

Trouble behind, trouble ahead, and you know that notion's stole from the Dead

by Mathew Paust

If it had happened in the switchbacks, with their blind curves and relentless grades, it might have made more sense. But we were in foothills. We'd been up hills and into hollows, changing speeds, turning willy nilly at junctions, some marked by only a letter and some with no sign at all. Jamie's idea was to see how Donnie would manage, how well he kept up, remaining out of sight, relying on his wits and the GPS in his smartphone. He was wily enough, she said. An Army Ranger she'd recruited after snatching him from his court martial. Charged with being AWOL, facing stockade time. Sick of the petty bullshit. Wanting to try something different.

She got the signal at a little roadside stand that sold apples and cider. We'd skipped lunch, and stopped there after snaking several miles along a narrow, well-worn blacktop through scrub-pine country that hosted an occasional clapboard house, the odd badly faded barn, and a plain, immaculate white church, its modest glass-cased lawn marquee promising salvation within, services at 10:30 and 11:30.

I was already snickering when she shouted, "Benny!" and slowed down as a hand-lettered signboard proclaiming *zukeeny appals cidar* came into view. The sign leaned against the trunk of a giant oak whose leafy canopy shaded a makeshift stand that appeared to be untended. I swept my gaze along a plank table laden with colorful basketed produce, and, at one end of the plank, a glassy sparkle that reached out and tickled a suddenly thirsty throat. But no "Benny."

We'd passed the weedy gravel drive next to the stand, and the shoulder was too narrow for parking. With no traffic in sight, Jamie did a U, came back and turned into the drive, crunching gravel as she pulled far enough ahead to leave room for another customer or two, should any happen along. A dented old blue pickup was parked just off the drive, behind the stand, but I still hadn't seen anyone near the table.

"Benny's had that sign forever. He's fairly literate, but he never really learned to spell. He was a deputy when I was growing up. Dad said everyone teased him about it, judge always squinted at his tickets and shook his head trying to figure out what they said. You didn't wanna mess with him, though. But he was fair. Us kids respected him."

We'd gotten out of the SUV and were walking down the drive toward the stand. "I don't see anyone," I said.

"Oh, I did. He's sittin' in his ol' chair behind the table. Poor old Benny's gettin' up there in years. All shriveled up like a raisin."

I whispered, "He can hear you."

"Nah. Long as he can't see your lips. He went deaf years ago." She chuckled, then lowered her voice conspiratorially, "I still wouldn't mess with him."

That's about when I saw him. Right where she said he'd be. Small as a child but with a grownup's head. Skullcap of gray fuzz. He'd twisted in his canvas chair and was gaping at us, revealing a black hole where incisors had been. Jamie'd told me she wanted to see if he recognized her. We separated at the table—me checking out the jugs and she strolling over to the baskets. I heard her say with enthusiasm, "Gravenstein!" then soften her tone. The other voice was low and mumbly, but I recognized "Gertie." They chatted quietly, and stopped. Her voice rose, and she called me over. I was smiling in anticipation of being introduced, but her face was grave. She was staring at her smartphone.

"Something's wrong. Donnie's sent me a trouble signal."

"Trouble?"

"Highest priority. I can't reach him. There's been nothing more."

Looking straight at Benny, her lips said we'd be back. She blew him a kiss, and we jogged to the SUV.

