

Mountain folk learn young that whistling at night is a dangerous act that could summon ancient spirits. Some things are best left undisturbed in the deep hollers of Appalachia. I count the red hound lying near the woodstove in my cabin as one of those things not to be bothered. I count myself as another. Why rouse an old woman when her bones are creaking and ice hangs like little daggers from the white pines?

*Lummie, they say, our kin's gone to their reward, and you'd best come.*

I don't want to, but come I will, 'cause a body's gotta eat.

I grow a fair amount of my own food on this small patch. Most times, my aim's still good enough to put meat in my pot. But winters can be cruel on these mountains. At times, my stores ain't enough, and the critters don't bother coming out 'til the wheel of the season makes a solid turn for the better. Truth be told, my stores ain't enough most days, but I get by. The land and the good Lord provide, iffen you know how to look. But a full belly's a surer proposition when I agree to tend to the dead kin of the folks who come bothering me.

*I might could, I reply when they ask me to come. What would you have for me, iffen I do?*

And so we trade. A bolt of cloth here, a cured ham there, a basket of eggs, or a box of bullets ... all for the redemption of an immortal soul.

I'm what you call a sin-eater. Most folks are afeared of me, on account of me being so polluted with the sins of others. And I ain't a cunning woman, after all. I don't come when their babies are ailing or their daddy takes a turn for the worse. I only come for the dead.

But I don't go down from this mountain alone. The red hound, she's ever at my heels when the dead need tending. The red hound came to me from my mama, and her mama before that, and so on until I can't remember. Never aged a day in all that time. I can't understand it, but I've come to accept it.