

Golgotha

by Jeff McCrory

They were starting to get winded. The boy, his father and his little brother were hiking up a hill, cutting a diagonal path through hay-colored grass towards an outcrop of craggy boulders below the hill's summit. The father held the younger child by the hand. The boy, wandering along in his own imagination, had drifted a little ways apart from them. To him, the father said:

When we get to those rocks up there, we'll stop to rest. But when you got your breath, I want you to gather wood for two fire pits. I want you to make one using the tepee method, and the other with the old log cabin method.

Can I light them? said the boy.

No, said his father.

Just one then?

No. The last thing we need is for you to start a grass fire out here. I can tell if you did them right. They both got to be right if you want to get your merit badge.

The boy was not wearing his scouting uniform. The father had decided that it was a waste to get it dirty since nobody was going to be around to see it anyway. The boy was disappointed. He liked that the front of his shirt was covered with badges and patches. But his father made him change into a regular t-shirt and jeans. He wouldn't even allow him to wear the yellow and blue kerchief around his neck.

Are we going to the pond before we go home? said the boy.

I don't know, said the father. Depends.

The next obvious question — *depends on what?* — made it all the way to the bottom of the boy's throat, but he stifled it before it came out. His father hated dumb questions. The steep hill had wearied them all, and his father's patience was short when he was tired. It was better to preserve the silence and the peace.

Uppy, said the small one.

No, I'm not carrying you, said the father.

His son started to bawl, and the father lifted him up into the air and set him on his shoulders. The swiftness of the journey from the ground to his father's shoulders made the child sway, and panic crossed his face, but, gaining his equilibrium, he grabbed tufts of his father's hair and held on for the ride.

By the time they reached the first and smallest boulder, the boy and his father were panting. The father put the child on the ground, and all three of them sat back in the grass, looking down the hillside. From this height, the surrounding hills were in plain view. To the boy, they looked like the hides of some tawny sheep that he knew. The boy had an illuminated rug tacked on the wall next to his bed. It showed Jesus sitting in profile against the backdrop of an idyllic landscape. Jesus was pictured as a Renaissance shepherd, in flowing robes, holding his staff in one hand and a lamb in the other. He had led his flock down to the cool water to drink. In the far distance was a range of mountains. Beyond the mountains was a golden sky. The boy imagined that was where heaven was.

Those hills kinda look like sheep, said the boy.

The father nodded, expressing his approbation with a grunt. The boy looked at his father. The father kept looking at the hills.

It's beautiful, said the father. God's creation.

It didn't seem so to the boy. The boy had always pictured God living in the darkness of space, billions and billions of miles away. In school, he had seen a photograph of the Milky Way. The swirl of stars was bright and beautiful, but it was too vast to comprehend. It frightened him. God was beyond the Milky Way and all the stars in the universe. He existed, at least in the boy's mind, in perfect, unchanging darkness, and it puzzled the boy how He, in thrall to such darkness, could have created the colorful and multiform earth.

The boy preferred to think that Jesus had created the world. Jesus had a gentle face and lived in an antique age that converged, as you traveled backwards towards it in your mind, like railroad tracks into the horizon. But the more the boy looked at the surrounding hills the less they looked like Jesus's sheep. Oaks freckled the folds and bellies of their slopes. Those were actual, individual trees, not merely daubs of pretty color. He noticed that the hills appeared to have been pushed up from the earth. They were like the humps in his comforter that he smoothed down with the palm of his hand when he made his bed. At the foot of the hills, the dirt road that they had driven in on curved and disappeared into the trees. The hills had looked different from the road.

Okay, boys, said the father. Let's go up a little higher, to the big rocks.

They trudged up. They sidestepped several lichen crusted stones spouting from the grass. The hill got so steep that they were almost crawling, but the boulders were in sight now. They pushed forward. Even the small one was intent on reaching their goal.

The boulders sat on a narrow plateau. There were three of them.

They were almost twice as tall as the father, and scattered around them, like ruins or children, were more lichen crusted stones. The father sat down on a stone and allowed the small one to climb into his lap. The boy touched the rugged and sun-warm boulder with both of his hands. He dreamed of climbing to the top of it and shouting

I'm up here!

Down to his father and brother. But he couldn't find a solid handhold in the surface of the rock. He followed the surface around to the shady side. In the adjoining boulder, he saw a hole at its base.

Hey, I found a cave, he shouted.

What cave? said his father.

It was a dark hole in the rock, large enough for a person to stick his head inside and half-hidden behind a pile of sticks. The boy went to gather the sticks for his two fire pits.

From the darkness, the buzzing began. It grew louder and seemed to encompass the boy. It was the angry warning, the boy knew, of rattlesnakes. He froze and scanned the ground for a coiled snake. He couldn't see anything, so he slowly backed away. When he turned around, he saw that he father was already moving down the hill, carrying his brother in his arms.

Dad, he called.

Get out of there, his father called back.

Wait for me.

But his father kept going,. The boy chased after him. His father hurried down the hill in long strides, past the smaller boulder where they had rested, before slowing to a standstill. When the boy caught up to him, he no longer heard the rattling except in the echo of his pounding heart. He was safe. The viper had not struck him. His fear turned to anger, which he could not check.

Why did you leave me?

What do you mean? I had to get your little brother out of there.

His father's voice was abashed, but only for an instant.

What were you waiting for anyway? You should be prepared for rattlesnakes. I thought you were a scout.

I don't even have my uniform on, said the boy in return.

The father huffed. It was his final word on the subject. He looked up into the sky and said it was getting late. The sun was beginning to make its afternoon descent. They continued on down the hill, the small one in his father's arms, and the boy falling gradually behind.

The father huffed. It was his final word on the subject. They continued down the hill, the small one in his father's arms, and the boy falling gradually behind. At their backs, the sun was just beginning to make its afternoon descent.

