

CHARLIE TELLS ANOTHER ONE

Andy Duncan

Since his first fiction sale, to *Asimov's* in 1995, Andy Duncan's stories have appeared here and in *Analog*, *Clarksworld*, *Conjunctions*, *F&SF*, *Lightspeed*, *www.Tor.com*, and many anthologies—including multiple year's-best volumes. His honors include a Nebula Award, a Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, and three World Fantasy Awards, the most recent for *Wakulla Springs*, cowritten with Ellen Klages (*www.Tor.com*, 2013; PS Publishing, 2018). The title story of his third collection, *An Agent of Utopia: New and Selected Stories* (Small Beer Press, 2018), was a Nebula Award finalist, Duncan's ninth. A native of Batesburg, South Carolina, and a graduate of Clarion West 1994, he has an M.F.A. from the University of Alabama and teaches writing at Frostburg State University in Maryland. Andy considers his new story a companion piece to his March 1997 tale, "Beluthahatchie." Music plays a major role in both stories.

When asked how he took up the banjo, Charlie liked to tell this story.

* * *

On Wednesdays the company man came for the rent: fifteen cents a room, sixty cents a house, not counting the privy, which was easy not to count because it was shared by four houses.

At each house, the company man made a big show of counting out loud the quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies, mostly pennies, before dropping them in his bag, checking off the name in his ledger, and moving on down the street. He said this was to keep anyone from claiming cheat later, but it had other uses as well. First thing in the morning the company man moved silently, and his loud knock startled people, even those who had been expecting him, dreading him. Toward dinnertime, however, you could hear him jingling three houses away, and he'd be coughing pretty bad by then, so he arrived at each evening porch to find the children standing solemn waiting for him.

It was always the children younger than nine, as every older person in the house was at the mill. Sometimes children went to the mill even younger than that; the needier the family, the younger the children handing over coins on the porch.

"Good morning, children," rattled the company man, as he snatched the coins and counted them, snick, snick, snick with his long calloused fingers. "My, how big you're getting," he often added, whereupon the oldest child would try to shrink.

To the smallest of the younguns, his rattling, whickering voice sounded like fly-wheels and shuttles and jennies, and they half fancied him not a man at all, but a wheezing contraption set in motion only for the extraction of coins from children. Their parents, on the other hand, knew T.B. when they heard it, and knew the mill was generous, having found a job that would keep the company man on the payroll and in the fresh air. For all the workers agreed that the mill owners were mighty good people.

But the children would have danced had this awful mechanical man dropped face-down dead in the privy, for they were all terrified of him, and whispered down through the years legends of his awful habits the moment he turned his back to go jingling and hacking down the row. Yet at each house the siblings and cousins stood together on the porch to meet him, figuring he couldn't stuff them all into his bag at once, not without someone hearing.

Now Charlie had been part of this ritual since he outgrew the yarn box beside his mother's loom, which made him old enough to stay at home with his older brothers Ralph, Hurley, and Bendigo, by which time the daily rhythms of the textile mill were natural to him, had been taken in with his mother's milk, had become internal and constant, like digestion. He already hated that naturalness, had resolved in adulthood to be as unnatural as possible.

He also had learned, of course, to hate the company man, whom he assumed must be the owner of not only the mill houses but the mill and the mill store and the mill depot and the mill village—in short, of the whole world as Charlie knew it—for why else would the mill children pay him tribute once a week?

Unlike the other children, however, Charlie carried his hatred of the company man one step further, and plotted against him.

As Charlie got older and more contrary and wild in the eye, as his silky ringlets stiffened and straightened into a wild weedy blond thatch that could best any comb, so Charlie's fantasies of ridding the mill-wide world of the company man grew ever more elaborate. In the meantime, petty revenge would have to do.

When Charlie's hero brother Ralph turned nine and was sent to the doffer line like Giles, Jim, Sarah, Leroy, and Henry before him, Charlie began shitting at night outside the privy and collecting his turds in a paper sack to fling over the mill's wooden fence in the morning.

Charlie had no idea where in the mill his little bombs were landing. He did his tossing at different places around the perimeter, at unpredictable times, sometimes skipping days, just to frustrate the company man, whom he imagined holding his nose and shaking his fist and wiping the mess off his bald spot in a three-handed frenzy of hatred and revulsion, all the while cursing the miserable little corn-eating God who daily dumped on his head.

But still, every week, the company man came to the doorstep for the rent, bringing the same smile, the same wheeze, the same outstretched claw. Nothing had changed, except that handing over the coins was now Hurley's job.

"I hate that old bald cooter," Hurley announced one day.

"I hate him, too," said Bendigo, who was always quick to repeat anything his next-older brother said. Bendigo just as happily would have echoed Hurley saying, "I love the company man and want to be his girly-bride." Their mama called Bendigo "Mockingbird," but wouldn't let the others call him that.

"Mockingbird!" jeered Charlie, and Hurley, who always took up for his loyal yes-man, promptly knocked Charlie down.

"Listen," said Charlie, prone but unfazed, the dust still rising around him. "How

much money you reckon the company man has on him, by the time he gets to our house?"

"Well, let's see," said Hurley, who prided himself on brains as well as brawn. He yanked free the slat his mama used to hold up the kitchen window sash—the sash stayed right where it was, for Mama Poole was a pessimist—and with the end of it began scratching signs and wonders in the yard. Slat had to do whenever you wanted a stick, because there were no sticks in the yard, because there were no trees. "Every week," Hurley said as he scratched, "we give him six dimes, or twelve nickels, or two quarters and a dime, or a quarter and five nickels and a dime, or ten nickels and five pennies and an eleventh nickel, or—"

"How come the rent's different every week?" Bendigo asked.

"Because we breathe more air some weeks than others," said Hurley, who was proud to have made that up on the spot. "Stupid Head," he elaborated. "Now, there's five houses before ours on this street, and there's four streets before he gets to ours, and that makes . . ." His voice trailed off as he scratched away with the slat, brow furrowed, both hands gripping the wood like it was the handle of a churn. Finished, he flung down the slat in triumph and said, "I ain't got time to figure all of it, but it's a lot of money."

"A hell of a lot of money," added Bendigo, to his brothers' astonishment. After a trip to the sawmill with their daddy, Bendigo had resolved to learn how to curse.

"Well, there you go," Charlie said. "If we was to kill him and rob him, then we could give all that money to Mama and Daddy, and we wouldn't all have to work in the mill no more."

"But we'd be caught and hanged," said Hurley.

"Hanged all to hell," Bendigo said.

"They don't hang younguns," Charlie said. "You got to be at least—what? Thirteen, before they hang you. Besides, who says they'd catch us? We could say we were on the other side of town, and no one would be wiser but the company man, and him dead."

"How we gone make him dead?" Hurley asked. "You gone blim him between the eyes with this slat? You couldn't even *reach* his eyes."

"You'd have to blim him in the jewels," Bendigo said. "And that would hurt. You wouldn't want someone to do you like that."

"I wouldn't want someone to kill me dead, neither," Charlie said, "but what does that matter? I ain't the one with all the money."

They went round and round about it, and Hurley and Bendigo finally got Charlie talked down from killing the company man to just knocking him out and tying him up and maybe blinding him so that he couldn't identify the robbers. So they rounded up one slat apiece and some bricks, and a rusty railroad spike for the blinding, and thus armed, they skulked behind the house, peering around the corner three-headed, awaiting the company man's arrival.

Finally they heard him, headed along the high fence that faced the alley: the familiar clanking, the familiar shuffle-drag of the footsteps. Only the coughing wasn't familiar. It wasn't as deep and resonant.

"Maybe he's feeling better," said Bendigo.

"Not for long," Charlie said, his fist tight around the railroad spike.

But all the tension left his body, and the spike dropped forgotten onto the ground, as their father shuffled into view. Daddy Poole held a ledger in one hand; with his other, he pressed a handkerchief into his mouth as he coughed. The clanking money-bag was slung over his shoulder. It looked new.

"Hello, boys," said Daddy Poole, as Bendigo rushed to hug him around the legs.

Charlie stood where he was, but Hurley stepped forward, his face grim, and extended, palm up, a handful of coins. Even as he blinked through tears, Charlie was

astonished and indignant to see that his fellow murderer had brought along the rent, just in case.

"Why ain't you at the mill?" Charlie cried.

"Got a new job, boys," Daddy Poole said. "Just started today. Don't hug so tight, son." Half-dragging Bendigo with him, he stepped forward, pocketing his handkerchief so that he could reach out and tousle Hurley's hair with his newly free hand.

"You ain't killed!" Bendigo wailed. "You're alive as all hell!"

"Don't say hell, son," Daddy Poole said. "Say, 'Thank you, Jesus.'" He clasped Hurley's outstretched hand and gently closed the fingers together around the money. "Thank Him for the fact we don't owe any rent this week. 'Call it a bonus,' the boss man said. We're mighty lucky, to work for people like that. Ain't that right, boys? Ain't that right, Charlie? They sure are good people."

* * *

In those days there were still hermits in the land, if a person knew where to look, and a few of them had achieved some measure of local fame.

The hermit Daner Johnson was well known among the children of the mill village, because he lived way out in the woods in a house made of shoe-polish tins and gummed the sap out of trees for his supper and washed his hair with gravel and did nothing all day but play a solid gold banjo that the Melungeons had given him in exchange for some back teeth, ten dollars, and his soul. His white beard was black with dirt and so long he wound it twice around his middle and knotted it for a belt, and his britches and jacket and shirt were so mottled and mildewed they blended right into the trees and leaves and underbrush, so you'd never know Daner Johnson was there watching you until he reached out one skinny arm and grabbed you, just like that, and dragged you back to his house of tin and cut out your insides to string his banjo. He wouldn't use cat gut because boy and girl gut made for a better sound, boy gut for low notes and girl gut for high, and besides, Daner Johnson never would hurt a cat because he loved cats, had seventy-five cats living with him at all times, and cats traveled from all over the world just to live the good cat life with Daner Johnson, and whatever boy and girl parts were no good for picking out "Sally Goodin," the majority of parts really, were thrown to the cats, which weren't partial to tree gum but enjoyed boys and girls just fine, and those howls you sometimes heard at night in the woods weren't panthers but Daner Johnson's housecats fighting over an eyeball.

Now in fact, almost none of what the children said about the hermit Daner Johnson was true. He actually was still a good-looking man in some lights, and more reliably healthy than most his age, and was in the habit of paying extended visits to three separate widow women in three separate corners of the county, at each house doing a week's worth of chores, some outdoors but mostly in, and eating considerably more than a week's worth of food before moving on. The widow women did not serve him tree sap but ham and grits and pocketwatch biscuits and other good things, and he enjoyed a long hot bath every evening, sometimes washing both himself and a widow woman, too, if the tub allowed it. His shirts were clean, he cinched his britches with polished brass hooks, he combed his long white beard clean and fine as silk, and far from dragging boys and girls home with him, he did all he could to avoid them altogether, which is one reason, natural inclinations aside, that he kept company only with widow women of a certain age, who were all done with cooking but still kept a hot stove.

He could, however, talk to cats, and vice versa, and spot Melungeons, and left to his own devices, he would indeed play the banjo all day, and five years in the future, he would receive a gold-plated banjo onstage from the master of ceremonies of the S.S. Stewart international competition at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis, because Daner had played "Dixie" so well that the state of Missouri just about

seceded on the spot, and amid rapturous applause he would shake hands with none other than the great Fred Van Eps himself.

But that would not happen until 1904, and so it was just some old shit banjo that Daner Johnson was playing in 1899, when the teary-eyed Charlie Poole first stumbled upon him in the woods, on the day Daddy Poole became a company man.

Even at that young age Charlie had learned to cry only by himself, and so far up in the hills he couldn't hear the mill anymore. On this particular afternoon, as the sound of the mill receded, another sound got louder to take its place: someone flailing a banjo, but not musically, not so as to produce entertainment, just a few licks and a pause and then the few licks repeated and the pause repeated and then a few twangs like hairs being plucked and then a flurry of notes like chickens rushing at each other crying, Run! Fox! Run! and then the pause repeated again.

Charlie never had heard anyone practice a banjo before, having assumed you either played one or didn't, with nothing in between. And he certainly never had heard anyone in the act of writing a song for the banjo, having reckoned that all the songs were already written long ago and were passed down from hand to hand like Sears catalogs and Sunday suits.

As he got closer he could hear a man's mumbling voice in between the stray notes. Finally he came into sight of a tall, lanky man in galluses with a long white beard who was sitting on a stump too low for him, both knees in the air level with his teeth, which were bared as he wrestled with the banjo in his lap, trying to make it behave. Above the beard, his face was unlined and youthful, and the beard itself was clean and laundered-looking, like a detachable beard kept in the wardrobe for use once a year in the church historical pageant.

The only parts of him that looked old, in fact, were his fingers, which clutched at the strings and scuttled along the neck and tickled the belly of the banjo like crabs or the skeleton claws in the story of Raw Head and Bloody Bones.

Charlie found himself both horrified and fascinated, and the fascination won out, so he kept edging forward through the brush, which is why his name is remembered today.

"Hell fire," said Daner Johnson, as he licked the swollen first knuckle of his red right thumb.

He should have quit an hour ago, but he was determined to knock this number in the head before he was done. A man could not properly concentrate if there was an unfinished song in his head. And this song had struck him with some force, driven him to his knees nearly on the mountainside that very morning, and he feared some retribution here or hereafter if he didn't deliver himself of it as soon as he could. Maybe if he could get it worked out and sung before the setting of the Sun and the changing of his clothes, it would spring off him fully formed and fly off and claw hold of some other poor soul.

So after a few more minutes of noodling around, Daner let fly what he had devised, an approximation of what he had intuited hours before, his tenor voice aiming for the treetops but actually, though he didn't realize it at the time, arcing sideways to blim Charlie Poole squarely between the eyes.

Hush up, little children, now don't you fret

You'll draw a pension at your papa's death

From Buffalo to Washington.

Ain't but one thing that grieves my mind

That is to die and leave my poor wife behind

I'll be gone a long, long time.

Yonder comes the train, she's coming down the line

Blowing every station, "Mr. McKinley's dying."

It's hard times, hard, hard times.

*Look here, you rascal, you see what you done
 You shot my husband with an Iver Johnson gun
 He's bound to die, he's bound to die.
 Mr. McKinley, he ain't done no wrong
 All he hoped to do was help the tariff along
 We'll lay him down, boys, we'll lay him down.*

As Daner plucked and sang, a motion in the corner of his eye made him aware of a thrown-away-looking little boy watching him from the bushes. The boy's frozen posture and slack jaw suggested rapt amazement, or at least idiocy, and his red eyes and streaky cheeks indicated that he had been crying very recently, perhaps as recently as the beginning of Daner's song.

The old man faltered to a stop as he looked into the boy's eyes.

"That's mighty pretty," said the boy.

"It ain't nothing of the kind," said Daner.

"Can you teach me to play like that, Mister?"

Daner felt an unexpected pang deep inside, like a long-unplayed string fraying and giving way.

"No!" he cried and resumed the song.

*Doctor, oh Doctor, please do all you can
 Man shot my husband with his handkerchief hand
 We'll take him back to Washington.
 I hope that all you attention will give
 The Devil gets all that the Lord won't forgive
 And it's hard, hard times.*

"And it'll be hard times for you," the young-old man yelled at the boy, "if you don't get the hell out of here, you mangy little pie-eating son of a bitch!"

By the time he hefted the handy rock he kept nearby, the boy had lit out; Daner heaved it into the woods anyway, to hear the satisfying crack as it snapped off a pine bough where the boy's moon face had been.

"See you tomorrow!" cried the out-of-sight-boy.

"I won't be here!" hollered Daner. "But in case I am, bring a nickel, will you? Or something to eat!"

By the time Charlie was back within earshot of the mill, its hundred-odd belts and pulleys and looms and turbines grinding away eternally like the true engine of the world, his cheeks were dry, and his snot had receded, and he was calculating ways to befriend that wild banjo man in the woods.

Charlie would rather not feed the wild man and his cats one of his own siblings, since they helped him sometimes and Mama Poole had enough these days to cry about already, but he was not at all averse to sacrificing one of the neighbor children, in the unlikely event he could lure one of them into the woods.

How long, Charlie wondered, could he have listened to the wild man's song, on the hillside that day, without forfeiting his soul and losing the ability ever to return to the life he had known? He resolved to find out.

Already parts of Daner's strange, senseless song seemed to live inside him, to animate his bones and muscles in time with a distant banjo. He kicked a Prince Albert can down the street past the company store and found himself singing what he could remember and making up the rest:

*Look here, you rascal, you see what you done
 Blowing every station with a ten-inch gun
 From Mebane to Burlington.*

"Mama," he said as he stomped into the Poole kitchen, laying down tracks of pine needles and mud, "do we know a Mr. McKinley?"

“Not unless you mean the president,” his mother said, not looking up from the pot she was stirring.

“President of what? The mill?”

“No, Charlie, of the whole country. Of the United States.”

“Oh,” Charlie said, hopping onto his favorite chair, one of several that were too big for him, and swinging his legs. “How’s he getting along?”

“Who?”

“Mr. McKinley.”

“I assume he’s doing just fine, Charlie.” She opened the oven door a crack and murmured to the rising bread, “Doing a damn sight better than we are.” As she straightened, wincing at the sudden pain in her back, the pain that never really left her since all the birthing, she asked rather sharply: “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Charlie replied, with unconvincing casualness. “I just heard he might be . . .” *Dying* he almost said, but at the last second substituted: “. . . sort of under the weather.”

His mother shook her head, wondering neither for the first nor the last time whether her adorable baby boy had been swapped in the cradle for a boy-shaped creature of unfathomable ways.

“Broom’s in the corner,” she said, turning back to the stove.

“So it is,” Charlie said, regarding it with disinterest.

“Use it, then,” his mother said. “Only God knows what devilment you were up to this afternoon, but you’ve tracked in enough dirt to rebuild Pilot Mountain.”

* * *

In March 1901, Charlie celebrated his ninth birthday, a subdued affair. Having no appetite, he fed most of his cake to his favorite yard dog, an unlikely half-breed that was fat and low-slung like a hound but had a pug’s mashed-in face. Charlie liked to watch its great flapping tongue sweep icing off its muzzle. Charlie could see no advantage in being able to lick his own eyebrows, but he wished he could do it anyway.

On Monday of the next week, his father having signed the paperwork, Charlie reported for work at the mill. He went without a fuss, the way you went to the outhouse when it was time to go. No one had a choice in the matter, so why complain?

Of course he kept going up the hill, every chance he got, to practice the banjo with Daner Johnson. But that earned no money for the mill, so the time spent doing it was magic time, forbidden time, time that did not exist, not in any discussable way. And so, as he went up the hill and down again, Charlie slipped in and out of existence, began to flicker, like the sun through a passing train.

Charlie started at the mill the way most of the men started, as a doffer boy. As the looms racketed back and forth, the bobbins slowly filled with fiber, until they looked like great spindles of cotton candy, and when the bobbin was plumb full, a doffer boy had to reach past the humming belts and hissing chains and hop the bobbin out of its hole and plunk an empty one into place, then carry the full bobbin over to the girls who plucked it naked, racked it for the next boy who needed one, and dropped the fibrous wad onto a belt that shuddered through the wall to the next station. God only knew what happened to it thereafter. Charlie figured it must come out as clothes at some point, and wondered how the buttons got put on, but he didn’t ask anyone on the mill floor, where the constant roaring racket was too loud even for a shout to be heard.

The workers kept track of their breaks and shifts by watching a row of electrical lights on a plank suspended from a beam high in the vaulted ceiling. By the end of the shift the green light that meant Go home could barely be seen through a fog of cotton dust. Strands and flakes of the stuff matted hair and plastered faces like a

thick spiderweb you walked through in the woods. The first thing you did on the outside of the building was peel off your mask of lint and fling it onto the ground, and every few days someone collected the drifts that piled up alongside the steps, so they could be fed back into the machines and inhaled all over again.

The mill needed small boys to change the bobbins because only small hands could fit between the moving parts while the machine was running, and of course if the mill had to shut down the machines every time a bobbin filled up, then no shift ever would make quota, and the mill would go bust, and everyone would be out of work and have to go pick cotton and tobacco in the fields with the coloreds, and no one could imagine a more miserable and demeaning job than that—certainly not the coloreds who worked in the mill, all of whom agreed it was a man-sized step up from the fields. Many adult mill workers had been doffer boys in their day, and were missing fingers and parts of fingers to prove it. For the rest of his life, whenever he heard someone refer to a textile worker as a mill hand, Charlie envisioned those mangled fingers: Those were mill hands to him. But Charlie was more nimble and careful than most, and displayed a remarkable gift for concentration. This would not have surprised Daner Johnson, had he ever darkened the doorstep of the mill to see firsthand its employment in an industrial capacity, but it fairly astonished everyone else of Charlie's acquaintance. Charlie knew he needed his hands for something more demanding than mill work. Why, he nearly had licked the bridge of "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down Blues," a cascade of notes that Daner admitted he himself hadn't licked until middle age. So Charlie watched the innards of the textile machinery the way a half-concealed rabbit watched a dog sniffing along a ditch; he had no intention of letting his deal go down.

So on Friday the sixth of September of the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and one, Charlie didn't even see the light come on. His first indication that something was wrong was the shrill and deafening locomotive-whistle alarm, his cue to yank his arms out of the machinery as it jittered and clattered to a halt. He peered through the clot of murk to confirm that the last light on the board had gone red for Shutdown.

The sudden crushing silence was invasive, like a stranger jamming fingers in Charlie's ears, and in the smothering calm he braced himself for the scream and scanned the million floating scraps to see which ones were dotted red—for the machines stopped only when someone was not only hurt but hurt bad. But there was no scream, and there was no blood. To fill the awful void, the workers began to talk among themselves, murmuring like gossips in pews during the prelude, wondering what in the world was going on.

Charlie wasn't the only one who jumped when the office door slammed and the manager walked onto the floor, his shiny shoes echoing as he clumped across the planks. He was a balding and burly man with glasses too small for a pumpkin head that was perpetually flecked with sweat. He went to the Presbyterian church, but rumor had it that his father was a Jew. He walked to the middle of the floor, stood there and looked around, fists on hips, sweat blooms beneath each arm. Normally impassive, a calming presence even in the midst of bloodshed, the manager today looked pale and angry and scared. Charlie found himself holding tight with both hands to an empty bobbin, as if it were a club or a ladder's last rung. The manager cleared his throat and said:

"Folks, there's bad news from the Pan American Exposition in New York. President McKinley has been shot."

Moans and gasps from the crowd. A man's carrying voice cried, "Oh, shit!"

The manager held up a sweaty palm for order. "The surgeons are working on him now," he continued. "That's all we know, and that's from the New York office, because the wires are still coming in from Buffalo."

A woman screeched, "Who did it?"

The manager looked pained and said, "The wires say an anarchist has been taken into custody."

Snarls of anger now.

A man said, "Fucking wops!" and spat on the floor.

Another blurted: "Jesus, two presidents shot dead since I been working here! At this rate, who'll want the job?"

A woman next to him said, "Don't forget Lincoln before that."

"Lincoln deserved it," he retorted.

"I repeat," the manager yelled, "that the president is not dead. Allow me to emphasize the *not*. All right? Everyone understand? The vice president is on his way to the bedside, everything is under control, and this is no time to panic. Instead, I think it would be appropriate, under the circumstances, for us all to bow our heads in prayer for the president, and his doctors, and his family, and our country on this terrible day. Might one of the preachers among you do the honors?"

"I'll do it, Mr. Cone," said Preacher Foy, who mauled his felt cap in lumpy callused hands as he stepped forward. He cleared his rheumy throat. "Let us pray."

Two hundred caps made a collective rustle as they were whisked off heads. Even Charlie, who had stood stone still during all the talking, as if poleaxed, removed his own cap automatically. He was just now allowing himself to think about what was happening.

As Preacher Foy droned on about the sanctified angels that gather around every hospital bed, the less devout continued to whisper to one another. One man hissed sideways over Charlie's head: "I'm damned if I'll pray for a Republican."

His buddy on Charlie's other side agreed. "The coloreds elected him, let *them* pray for him."

Charlie himself wasn't listening to the prayer. In his relatively brief lifetime of forced churchgoing, he had developed a theory that no one really listened to a public prayer; either you prayed some prayer of your own, independent of the preacher's, or you thought about something else entirely, like what you were having for dinner or how you wished your mama was still alive or the way the youngest McMichael girl had filled out over the summer. What Charlie was thinking about now was Daner Johnson sitting on a mountain stump, singing:

Yonder comes the train, she's coming down the line

Blowing every station, "Mr. McKinley's dying."

It's hard times, hard, hard times.

Not for two weeks was Charlie able to fight his way free of the hypnotic bobbin long enough to scramble up the hill to Daner Johnson's place, by which time Daner had perfected what he claimed was a new-made song about the whole affair. Charlie knew this was a lie, because he'd heard Daner sing most of it years before, on the day they met.

But he didn't let on, not that day nor the next five hundred days. Charlie just kept nodding his head and listening, watching, practicing, learning.

* * *

In late summer 1903, Daner became increasingly moody, skittish, ill-tempered, and just plain odd. All these things, granted, had been more or less true of Daner Johnson for years, but by the third week of September even Charlie, who by age eleven already had developed a nearly inhuman tolerance for eccentricity, was hard-pressed to put up with him.

Charlie should have been relieved when the older man announced he'd be gone a day or two, visiting old cotton-mill friends in Danville, just across the Virginia line. Instead Charlie was sure that something was up in Danville, something Charlie was determined not to miss.

"I'll come with you," Charlie said.

"No, you won't, neither," Daner said. "You've still got a job at the mill, and a family to help feed, and you ain't even close to learning 'Soldier's Joy' yet. You stay here and keep up with your work. Nothing worth seeing in Danville nohow."

Nothing would dissuade Daner, so Charlie had no choice but to bribe Willie Smith, the doffer boy who worked beside him, to cover Charlie's Saturday shift.

"I'll give you both my aggies and the next frog I catch," Charlie said.

"I don't look nothing like you, Charlie," said Willie, who spoke the truth. A year older than Charlie, he had grown five inches in the past six months and longed for his Christmas clothes to arrive, for until then his arms and legs stuck out of his sleeves and britches like the limbs of a child's pipe-cleaner man.

"I ain't asking you to impersonate me," Charlie said. "This ain't a Pinkerton assignment. All you got to do is punch my card in and out, once in the morning and once in the evening."

"Yeah," Willie said, "and do your work and mine, too."

"It ain't as if I do that much work anyway," Charlie said.

Fortunately for Charlie's weekend plans, Willie was still three months shy of puberty, whereupon Stokes County's amphibious population would forevermore cease to entice him.

"Two frogs," Willie said.

Their bargain concluded, Charlie crept over to Daner's place that Friday night, with some biscuits and cheese wrapped in one of his pa's old handkerchiefs—a well-laundered one, with almost no pinkish stains left—and crouched beneath the window long enough to assure himself the old man was snoring. Then he climbed into the back of Daner's wagon, covered himself up with canvas, reflected, uncovered himself, crawled out, peed his initials in the road, crawled back in, re-covered himself, and went to sleep.

He was awakened by a mosquito drilling into his cheek. Making the unavoidable universal mistake, he slapped himself. Fully alert now, he realized the wagon was in motion.

He lay low most of the morning, new splinters working their way into him at every jolt, gnawed his bread and cheese, and suffered in thirsty silence until the need to pee again drove him forth at midday.

He dropped as silently as he could into the road, stepped out of the dust cloud, did his business in the bushes, then ran to catch up with Daner's wagon, hopping onto the buckboard with a grin.

To his dismay, the old man did not have a heart attack or scream or faint, did not respond in any way except to mutter: "I wondered how long you could hold it. Enjoy it while you can. That's all I can say." He tossed a gingham sack into Charlie's lap. "Your ma made you some sandwiches. You got one left."

The people Daner was visiting in Danville were named Meade. Daner had worked at the Spray mill with Mr. Meade years before, until Meade married a Danville girl and hired on at the Riverside and Dan.

Charlie was fascinated by the prospect of meeting someone who had seen Daner Johnson in the act of working and therefore could describe the phenomenon firsthand, however distant the memory.

He also was pleased to see that the Meades had one of the bigger houses in the North Danville mill village, four large rooms with a wraparound porch that gave a fine view of the mill, the trestle, and the Southern Railway as it ran steeply down to the river.

"This is Charlie Poole," Daner told the Meades. "He lives in Spray, and can sleep anywhere."

What more Daner might have said to explain Charlie's presence, the boy didn't know, but at dinner Mrs. Meade offered him a third pork chop, saying she didn't imagine he got much home cooking at the reformatory.

While Daner charmed the Meades and some neighbors with his banjo on the front porch that night, the old man clearly was not himself, and seemed loath to go inside, even after Mrs. Meade had turned in and Mr. Meade had yawned and looked at his pocketwatch five times.

"Charlie here plays a little banjo," Daner said, "and expects to inherit one of mine someday, when he's good enough. Which, at his current rate of progress, will be when he's roughly a hundred and three."

Charlie had heard such raillery before, but on this night, he could tell the old man's heart wasn't in it.

The next morning, September 27, 1903, was a Sunday, and over a fine flapjack breakfast the Meades apologized for their heathen ways. They said their little Holiness congregation shared a preacher with three other churches on a circuit, and this week wasn't their turn.

Thank you, Jesus, was Charlie's silent prayer.

After eating, Mr. Meade and Charlie took their coffee and buttermilk, respectively, onto the porch. Daner was already there, perched in the motionless swing, eyes darting back and forth, a vein pulsing in his neck. Charlie didn't know what had got into him. He looked ready to bolt at any second, run through the yard and across the street and hop the low stone wall and dive headfirst into the ravine.

Mr. Meade blew ripples on his coffee, slurped it, and consulted his watch. "Mail train's running late today. We ought to get a good view of her, though, when she does show."

Mr. Meade, Charlie quickly had realized, was one of those fabulous beings who speaks only in commonplaces, as if his every utterance had been legislated into being by consensus vote of the Chamber of Commerce.

"What a wonderful service the U.S. Post Office provides," Mr. Meade went on.

"I purely love a train," Charlie said, after a pause. It seemed someone ought to say something, and he was trying to head off a Mr. Meade recitation about snow and rain and gloom of night.

"I do, too, son," said Mr. Meade. "Why, it may surprise you to hear it, but I hopped a freight once, when I was about your age, and made it all the way to Atlanta before the law caught up to me. I was quite the fugitive, ha ha. My grandfather wired me the return fare. Not a happy homecoming, I assure you. I didn't sit down for a week."

Daner was watching the far hillside, where the Southern dropped out of a stand of trees.

Mr. Meade rocked steadily on the uneven planks, ka-thunk, ka-thunk, as he gazed at Charlie over his steaming coffee. "Don't you try a stunt like that yourself," he said.

"No, sir," Charlie said.

"I was lucky," he continued. "I could have been killed. Or worse." He slurped his coffee.

"Yes, sir," Charlie said, as the train whistle shrieked.

"Ah, yonder she comes," said Mr. Meade. Black oily smoke was puffing along the ridgeline. He gestured with his coffee cup. "That's the way to travel the rails, my boy. Railroading is an honorable profession. See our great land, and get paid for it."

He glanced at Daner, who had eyes only for the oncoming train.

First the belching crown of the smokestack and then the rest of the locomotive came into view, cresting the ridge. Then the cars behind shouldered over the hump, swaying in alternate patterns almost musical, Charlie thought.

Out of unthinking habit, he counted the cars—one, two, threefourfive—and the speed of his counting told him something was wrong.

Mr. Meade stopped rocking.

"That boy's coming down too fast," he said.

Charlie glanced at Daner, an automatic appeal to authority, but the older man just sat forward tight-lipped in the swing, a stray breeze lifting his sparse and fine white hair. His lips moved soundlessly.

The train sped down the steep railbed like a dropped rock, whistle still shrieking, toward the bottom of the slope, where the rails took a sharp turn sideways to parallel the river, and cross the trestle above Stillwater Creek.

Charlie was off the porch steps now, halfway in the yard, hands reaching out as if he could stop the train.

Behind him Mr. Meade hollered, "Clara. Clara! Come out and see the wreck," and on porches and in yards all around, Charlie was aware of people on their feet, shouting to one another.

A woman in the next yard snatched a little girl back by the neck of her dress, flung an apron over the child's head to cover her eyes, then watched, ashen, as the fast train hit the bottom of the slope screaming.

Ninety miles an hour, some later claimed, as if anyone in Danville, indeed anyone on the Southern Railway, knew what ninety miles an hour looked like.

Charlie watched as the train hit the bend and jumped the tracks. The locomotive leaped into space, then plowed roaring into the steep slope, pulling the cars with it.

People all along the hillside gasped as the engine wallowed down the ravine, tumbling as it neared the bottom, the cars behind whipping to and fro like a cow's tail, until they all smashed in the creekbed at the bottom.

The sudden silence was louder than the whistle had been, until every witness in North Danville began screaming and crying and talking at once.

"Charlie! Come back!"

Charlie heard Daner's cry, but he could no more have checked his scramble down the steep bank, a curtain of gravel and rocks sliding with him, than Number 97 could have stopped its plunge into the creekbed, once begun.

The ravine was silent but for the wavering keen of steam escaping and the occasional creak and groan of debris settling, like wood in a cold campfire, and the scuffling sounds of descent, Charlie's and others as well.

Whenever he reached a spot on the slope flat enough to stand on, Charlie looked again at the steaming, splintered thing lying in segments below, searched in vain for human motion amid the wreckage, and evaluated the other locals slip-sliding down the opposite bank. His side looked easier than theirs, but he wouldn't be the first on the scene: Already people in an antlike line, including several women and a man in an out-of-place frock coat, were climbing down zigzag stairs at the back of the mill, onto the concrete lip of the viaduct.

The two overalled leaders of the cotton-mill party were already darting in and out of the smashed caboose, and their voices carried far across the damp rocks: "Anyone in there? Hello! Can you hear us?"

Now Charlie was at their level, having slid muddily on his butt the last ten feet down, and as he approached the caboose across a few treacherous yards of greasy creekstones, he saw a twisted, blue-uniformed arm sticking out of the wreck, a shattered lantern lying a few feet away from the splayed fingers: the signalman, maybe, waving *mayday* from the rear platform as the train went over.

Farther ahead, a severed leg lay in the creek, water flowing around the new end like the flow around a stopped-up pipe.

"Lord have mercy," Frock Coat kept murmuring, sun shining off his bald pate. "Lord have mercy on their souls."

One of the women was kneeling in a bloody pool, her Sunday dress already sodden, cradling the red-streaked head of a trainman who lay moaning on the rocks, his

hips out of alignment with the rest of his body, so that even on his back he pointed like an arrow.

The keening sound broke off for a few seconds and became a human voice wailing, “It hurts it hurts oh Jesus it hurts,” then went back to the high-pitched whine like escaping steam. Charlie hadn’t known people could make noises like that. The sound was the engineer, now visible as Charlie trotted along the broken spine of the mail cars. The men in overalls were trying to pull the engineer out of the cab.

“Don’t do that,” a woman cried behind them, but it was too late, as the men emerged from the cab without the engineer, pale-faced and retching.

One slapped something down onto the rocks that landed wetly, like a cleaned fish. It was a fat pink mitten. One of the men cried, “Poor bastard’s skin come off in our hands!”

Charlie had reached the sideways locomotive. The scalded engineer, his skin red and bare and swollen like a sausage casing, hat and eyebrows and most of his hair gone, left off screaming to focus on Charlie.

“Please kill me, son,” the engineer said. “One swing of that crowbar would do it. Please.”

He keened again as a group of would-be rescuers surrounded the cab. Charlie lost sight of the doomed man in the jostle of shoulders and backsides. Someone unscrewed a pint flask, and someone else was ripping bandages.

Charlie realized that his right hand hung heavy at his side. At some point in his exploration of the wreck, he had indeed picked up a crowbar, to what end he didn’t know. Appalled, he threw it aside.

“Watch it, buddy!” someone called. “A guy could get hurt.”

Two grimy trainmen headed his way, the burly one supporting the thin one who hopped on one foot. Charlie tried to dart around them, but the burly man seized him with his meaty free hand.

“Want a souvenir, do you?” the man snarled, shaking Charlie for emphasis. “Do you, you little son of a bitch? Here.” He spat out a bloody tooth, which didn’t reach the flinching Charlie but looped down the man’s coveralls on a long slow rope of red spittle.

Charlie wrenched out of his grip and ran back toward the Meade house, toward Daner Johnson, toward safety. His cheeks burned as behind him, he heard the burly man laugh. He forced himself to stop running, slowed to a walk of studied nonchalance.

By now the train was aswarm with locals, but this had been a mail train, so the scavengers were mostly disappointed. The only contents spilling out of the crumpled cars were piles of gray sacks the size of the duffel bags the boys brought home from Cuba. A few had bust open, and carefully inked envelopes full of tidings good and bad littered the creekbed. Odd that people were so careful not to step on them. Charlie himself picked up several as he walked back toward the caboose, until he had two handfuls. One on the top was addressed to Mrs. Ezra O. Miller, Atlanta, Georgia, from Mr. Geo. A. Thomas, Cumberland, Maryland. Charlie absently set the letters in a tidy stack atop one of the train’s great iron wheels, no longer spinning, and left them there.

Charlie peered up the slope he had come down, registered the half-dozen men and boys standing silent at various spots along the descent, fixed like mileposts.

Charlie took the lazier way up, on the zigzag stairs—passing two hatless men with doctor’s bags, and a group of firemen toting stretchers—and trudged back through the unfamiliar streets of North Danville, aiming uphill, until he found himself back at the gate where Daner Johnson sat on the curb, cradling his banjo, and making fits and starts at playing something.

“*It’s a mighty twisty road,*” Daner sang, then stopped. He talked to himself when he worked on songs. “Too many beats. Mighty hard road? No. Mighty *rough* road. *It’s a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville.* Satisfied?” Daner asked Charlie, without looking up from the strings. “Learn anything down there you didn’t already know?”

Charlie didn't answer, just stared at him, and then sat on the curb beside Daner, his gaze still locked on the scene below.

"It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville/ It's a line with a three-mile grade. No, that won't do; I purely hate an 'it's.' Waste of a good beat. Oh, hellfire!"

This last was because all the church bells of Danville had begun to peal at once, including the Methodist version a block away.

"Can't hear the music for the damn churches," Daner said.

* * *

In the wagon headed home, Charlie took the reins while Daner worked on his new song, which sounded pretty good even though he did just say Blah-Blah-Blah where the engineer's name would go, as Daner didn't know the engineer's name yet. Someone had said it was Steve Brodie, but that couldn't be right because Steve Brodie was the fellow who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge in 1886 and came up wet but smiling.

"The tune is mostly 'The Ship That Never Returned,'" Daner said. "Mostly."

"Is that why we went to Danville?" Charlie asked. "So's you could watch nine men die in a train wreck just to write a song about it? I'll have nightmares for sure."

"Who's talking *we*?" Daner replied. "You went to Danville, Charlie Poole, because your all-fired nosiness led you to hide in the wagon. You popped out when it was too late to turn back, and I was too kindhearted to chuck you out into the road the way I should have done. Don't be hanging no *we* around my neck, boy. You have nightmares, it's your own damn fault."

"So why did *you* go? And don't tell me it was Mr. Meade's nasty pipe and Mrs. Meade's narrow ass."

Daner didn't reply immediately, but he looked rueful and annoyed enough that Charlie was pretty sure he *would* say something soon, if just to get the taste out of his mouth, so Charlie held his tongue for a few clop-clops of the mule team.

Daner finally said, "Meade is one brass-balled liar. Rode the rods as far as Atlanta, my ass! The man got past Leaksville only in his Holiness dreams. He *did* get an ass-whipping, though."

He glanced at Charlie's impassive face, which admitted no change of subject, and sighed.

"I knew something would happen there," Daner said. "Something that was worth a song. I feel that way sometimes. Makes me all, I dunno, scratchy, like I've sat on an ant bed. Usually I get there just after it happened. This time, I got there beforehand."

"So you'll be the first with the song, then? Is that it?"

"Shit," Daner said. "There was five hundred people climbing around on that wreck, and I'll lay you odds half of them is in at least one band. I'll meet songs about Number 97 coming and going. I bet if we had stayed on the Meades' porch tonight, we'd have heard two or three, just from the houses around us. You can't beat a song into the world."

Charlie began: "So if it ain't about writing the song—"

"It's just somewhere I need to be, that's all," Daner said. "All I knew about that wreck was, something bad was coming closer and closer, and calling me to Danville. If I fight that urge, I'm purely miserable."

The wagon rocked along.

"You didn't go to Buffalo," Charlie said. "And yet you knew McKinley was gonna be shot, didn't you?"

"Well, hell, Charlie, Buffalo ain't Danville. I couldn't hitch the mule and ride to Buffalo, could I? Besides, I was a year early on that one." He shivered. "That was one of the times a song come to me all at once, just poured out like a sickness."

"You knew he was gone be killed," Charlie said. "You could have told the army, could have stopped it."

"I didn't know shit. Not the where, not the when, not the who." Daner shivered

again. “Now, the Iver Johnson gun—I did know that. Felt it in my hand. But, Charlie, what good would that information be, to anyone? Iver Johnson arms every twelfth man in America. Huh! Mr. McKinley would have died just the same. Meanwhile, they’d a locked me in a cool dry place, and whatever would have become of you?”

Charlie said, “I want songs to come to me like that.”

“Be careful in your wanting,” Daner said.

They were silent for a half-hour.

“I got another verse for you,” Charlie said. “You want to hear it?”

“I certainly do not,” Daner said.

They were silent for another half-hour.

“How’s it go?” Daner asked.

Charlie sang:

He raced down the grade at Danville Virginia

His whistle began to scream

He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle

He was scalded to death by the steam.

He expected only complaint, but Daner’s mood lifted immediately. He seemed genuinely pleased.

“Well, how about that,” Daner said. “I may use some of that, yes indeed. The part about the steam, anyway. Wrote that in your head just sitting here, riding along? Well, good for you. That’s just fine.”

Charlie didn’t tell Daner that he actually had written the verse back in Danville, as he trudged back up the hill from the creekbed, only to find it exactly fit the tune Daner was working on. Daner didn’t need to know everything.

* * *

In the years to come, Charlie kept working at the mill, quitting the mill, getting hired on at the mill, and quitting the mill again, all the while nodding his head at Daner Johnson and listening, watching, practicing, learning.

One day, a month before Charlie’s eighteenth birthday, he disappeared both from the life of the mill and from the life of Daner Johnson. The former assumed he was busy with the latter, the latter assumed he was busy with the former, and the remaining members of the Poole family assumed that Charlie, wherever he was, was just being Charlie Poole. For by the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and ten, Mama Poole’s youngest boy had become, even to his family, “Charlie Poole,” a three-syllable entity separate from the lives of women and men, that came and went like the weather and could leave behind just as much damage and joy.

Charlie Poole next showed up at Daner’s place at the precise age of eighteen years and three days. He had a swagger in his step, a wildness in his eyes. Hands jammed into his pants pockets, rocking to and fro on his heels, he acted like a little boy about to blurt the world’s best secret.

“Where you been?” Daner asked. “No, wait, don’t answer that. I withdraw the question. I don’t want people knowing where I go, and you deserve the same courtesy. But I hope you will tell me what’s got into you. You won the Irish Sweepstakes?”

“Just feeling the springtime, I reckon,” Charlie said. “I hear you got a banjo you’re looking to pass on.”

Daner grunted and made no move to reach for the cedar chest where all his instruments rested, separated by walnut partitions. “I might,” Daner said, “if the man shows up who knows how to play it.”

“I deserve a chance, don’t I?” Charlie asked.

He looked like a man with a trick up his sleeve, but Daner couldn’t figure what it might be. Besides, Daner wasn’t getting any younger. Daner grunted again, lifted the lid of the chest, and pulled out his oldest and scruffiest banjo.

"Not that one," Charlie said.

Daner set that one aside and pulled out a much nicer model.

"Not that one, either," Charlie said. "You know the one I want. The one you brought back from the Exposition."

"I already told you," Daner said. "The gold-plated S.S. Stewart banjo I won from Fred Van Eps got stole, before I even set foot on the train out of town. An omen of my life thus far."

Charlie waited.

Daner sighed. "And so I hocked my pocketwatch and all my luggage, right there in St. Louis, and came home with nothing but this."

He pulled forth the real prize, peeled away the layers of cheesecloth in which it lay wrapped. There were shinier, newer, fancier banjos in the world, but this one had the satisfied gleam of long use and care. The model name across the belly was stroked nearly into oblivion; only the G of Gibson was readable. The strings seemed almost to vibrate on their own, as if the music played whether or not a musician was present.

Daner and Charlie looked at the banjo for a few moments, Daner with the calm warm gaze of an old friend, Charlie with a more covetous, even angry gleam. Yet the younger man respectfully waited for his cue.

"Go ahead, then," Daner said.

A player's first moments with an instrument were not for spectating, so Daner turned away, opened the screen door, and stepped to the edge of the porch.

Daner's cabin sat on a little moss-covered, root-entwined promontory in the woods, and the land on three sides fell away into a shallow two-pronged ravine, but on the fourth side, in front of the porch, was a broad cool flat slate rock that was fine for shady sitting, and Daner settled himself on it now, looking up at the patchy sky visible through the limbs and leaves. He registered nothing but the breeze and the welcoming eroded hollows of the rock beneath his bony buttocks, but as he sat he flexed his fingers involuntarily, as if limbering them up. They never would be as limber as they had been.

The screen door pronged open and slapped shut behind him, and Charlie stepped off the porch past Daner, walked to the edge of the promontory, where the mossy path dropped down into the woods. He cradled the banjo before him. With his back to Daner, Charlie began to play and to sing:

*Now I've been all around this whole wide world
Down to Memphis Tennessee
Any old place I hang my hat
Looks like home to me.*

By now Daner was standing, in open-mouthed astonishment. The singing voice was Charlie's unmistakable mushmouthed yawp, but the playing, that was new. Could Charlie have double-crossed his teacher, pulled one of the other banjos out of the chest while his back was turned? But Daner owned no banjo with a sound like this—not before today, anyway—and he was pretty sure no one else had, either.

*Oh it's don't let your deal go down
Don't let your deal go down
Don't let your deal go down
Before my last gold dollar is gone.*

This playing had a new urgency, a new depth. It seemed to provide its own echo, as if three hands formed the downstroke instead of one. The song was one of the oldest Daner knew, one of the oldest anyone in North Carolina knew, but somehow Charlie had found more notes in it than anyone had before.

Daner edged forward, keen to see Charlie's hands without interrupting him.

*Now I left my little girl crying
Standing in the door*

*Threw her arms around my neck
Saying "Honey don't you go."
Daner sidled around Charlie's right side, where he could look down at the—
"God almighty!" Daner cried. "Boy, what have you done to your hand?"
Now I've been all around this whole wide world
Done most everything
I've played cards with the king and the queen
Discard the ace and the ten.*

"Answer me, boy!" Daner seized Charlie's right wrist in one hand and the neck of the banjo in the other.

Charlie stopped playing but held onto the neck, and for a second the two men glared at one another nearly nose to nose, as if committing to a struggle that would tear the old banjo to pieces.

But Charlie let go. Daner laid the instrument down on the rock without looking at it and took gentle hold of Charlie's right hand. Charlie put up only a token struggle.

The thumb and index finger looked normal, but the other three fingers were swollen, scarred and hooked inward as a single crablike unit. Daner tried, and failed, to separate them.

"Ow!" Charlie said. "Quit that. They ain't gone work that way anymore, Daner, but they're nearabouts ideal for banjo picking, don't you think?"

Daner felt twenty years older. "Lord, Charlie, how'd you break your fingers? Why didn't you have them set? Don't they hurt you?"

"Naw, not after the first day or so. Mostly numb, to tell you the truth about it."

"But, son, how can you play like that, without feeling in your playing fingers?"

Charlie laughed. "I ain't got feeling in my picks and frets neither, but I can play with them just the same. Looks just like a clawhammer, wouldn't you say?"

"They look plumb awful," Daner said. "They look," he added, and stopped. He almost had said *They look like the mark of Cain*. "How did it happen?"

Charlie looked coy. "Aw, Daner, you know how it is."

"Charlie!"

Charlie sighed. "All right, I'll tell you."

* * *

When asked how he broke his fingers, Charlie liked to tell this story.

Late one night he was rambling through the woods above the mill, with nothing particular to do but go on home and no special desire to do so, when an old oak stump in his path belched into flame like a locomotive smokestack, and the Devil stepped out of the flame. She had bobbed, jet-black hair and wore a tight, knee-high, see-through black flapper dress and a long white string of pearls that nearly dragged the ground. She was really something, and the sight of her made Charlie's pecker so hard it hurt, even though there were no whites in her eyes, just dark on dark, and her feet were bare and hairy and clawed like a bear's. Struck dumb with terror and desire, Charlie wondered whether she was that hairy under the dress.

"Never you mind just yet," said the Devil. She could hear even words unspoken, which is most of them. "I've had my eye on you for a while now, Charlie Poole."

"How come?" Charlie asked.

"Because I like you," the Devil said. "I purely love a banjo, and I like the way you play it. I like that you don't go to church for reasons other than laziness. I like how, when you pee, you give your little thing two more jerks than are, strictly speaking, necessary. And for all those reasons, Charlie, I'm going to do you a favor, no strings attached, and if you go through with it, I might even let you take a poke at me with that little thing of yours. It would be a nice change of pace from what I'm used to, since you'd be alive and willing and all."

"What favor is that?" Charlie asked. He was watching her moving pearl necklace, which crawled snakelike along the front of her dress without her fingers touching it.

"Why, I want to make you the best banjo picker ever to come out of North Carolina, that's all."

"I'm that already," Charlie said. "What else you got?" He cocked his head to see better through her dress, but she moved away from the fire so that she wasn't backlit anymore and laughed merrily, a lovely silvery laugh that made birds drop dead from the trees all around and gushed blood from Charlie's nose.

"Don't try to horseshit me," the Devil said. "I invented horseshit—the kind you deal in, anyway. You and I both know you ain't that good, not yet, but that you want to be, and could be, with my help."

"What's the catch?" Charlie asked through his handkerchief. He had about got the bleeding to stop, and because she looked amused enough to laugh again, he quickly rephrased the question. "I mean, what do I have to do?"

"Just let me break three of your fingers on your right hand. They'll set you up just right for picking, believe me."

Charlie looked around in fear. "How? You gone drop a tree on me?"

"What fun is that?" the Devil said, hiking her dress up to mid-thigh and wiggling. "Just put your hand between my legs, you know where it is, and make me happy, and when I get real happy, my muscles will do the rest."

"I don't want to get beneath your dress that bad," Charlie said. "Suppose I say no?"

The Devil shrugged. "Then you go on about your business, and I go on about mine, and the offer will never be repeated, and I wish you a lot of luck. I hear the mill down in Spray is hiring. And if textiles go overseas, there's always the mines, or the cotton fields."

Charlie wavered. He had been sober, for a change, when the Devil showed up, but she was making him feel drunk and reckless. "If I already broke my hand, sticking it in there, what makes you think I'd stick in my pecker, too? You'd break it off like a stick."

"Now, Charlie," the Devil said. "Why would I ever want to break that? It can do more devilment than a banjo, even."

She hiked her dress even farther, then, and her necklace slithered off her neck and sidewinded across the ground to swarm whitely over one of the dead birds and begin to feed, and Charlie couldn't help walking forward, couldn't help reaching out his hand . . .

* * *

When asked how he broke his fingers, Charlie liked to tell this story.

He was out front of Daner Johnson's cabin, kneeling before a slate rock, and sweating in the sun. His right hand was staked flat out on the rock, fingers separated by thick pegs wedged low into the joints, wrist and forearm trussed with ropes that wrapped all around the rock. He couldn't move his arm, only work his fingers up and down a little between the pegs, like the last leg-kicks of something dying. His arm below the elbow had gone to sleep, so even those little motions were like a thousand pinpricks going in.

"This what you want, Charlie Poole?" asked Daner Johnson, who stood with one foot on the slate rock, looking down at Charlie. Daner hefted a double-headed sledgehammer, the kind used for pile-driving. His ropy arm muscles bulged as he handled it. The double head was flecked with red spots, some of which were rust.

"Yes, damn it!" Charlie yelled. "I been telling you for three hours. Go on and do it, damn your skinny widow-eating hide."

"You need to understand," Daner said. "This ain't only your fingers we're shaping here. We're shaping your life. The life of a banjo picker, Charlie, is no easy life. Nor necessarily a long life. Certainly not a respectable life, not like the lives of those who

add columns of figures, those who answer other people's telephones, or those who move papers from one drawer to another. To an outsider, in fact, a banjo picker's life may look like no life at all. But it will be your life, Charlie, and no mistake. There will be no turning back."

"Yes, yes, yes, we been through all that ten times," Charlie said. "What the hell is this, the Masons? Let's get it over with. Just give me one more slug of whisky first."

"Ain't no more whisky," Daner said. "You done drunk it all."

"What? That one little flask I brought from town? Aw, come on, Daner. You've lived in these woods your whole life. The creeks out here run yellow with sour mash, every farmer who makes a trip to the store finds reason to bring home twenty pounds of sugar, you're surrounded by the smoke from the cottage industries all around. I know you got to have a jug of corn laid by someplace. It's only human."

"Nothing doing," Daner said, shaking his head, his white beard wagging with disapproval. His eyes seemed to retreat in his head. "I renounced the drinking of alcohol," Daner said, "when I took up the banjo and pledged to make it my life, here on this very stone. I made an exception in your case today, for the obvious medicinal and anesthetic qualities of a right snootful, but otherwise, drink and the banjo do not mix. Guitarists, yea, may gulp it up in buckets, and fiddlers, yea, may take baths in it, and the capacious habits of mandolin players and, worse yet, autoharpists, do not bear description in the corridors of the just, but for the banjo player—ah, the sanctified banjo player!—to know alcohol is a perversion and abomination unto the Lord, for from the banjo comes the rhythm, and the rhythm must always be steady and true."

There was a long silence. The sun dipped below the treeline. A warbler flitted from perch to perch. A chipmunk approached the two motionless figures, nosed around the edge of the rock, then scampered into the woodpile and disappeared.

Finally Charlie said, "Now you tell me."

"He who has ears," Daner intoned, "let them hear."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Well, shit."

"That which is shit," Daner intoned, "shit it shall remain."

"Don't suppose you know any old wild-eyed hermit autoharp players?"

"Can't say that I do."

"You know, I might just take me a nip now and then."

"That which you sow, that shall you also reap." Daner shrugged. "But, hey, it's your life."

"And the banjo life you're describing," Charlie said, "well, it ain't natural. It ain't right. Hell, it ain't even human."

"Now you got it," Daner said, and swung that hammer down.

* * *

When asked how he broke his fingers, Charlie liked to tell this story.

The bedroom door slammed open. Charlie leapt sideways, misjudged the edge of the unfamiliar bed, having been occupied squarely in the middle for a good hour, and fell to the rough plank floor, dragging half the bedclothes after him. Izzy covered herself as best she could, gathering the remaining sheet beneath her chin, one long bare leg exposed. Her father, advancing on the bed in no special hurry, seized her tiny foot in his quart-jug hand.

"Cover up before your own kin," her father breathed, "but rut like a sow with this wastrel, this stranger."

This wastrel, this stranger, was shinnying backward, gathering splinters, as he yanked on his trousers and looked wanly toward the room's only window, which was, alas, on the far side of the bed.

"Daddy, don't," cried Izzy as he slipped one meaty finger beneath her sparking ankle bracelet, which Charlie had given her that very afternoon. His other hand

caressed her foot, then squeezed it, tighter and tighter, and she cried out as the small bones ground together.

"What whore's jewelry is this?" her father cooed. "A geegaw that can't even be seen, unless your skirts are up and your knees in the air." He yanked and twisted the bracelet, which cut into her foot before the chain broke. He dashed it into the corner, ripped the sheet two-handed from the girl's plucking fingers. He let the sheet puddle around his ankles and gazed down at Izzy as she squirmed, trying to use her hands to cover herself. Charlie couldn't help admiring her flawless skin as he jerked on his shirt and sidled toward the door.

"I see you, Isadora," her father said. "I see you, and I know you. All your whore's equipment is known to me. And just where do you think you're going, Sonny Jim?"

He continued to stare at the sobbing girl as he said this, but Charlie stopped, arrested.

"You should have left sooner, son," Izzy's father said, turning his gaze to Charlie. "You should have left before you got here."

"Please, Mr. Barnhart," Charlie said. "Let's you and me go outside, talk this over."

Barnhart was expressionless as he slowly put his hands on his waist, moved them forward to the front of his britches. For a second Charlie was sure he intended to piss on both of them. Barnhart was a rangy, narrow-waisted man, and wore twice the belt he needed, doubling it across, and sometimes was asked why he wore such a belt as that. The true answer was that he lived for just such occasions as this. It was part of his nature, that belt. He slowly unbuckled it and drew it free with a hiss, flexing the strap in his sweating hands.

"No need for Izzy to see this," Charlie squawked. "Let's go outside, please."

"Her name is Isadora," Barnhart said, as quietly as before. "Named for her mother, dead these past five years."

"Oh, I'm real sorry," Charlie said, stalling. His shirt hung unbuttoned, his arms and hands were loose at his sides, his legs were braced, but he was unarmed. His own belt was draped across the room's only chair, but his belt was a poor cardboard thing, a musician's belt. The chair would be better, but it was not in reach, and to reach for it, or for the banjo under the bed, would invite Barnhart to swing.

"I loved that woman," Barnhart said, in a flat recitation like ordering dry goods at the store, "but she was a whore, too."

"Mama!" Izzy sobbed, and her father, no warning on his face, whirled and whipped her once with the belt, yanking it away and turning back to Charlie before the younger man could move two inches. Izzy shrieked and writhed as the angry red stripe rose across her belly.

"Hush," Barnhart said, still looking at Charlie. "I love you, Isadora, so you won't get the buckle end." He wrapped the naked end around his fist. The buckle swung like a pendulum, and Charlie was mesmerized. "The buckle end," Barnhart said, "is for him," and lashed out.

Charlie seized the belt midway, the buckle looping behind him and taking a chunk from his back. He yanked Barnhart off balance, then head-butted him in the chin.

Both men hit the floor as Izzy sprang from the bed and bolted naked through the doorway and was gone. The men rolled, cursing and kicking and gouging, fighting for the belt. Charlie felt his only immediate chance was to stay close, so close he could smell the biscuits on Barnhart's breath, so that he was not in striking distance of that belt.

They rolled into Izzy's vanity. Its mirror slammed the wall and broke, and everything on the deal top that had been heaped there in the heat of the moment—hair-brush, wallet, daisy-imprinted frock, underpants, pocket Bible, flask—tumbled onto them.

Rearing up above Charlie in the vanity's central well, Barnhart slammed his head into the bottom of the drawer. Charlie punched him in the throat and rolled free, lunged for the bed, reached beneath, grabbed the neck of his banjo and swung it forward, sliding backward as he waved the fat end at Barnhart. He hoped to hold him off just long enough to flee but not actually to have to use it, however satisfying it would be to lay five bleeding welts across the bastard's face.

Barnhart went utterly still at sight of the banjo.

"A musician," he said. He smiled then, for the first time. "Her mama was always partial to musicians."

Charlie had no awareness of movement, of Barnhart doing anything actually to cover the distance. One instant Barnhart was crouched half-beneath the vanity, his daughter's frock draped across one shoulder like a cape, the next he was on top of Charlie with his hands around his neck, slamming the back of his head into the planks, the banjo tossed aside like a toy.

"Fucking banjo players," Barnhart snarled, dragging Charlie across the splintered floor as he choked him, toward the still open door. "Fucking banjo players with their stinking diddling little fingers." He slammed Charlie's head into the floor once more, dazing him, seized Charlie's right hand and fed it into the gap between the door and the wall, just above the bottom hinge, as his other hand reached for the doorknob.

"Jesus, no! Don't!" Charlie screamed, as Barnhart leaned back with all his weight to slam the door . . .

* * *

When asked how he broke his fingers, Charlie liked to tell any number of stories, depending on his mood, some of which were partially true.

"Jump for it!" his buddy hollered from the boxcar door as Charlie ran alongside the speeding-up train, gravel in his shoes cutting his feet with every step. At the last possible moment he reached for the bottom rung and lunged . . .

"It ain't no trouble at all, ma'am, I'm glad to help," Charlie groaned, tottering beneath the weight of the rich old lady's steamer trunk. Without warning, one of the anvils or encyclopedia sets or dead bodies inside shifted and sent him stumbling sideways, toward the head of the boardinghouse stairs. "Oh, hell, look out," he yelled, as he threw himself against the banister to stop his fall . . .

On his first day back on the floor after his daddy was buried, young Charlie misjudged as he grabbed at the plunging bobbin, so that his right hand dropped into the groove just as the next bobbin was coming up . . .

"I got it! I got it!" Charlie yelled, running backward barehanded into the outfield . . .

"Eat this, then, you son of a bitch," Charlie snarled, drawing back his fist . . .

"Mules love apples. Want an apple, little fella? Nice apple . . ."

"Ten cents says this fan can't hurt me!" Charlie said, jabbing at the blades . . .

"Hey," Charlie yelled across the whorehouse parlor. "Watch this . . .!"

* * *

When Charlie finished telling Daner what happened to his fingers, Daner just stared at him, there on the mountain before the cabin. He did not believe a word of it.

The sun would still be up in the flat, but up here the sky had purpled, and the night breeze had kicked up.

Finally Daner turned and walked inside. He walked slowly and judged the porch step before he ascended, and his silhouette in the rectangled lamplight of the doorway was stooped before he eased the door shut behind him, cutting off the light. Charlie heard the strap drawn across, and then the latch.

Inside, his back to the door, Daner stood listening. He heard Charlie cat-stepping closer, then heard a silence that lasted just about long enough for someone to peer through the crack beside the door.

Charlie looked until his eyes hurt, but clearly Daner was determined, as long as Charlie stood there, to remain out of sight, indeed motionless, indeed holding his breath. Charlie realized he was holding his breath, too.

Yet Charlie still held the banjo, and the banjo was what he had come for. Wasn't it?

Charlie Poole sighed, loudly enough to be heard inside. He stomped across the porch like a buckdancer, and into the woods. He was suddenly in a hurry. If he was at the mill by seven in the morning, sober and shaven and in time for a full day's work, they'd probably hire him back again. They always had. After all, people still needed clothes. He had no lantern, and had to stumble his way down the slope, though he fancied that the banjo caught some of the moonlight and shone before him, as if the strings were made of silver and the frets were cut stones, like bright eyes, like stars.