy cadence, as if out of breath.

“Mark Howard, Attorney General for Bryles County. You must be Miss Gill, the unfortunate victim. Folks around here don’t take to it lightly when one of our bible college students gets hurt regardless of where she comes from...or what color she might be. What we’re going to do young lady is show the liberal media and the NAACP and anyone else who shows up, that persons of color like yourself will get a fair shake in Bryles County just as if they were white people.”

And there it was. Without an ounce of sincerity in his miserable soul, Mark had laid out the rules of the game. A young African-American woman’s terrible hurt would give him the gold stars needed for his anticipated race to seize the 1st District congressional seat.

“I will be the lead attorney trying your case...,” Mark boasted. “With Mr. McVey assisting me. I won’t tolerate any slip ups from

anyone, the case is too important to you Ms. Gill, and the county.” And especially to you, Grove murmured to himself.

Grove disliked intensely everything about Mark, but begrudgingly knew the man was a giant among the attorney generals in East Tennessee. The ratio of convictions to acquittals on his watch was overwhelming for a county the size of Bryles and had resulted in the continuing rise of guilty pleas by the county’s small cadre of criminal lawyers. Consigned by fate to Bryles County, each of these lawyers held tightly to the single dream that one day they would stumble onto ‘the case’ that would instantly propel them to statewide fame. But any hope of grabbing Monica Gill’s case as the long awaited path of deliverance had been quickly dashed, because the seediest and the neediest and the most ancient of Greenhill’s ‘barristers’ as he liked to call himself, J.R. Cromwell, stole the case the minute the county jail doors slammed shut behind the accused assailant. Judge Benjamin Dawson, the sheriff’s brother, quickly appointed J.R. pro bono counsel for the defendant, knowing he wouldn’t accept one red cent in attorney fees from the hard pressed tax payers of Bryles County. But Grove knew the real reason for Judge Dawson’s decision to appoint J.R. was that the old warrior would crowd Mark Howard whom the judge detested, off the front page, relegating him to the back seat in prime time news.

Walking to the door, Mark glanced at Monica once more and then left without a goodbye. Seeing how unsettled Mark’s blustering notions had left Monica, Grove said in a softer voice than usual,

“Believe me the man knows where he is going...trust him, even though he wants to milk your case for all the publicity he can get.”

Monica immediately arose from her chair, voiced anger masking the loveliness of her face.

“Why should I? I’m a very private person. It’s no mystery. Because of my color in this two traffic light town, this case has become something far more than it ever should be. A hate crime is the media’s byline and that is simply not true. The crime was a homeless wino trying to grab a quick dollar for his next rise, that’s all. He may hate blacks but he didn’t know it...and if he did know it at one time, he doesn’t remember it now.”

Grove sat quiet for a minute, fascinated with this remarkable young woman standing before him, but still troubled by her race. Prejudice, he quickly thought, must have a life of its own that follows a person around; because his own covered him like a shadow where ever he went, even in his efforts to dispense justice.

“Maybe you’re right, but that’s the way your case will be played out. I’ll work with the Attorney General to see if we can’t tone things down.”

Monica stood up and walked to the office door to leave.

“I need to start home now Mr. McVey Please do what you can about the awful publicity. There is a certain amount of shame attached to it for my mother, whom I don’t understand, but she is my mother.”

Grove followed Monica to the door, stopping her before she entered the hallway.

“One more question. After you were hit from behind, can you remember anything different now...like being dragged behind the stairwell, or someone fumbling with your jacket...even a voice? I thought being back in school might have shaken some cobwebs loose.”

“No, my head still aches inside and out and my eye sight is blurry at times. I remember nothing.” Then turning to leave, Monica added,

“Can we talk about this Saturday? I need to get over the mountain and home before dark. Have you ever counted the s-turns driving up the mountain to Boone? They’re from another world. Especially in the late afternoon when the shadows fall off the hills and hide them.”

Grove could only nod. His mind was somewhere else now. Somewhere along that road watching his eighteen-year-old daughter, Emily, fail to navigate one of the ‘snake’ turns while driving back from Appalachian State College. Watching her car slide sideways off the highway, plunging end over end five hundred feet down the side of the mountain. Standing alone on the highway, he had waited for five hours looking down into a dark abyss while volunteers from the Mountain City rescue squad struggled to pull her lifeless body up the mountain side to the waiting ambulance. The only thing he could remember for months after the accident was having Emily’s body cremated, refusing to let her lie in the cold ground. Then taking her ashes to the mountains they both loved and sprinkling them in the snow where they would slowly melt into the earth, nourishing the wild flowers she played and ran through as a child.

Monica had left the court house by the time Grove could shake free from the scene that still crowded the corners of his mind with the horror of losing someone you loved without bounds. How is it we feel when we never did before, the totality of unconditional love only after it is gone? It would make more sense if the death of a loved one were ordained or planned by God. At least then there would be a purpose in

