

# **Back of Beyond**

## **Burning Bright, #2**

**by Ron Rash, 1953-**

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When Parson drove to his shop that morning, the sky was the color of lead. Flurries settled on the pickup's windshield, lingered a moment before expiring. A heavy snow tonight, the weatherman warned, and it looked to be certain, everything getting quiet and still, waiting. Even more snow in the higher mountains, enough to make many roads impassable. It would be a profitable day, because Parson knew they'd come to his pawnshop to barter before emptying every cold-remedy shelf in town. They would hit Wal-Mart first because it was cheapest, then the Rexall, and finally the town's three convenience stores, coming from every

way-back cove and hollow in the county, because walls and windows couldn't conceal the smell of meth.

Parson pulled his jeep into the parking lot of the cinder-block building with PARSON'S BUY AND SELL hung over the door. One of the addicts had brought an electric portable sign last week, had it in his truck bed with a trash can filled with red plastic letters to stick on it. The man told Parson the sign would ensure that potential customers noticed the pawnshop. You found me easy enough, Parson had replied. His watch said eight forty and the sign in the window said nine to six Tuesday through Saturday, but a gray decade-old Ford Escort had already nosed up to the building. The back windshield was damaged, cracks spreading outward like a spiderweb. The gas cap a stuffed rag. A woman sat in the driver's seat. She could have been waiting ten minutes or ten hours.

Parson got out of his truck, unlocked the door, and cut off the alarm. He turned on the lights and walked around the counter, placed the loaded Smith & Wesson revolver on the shelf below the register. The copper bell above the sill tinkled.

The woman waited in the doorway, a wooden butter churn and dasher clutched in her arms. Parson had to hand it to them, they were getting more imaginative. Last week the electric sign and false teeth, the week before that four bicycle tires and a chiropractic table. Parson nodded for the woman to come on in. She set the churn and dasher on the table.

"It's a antique," the woman said. "I seen one like it on TV and the fellow said it was worth a hundred dollars."

When the woman spoke Parson glimpsed the stubbed brown ruin inside her mouth. He could see her face clearly now, sunken cheeks and eyes, skin pale and furrowed. He saw where the bones, impatient, poked at her cheeks and chin. The eyes glossy but alive, restless and needful.

"You better find that fellow then," Parson said. "A fool like that don't come around often."

"It was my great-grandma's," the woman said, nodding at the churn, "so it's near seventy-five years old." She paused. "I guess I could take fifty for it."

Parson looked the churn over, lifted the dasher and inspected it as well. An antiques dealer in Asheville might give him a hundred.

"Twenty dollars," Parson said.

"That man on TV said..."

"You told me," Parson interrupted. "Twenty dollars is what I'll pay."

The woman looked at the churn a few moments, then back at Parson.

"Okay," she said.

She took the cash and stuffed the bills in her jeans. She did not leave.

"What?" Parson asked.

The woman hesitated, then raised her hands and took off her high school ring. She handed it to him, and Parson inspected it. "Class of 2000," the ring said.

"Ten," he said, laying the ring on her side of the glass counter.

She didn't try to barter this time but instead slid the ring across the glass as if it were a piece in a board game. She held her fingers on the metal a few moments before letting go and holding out her palm.

By noon he'd had twenty customers and almost all were meth addicts. Parson didn't need to look at them to know. The odor of it came in the door with them, in their hair, their clothes, a sour ammonia smell like cat piss. Snow fell steady now and his business began slacking off, even the manic needs of the addicted deferring to the weather. Parson was finishing his lunch in the back room when the bell sounded again. He came out and found Sheriff Hawkins waiting at the counter.

"So what they stole now, Doug?" Parson asked.

"Couldn't it be I just come by to see my old high school buddy?"

Parson placed his hands on the counter.

"It could be, but I got the feeling it isn't."

"No," Hawkins said, smiling wryly. "In these troubled times there's not much chance to visit with friends and kin."

"Troubled times," Parson said. "But good for business, not just my business but yours."

"I guess that's a way of looking at it, though for me it's been too good of late."

Hawkins took a quick inventory of the bicycles and lawn mowers and chain saws filling the room's corners. Then he looked the room over again, more purposeful this time, checking behind the counter as well. The sheriff's brown eyes settled on the floor, where a shotgun lay amid other items yet to be tagged.

"That .410 may be what I'm looking for," the sheriff said. "Who brought it in?"

"Danny."

Parson handed the gun to the lawman without saying anything else.

Hawkins held the shotgun and studied the stock a moment.

"My eyes ain't what they used to be, Parson, but I'd say them initials carved in it are SJ, not DP."

"That gun Steve Jackson's?"

"Yes, sir," the sheriff replied, laying the shotgun on the counter. "Danny took it out of Steve's truck yesterday. At least that's what Steve believed."

"I didn't notice the initials," Parson said. "I figured it came off the farm."

Hawkins picked the shotgun off the counter and held it in one hand, studying it critically. He shifted it slightly, let his thumb rub the stock's varnished wood.

"I think I can talk Steve out of pressing charges."

"Don't do that as a favor to me," Parson said. "If his own daddy don't give a damn he's a thief, why should I?"

"How come you to think Ray doesn't care?" Hawkins asked.

"Because Danny's been bringing things to me from the farm for months. Ray knows where they're going. I called him three months ago and told him myself. He said he couldn't do anything about it."

"Doesn't look to be you're doing much about it either," the sheriff said. "I mean, you're buying from him, right?"

"If I don't he'll just drive down to Sylva and sell it there."

Parson looked out at the snow, the parking lot empty but for his and Hawkins's vehicles. He wondered if any customers had decided not to pull in because of the sheriff's car.

"You just as well go ahead and arrest him," Parson added. "You've seen enough of these meth addicts to know he'll steal something else soon enough."

"I didn't know he was on meth," Hawkins said.

"That's your job, isn't it," Parson replied, "to know such things?"

"There's too many of them to keep up with. This meth, it ain't like other drugs. Even cocaine and crack, at least those were expensive and hard to get. But this stuff, it's too easy." The sheriff looked out the window. "This snow's going to make for a long day, so I'd better get to it."

"So you're not going to arrest him?"

"No," Hawkins said. "He'll have to wait his turn. There's two dozen in line ahead of him. But you could do me a favor by giving him a call. Tell him this is his one chance, that next time I'll lock his ass up." Hawkins pressed his lips together a moment, pensive. "Hell, he might even believe it."

"I'll tell him," Parson said, "but I'll do it in person."

Parson went to the window and watched as the sheriff backed out onto the two-lane and drove toward the town's main drag. Snow stuck to the asphalt now, the jeep blanketed white. He'd watched Danny drive away the day before, the tailgate down and truck bed empty. Parson had known the truck bed would probably be empty when Danny headed out of town, no filled grocery bags or kerosene cans, because the boy lived in a world where food and warmth and clothing were no longer important. The only essentials were the red-and-white packs of Sudafed in the passenger's seat as the truck disappeared back into the folds of the higher mountains, headed up into Chestnut Cove, what Parson's father had called the back of beyond, the place where Parson and Ray had grown up.

He placed the pistol in his coat pocket and changed the OPEN sign to CLOSED. Once on the road, Parson saw the snow was dry, powdery, which would make the drive easier. He headed west and did not turn on the radio.

Except for two years in the army, Ray had lived his whole life in Chestnut Cove. He'd used his army pay to buy a farm adjacent to the one he'd grown up on and had soon after married Martha. Parson had joined the army as well but afterward went to Tuckasegee to live. When their parents had gotten too old to mend fences and feed livestock, plant and harvest the tobacco, Ray and Martha did it. Ray had never asked Parson to help, never expected him to, since he was twenty miles away in town. For his part, Parson had not been bitter when the farm was willed to the firstborn. Ray and Martha had earned it. By then Parson owned the pawnshop outright from the bank, had money enough. Ray and Martha sold their house and moved into the farmhouse, raised Danny and his three older sisters there.

Parson slowed as the road began a long curve around Brushy Mountain. The road soon forked and he went left. Another left and he was on a county road, poorly maintained because no wealthy Floridians had second homes on it. No guardrails. He met no other vehicle, because only a few people lived in the cove, had ever lived up here.

Parson parked beside Ray's truck and got out, stood a few moments before the homestead. He hadn't been up in nearly a year and supposed he should feel more than the burn of anger directed at his nephew. Some kind of nostalgia. But Parson couldn't summon it, and if he had, then what for? Working his ass off in August tobacco fields, milking cows on mornings so cold his hands numbed—the very things that had driven him away in the first place. Except for a thin ribbon of

smoke unfurling from the chimney, the farm appeared forsaken. No cattle huddled against the snow, no TV or radio playing in the front room or kitchen. Parson had never regretted leaving, and never more so than now as his gaze moved from the rusting tractor and bailer to the sagging fences that held nothing in, settled on the shambling farmhouse itself, then turned toward the land between the barn and house.

Danny's battered blue-and-white trailer squatted in the pasture. Parson's feet made a whispery sound as he went to deal with his nephew before talking to his brother and sister-in-law. No footprints marked the snow between house and trailer. Parson knocked on the flimsy aluminum door and when no one answered went in. No lights were on and Parson wasn't surprised when he flipped a switch and nothing happened. His eyes slowly adjusted to the room's darkness, and he saw the card table, on it cereal boxes, some open, some not, a half-gallon milk container, its contents frozen solid. The room's busted-out window helped explain why. Two bowls scabbed with dried cereal lay on the table as well. Two spoons. Parson made his way to the back room, seeing first the kerosene heater beside the bed, the wire wick's muted orange glow. Two closely lumped mounds rose under a pile of quilts. *Like they're already laid out in their graves*, Parson thought as he leaned over and poked the bigger form.

"Get up, boy," Parson said.

But it was Ray's face and torso that emerged, swaddled in an array of shirts and sweaters. Martha's face appeared as well. They seemed like timid animals disturbed in their dens. For a few moments Parson could only stare at them. After decades in the most cynical of professions, he was amazed that anything could still stun him.

"Why in the hell aren't you in the house?" Parson asked finally.

It was Martha who replied.

"Danny, he's in there, sometimes his friends too." She paused. "It's just better, easier, if we're out here."

Parson looked at his brother. Ray was sixty-five years old but he looked eighty, his mouth sunk in, skinny and feeble. His sister-in-law appeared a little better off, perhaps because she was a large, big-boned woman. But they both looked bad—hungry, weary, sickly. And scared. Parson couldn't remember his brother ever being scared, but he clearly was. Ray's right hand clutched a quilt end, and the hand was trembling. Parson and his wife, DeAnne, had divorced before they'd had children. A blessing, he now saw, because it prevented any possibility of ending up like this.

Martha had not been above lording her family over Parson in the past, enough to where he'd made his visits rare and short. You missed out not having any kids, she'd said to him more than once, words he'd recalled times when Danny pawned a chain saw or posthole digger or some other piece of the farm. It said much of how beaten down Martha appeared that Parson mustered no pleasure in recalling her words now.

He settled his eyes on the kerosene heater emitting its feeble warmth.

"Yeah, it looks to be easier out here all right," he said.

Ray licked his cracked lips and then spoke, his voice raspy.

“That stuff, whatever you call it, has done made my boy crazy. He don’t know nothing but a craving.”

“It ain’t his fault, it’s the craving,” Martha added, sitting up enough to reveal that she too wore layers of clothing. “Maybe I done something wrong raising him, petted him too much since he was my only boy. The girls always claimed I favored him.”

“The girls been up here?” Parson asked. “Seen you like this?”

Martha shook her head.

“They got their own families to look after,” she said.

Ray’s lower lip trembled.

“That ain’t it. They’re scared to come up here.”

Parson looked at his brother. He had thought this was going to be so much easier, a matter of twenty dollars, that and relaying the sheriff’s threat.

“How long you been out here, Ray?”

“I ain’t sure,” Ray replied.

Martha spoke.

“Not more than a week.”

“How long has the electricity been off?”

“Since October,” Ray said.

“Is all you’ve had to eat on that table?”

Ray and Martha didn’t meet his eyes.

A family photograph hung on the wall. Parson wondered when it had been put up, before or after Danny moved out. Danny was sixteen, maybe seventeen in the photo. Cocksure but also petulant, the expression of a young man who’d been indulged all his life. His family’s golden child. Parson suddenly realized something.

“He’s cashing your Social Security checks, isn’t he?”

“It ain’t his fault,” Martha said.

Parson still stood at the foot of the bed, Ray and Martha showing no indication of getting out. They looked like children waiting for him to turn out the light and leave so they could go to sleep. Pawnbrokers, like emergency room doctors and other small gods, had to abjure sympathy. That had never been a problem for Parson. As DeAnne had told him several times, he was a man incapable of understanding another person’s heart. You can’t feel love, Parson, she’d said. It’s like you were given a shot years ago and inoculated.

“I’ll get your electricity turned back on,” Parson told his brother. “Can you still drive?”

“I can drive,” Ray said. “Only thing is, Danny uses that truck for his doings.”

“That’s going to change,” Parson said.

“It ain’t Danny’s fault,” Martha said again.

“Enough of it is,” Parson replied.

He went to the corner and lifted the kerosene can. Half full.

“What you taking our kerosene for?” Martha asked.

Parson didn’t reply. He left the trailer and trudged back through the snow, the can heavy and awkward, his breath quick white heaves. Not so different from those mornings he’d carried a gallon pail of warm milk from barn to house. Even as a child he’d wanted to leave this place. Never loved it the way Ray had. Inoculated.

Parson set the can on the lowered tailgate and perched himself on it as well. He took the lighter and cigarettes from his coat pocket and stared at the house while he smoked. Kindling and logs brought from the woodshed littered the porch. No attempt had been made to stack it.

It would be easy to do, Parson told himself. No one had stirred when he'd driven up and parked five yards from the front door. No one had even peeked out a window. He could step up on the porch and soak the logs and kindling with kerosene, then go around back and pour the rest on the back door. Then Hawkins would put it down as just another meth explosion caused by some punk who couldn't pass high school chemistry. And if others were in there, they were people quite willing to scare two old folks out of their home. No worse than setting fire to a woodpile infested with copperheads. Parson finished his cigarette and flicked it toward the house, a quick hiss as snow quenched the smoldering butt.

He eased off the tailgate and stepped onto the porch, tried the doorknob, and when it turned, stepped into the front room. A dying fire glowed in the hearth. The room had been stripped of anything that could be sold, the only furnishing left a couch pulled up by the fireplace. Even wallpaper had been torn off a wall. The odor of meth infiltrated everything, coated the walls and floor.

Danny and a girl Parson didn't know lay on the couch, a quilt thrown over them. Their clothes were worn and dirty and smelled as if lifted from a Dumpster. As Parson moved toward the couch he stepped over rotting sandwich scraps in paper sacks, candy wrappers, spills from soft drinks. If human shit had been on the floor he would not have been surprised.

"Who is he?" the girl asked Danny.

"A man who's owed twenty dollars," Parson said.

Danny sat up slowly, the girl as well, black stringy hair, flesh whittled away by the meth. Parson looked for something that might set her apart from the dozen or so similar women he saw each week. It took a few moments but he found one thing, a blue four-leaf clover tattooed on her forearm. Parson looked into her dead eyes and saw no indication luck had found her.

"Got tired of stealing from your parents, did you?" Parson asked his nephew.

"What are you talking about?" Danny said.

His eyes were light blue, similar to the girl's eyes, bright but at the same time dead. A memory of elementary school came to Parson of colorful insects pinned and enclosed beneath glass.

"That shotgun you stole."

Danny smiled but kept his mouth closed. *Some vanity still left in him*, Parson mused, remembering how the boy had preened even as a child, a comb at the ready in his shirt pocket, nice clothes.

"I didn't figure him to miss it much," Danny said. "That gas station he owns does good enough business for him to buy another."

"You're damn lucky it's me telling you and not the sheriff, though he'll be up here soon as the roads are clear."

Danny looked at the dying fire as if he spoke to it, not Parson.

"So why did you show up? I know it's not to warn me Hawkins is coming."

"Because I want my twenty dollars," Parson said.

"I don't have your twenty dollars," Danny said.

“Then you’re going to pay me another way.”

“And what’s that?”

“By getting in the truck,” Parson said. “I’m taking your sorry ass to the bus station. One-way ticket to Atlanta.”

“What if I don’t want to do that?” Danny said.

There had been a time the boy could have made that comment formidable, for he’d been broad-shouldered and stout, an all-county tight end, but he’d shucked off fifty pounds, the muscles melted away same as his teeth. Parson didn’t even bother showing him the revolver.

“Well, you can wait here until the sheriff comes and hauls your worthless ass off to jail.”

Danny stared at the fire. The girl reached out her hand, let it settle on Danny’s forearm. The room was utterly quiet except for a few crackles and pops from the fire. No time ticked on the fireboard. Parson had bought the Franklin clock from Danny two months ago. He’d thought briefly of keeping it himself but had resold it to the antiques dealer in Asheville.

“If I get arrested then it’s an embarrassment to you. Is that the reason?” Danny asked.

“The reason for what?” Parson replied.

“That you’re acting like you give a damn about me.”

Parson didn’t answer, and for almost a full minute no one spoke. It was the girl who finally broke the silence.

“What about me?”

“I’ll buy you a ticket or let you out in Asheville,” Parson said. “But you’re not staying here.”

“We can’t go nowhere without our drugs,” the girl said.

“Get them then.”

She went into the kitchen and came back with a brown paper bag, its top half folded over and crumpled.

“Hey,” she said when Parson took it from her.

“I’ll give it back when you’re boarding the bus,” he said.

Danny looked to be contemplating something and Parson wondered if he might have a knife on him, possibly a revolver of his own, but when Danny stood up, hands empty, no handle jutted from his pocket.

“Get your coats on,” Parson said. “You’ll be riding in the back.”

“It’s too cold,” the girl said.

“No colder than that trailer,” Parson said.

Danny paused as he put on a denim jacket.

“So you went out there first.”

“Yes,” Parson said.

A few moments passed before Danny spoke.

“I didn’t make them go out there. They got scared by some guys that were here last week.” Danny sneered then, something Parson suspected the boy had probably practiced in front of mirror. “I check on them more than you do,” he said.

“Let’s go,” Parson said. He dangled the paper bag in front of Danny and the girl, then took the revolver out of his pocket. “I’ve got both of these, just in case you think you might try something.”



They went outside. The snow still fell hard, the way back down to the county road now only a white absence of trees. Danny and the girl stood by the truck's tailgate, but they didn't get in. Danny nodded at the paper bag in Parson's left hand.

"At least give us some so we can stand the cold."

Parson opened the bag, took out one of the baggies. He had no idea if one was enough for the both of them or not. He threw the packet into the truck bed and watched Danny and the girl climb in after it. *No different than you'd do for two hounds with a dog biscuit*, Parson thought, shoving the kerosene can farther inside and hitching the tailgate.

He got in the truck and cranked the engine, drove slowly down the drive. Once on the county road he turned left and began the fifteen-mile trip to Sylva. Danny and the girl huddled against the back window, their heads and Parson's separated by a quarter inch of glass. Their proximity made the cab feel claustrophobic, especially when he heard the girl's muffled crying. Parson turned on the radio, the one station he could pick up promising a foot of snow by nightfall. Then a song he hadn't heard in thirty years, Ernest Tubb's *Walking the Floor Over You*. Halfway down Brushy Mountain the road made a quick veer and plunge. Danny and the girl slid across the bed and banged against the tailgate. A few moments later, when the road leveled out, Danny pounded the window with his fist, but Parson didn't look back. He just turned up the radio.

At the bus station, Danny and the girl sat on a bench while Parson bought the tickets. The Atlanta bus wasn't due for an hour so Parson waited across the room from them. The girl had a busted lip, probably from sliding into the tailgate. She dabbed her mouth with a Kleenex, then stared a long time at the blood on the tissue. Danny was agitated, hands restless, constantly shifting on the bench as though unable to find a comfortable position. He finally got up and came over to where Parson sat, stood before him.

"You never liked me, did you?" Danny said.

Parson looked up at the boy, for though in his twenties Danny was still a boy, would die a boy, Parson believed.

"No, I guess not," Parson said.

"What's happened to me," Danny said. "It ain't all my fault."

"I keep hearing that."

"There's no good jobs in this county. You can't make a living farming no more. If there'd been something for me, a good job I mean."

"I hear there's lots of jobs in Atlanta," Parson said. "It's booming down there, so you're headed to the land of no excuses."

"I don't want to go down there." Danny paused. "I'll die there."

"What you're using will kill you here same as Atlanta. At least down there you won't take your momma and daddy with you."

"You've never cared much for them before, especially Momma. How come you to care now?"

Parson thought about the question, mulled over several possible answers.

"I guess because no one else does," he finally said.

When the bus came, Parson walked with them to the loading platform. He gave the girl the bag and the tickets, then watched the bus groan out from under the

awning and head south. There would be several stops before Atlanta, but Danny and the girl would stay aboard because of a promised two hundred dollars sent via Western Union. A promise Parson would not keep.

The Winn-Dixie shelves were emptied of milk and bread but enough of all else remained to fill four grocery bags. Parson stopped at Steve Jackson's gas station and filled the kerosene can. Neither man mentioned the shotgun now reracked against the pickup's back window. The trip back to Chestnut Cove was slower, more snow on the roads, the visibility less as what dim light the day had left drained into the high mountains to the west. Dark by five, he knew, and it was already past four. After the truck slid a second time, spun, and stopped precariously close to a drop-off, Parson stayed in first or second gear. A trip of thirty minutes in good weather took him an hour.

When he got to the farmhouse, Parson took a flashlight from the dash, carried the groceries into the kitchen. He brought the kerosene into the farmhouse as well, then walked down to the trailer and went inside. The heater's metal wick still glowed orange. Parson cut it off so the metal would cool.

He shone the light on the bed. They were huddled together, Martha's head tucked under Ray's chin, his arms enclosing hers. They were asleep and seemed at peace. Parson felt regret in waking them and for a few minutes did not. He brought a chair from the front room and placed it by the foot of the bed. He waited. Martha woke first. The room was dark and shadowy but she sensed his presence, turned and looked at him. She shifted to see him better and Ray's eyes opened as well.

"You can go back to the house now," Parson said.

They only stared back at him.

"He's gone," Parson said. "And he won't come back. There will be no reason for his friends to come either."

Martha stirred now, sat up in the bed.

"What did you do to him?"

"I didn't do anything," Parson said. "He and his girlfriend wanted to go to Atlanta and I drove them to the bus station."

Martha didn't look like she believed him. She got slowly out of the bed and Ray did as well. They put on their shoes, then moved tentatively to the trailer's door, seemingly with little pleasure. They hesitated.

"Go on," Parson said. "I'll bring the heater."

Parson went and got the kerosene heater. He stooped and lifted it slowly, careful to use his legs instead of his back. Little fuel remained in it, so it wasn't heavy, just awkward. When he came into the front room, his brother and sister-in-law still stood inside the door.

"Hold the door open," he told Ray, "so I can get this thing outside."

Parson got the heater down the steps and carried it the rest of the way. Once inside the farmhouse he set it near the hearth, filled the tank, and turned it on. He and Ray gathered logs and kindling off the front porch and got a good flame going in the fireplace. The flue wasn't drawing as it should. By the time Parson had adjusted it a smoky odor filled the room, but that was a better smell than the meth. The three of them sat on the couch and unwrapped the sandwiches. They did not speak even when they'd finished, just stared at the hearth as flame

shadows trembled on the walls. Parson thought what an old human feeling this must be, how ten thousand years ago people would have done the same thing on a cold night, would have eaten, then settled before the fire, looked into it and found peace, knowing they'd survived the day and now could rest.

Martha began snoring softly and Parson grew sleepy as well. He roused himself, looked over at his brother, whose eyes still watched the fire. Ray didn't look sleepy, just lost in thought.

Parson got up and stood before the hearth, let the heat soak into his clothes and skin before going out into the cold. He took the revolver from his pocket and gave it to Ray.

"In case any of Danny's friends give you any trouble," Parson said. "I'll get your power turned back on in the morning."

Martha awoke with a start. For a few moments she seemed not to know where she was.

"You ain't thinking of driving back to Tuckasegee tonight?" Ray asked. "The roads will be dangerous."

"I'll be all right. My jeep can handle them."

"I still wish you wouldn't go," Ray said. "You ain't slept under this roof for near forty years. That's too long."

"Not tonight," Parson said.

Ray shook his head.

"I never thought things could ever get like this," he said. "The world, I just don't understand it no more."

Martha spoke.

"Did Danny say where he'd be staying?"

"No," Parson said, and turned to leave.

"I'd rather be in that trailer tonight and knowing he was in this house. Knowing where he is, if he's alive or dead," she said as Parson reached for the doorknob. "You had no right."

Parson walked out to the jeep. It took a few tries but the engine turned over and he made his way down the drive. Only flurries glanced the windshield now. Parson drove slowly and several times had to stop and get out to find the road among the white blankness. Once out of Chestnut Cove, he made better time, but it was after midnight when he got back to Tuckasegee. His alarm clock was set for seven thirty. Parson reset it for eight thirty. If he was late opening, a few minutes or even an hour, it wouldn't matter. Whatever time he showed up, they'd still be there.

