

Introduction: Resurrection

Loosely affixed to the blue-tinged monotony of the Shenandoah ridge sat a pinnacle of rocks, distinct from the rest, seemingly pushing to get away. The locals called this peak Old Rag. As Matt stared at it wide-eyed on this darkest of nights, he could feel its anger, and he swore that its rocks glowed a haunting orange, trying to tell him something of great urgency.

"Matt!" shouted his father, yanking his sixteen-year-old son's attention away from a trance. "Have you heard anything I been saying?"

"Yea, I heard," Matt snidely uttered. "I just don't want to listen." His eyes again snuck up to the peak, but his father quickly pulled him back.

"Look at me, Matt. All I want is what's best for us. We been living here as long as you been alive, even longer. Your mother died having you, and that left us alone, just me and you and this here land. We found a life here. It's been good to us. I was nothing before I found this place."

Matt interrupted him. "You didn't find this place," he snarled, with eyes brewing with indignation. "Someone give it to you, out of pure charity. You couldn't hold a job up North. You even tried the army and failed that too. Then a friend in your New York army group who hearkened from Virginia, he knowed of this place, and he helped you get it and get it going. I know the story, Dad, and I ain't in any mood to hear it again. It don't make what you are doing right. That's all I know."

Matt glanced up one more time, but the night's intense blackness engulfed the rocks of his mountain. They were gone, and Matt stood alone. That reality only accentuated his fury, as he clenched his fists and fought off angry thoughts.

"I want my brothers," he shouted sharply, his piercing voice slicing through the night's silence. "It's my job to protect them. And I want my mamma back!"

"She's dead, Matt, dead from delivering you."

"No!" Matt shoved his father, breathing deeply. "The one who gave birth to me, I never know her. She ain't nothing to me. You know who I mean. Don't be like the rest of them who live here and pretend that Momma was nothing more than some slave to you. My real mother raised me and my brothers. She was your wife. She was everything to us, smart as a whip, kind as can be. She was my momma. What you did today was disgusting. Don't pretend she don't exist. You don't get a right to do that!"

"Matt," the man sighed after a brief silence, "you got to understand. She is black. It ain't so simple down here. There are rules, and we broke proper every one of them. But now, we got no choice. Either we leave this place, or we give in to what they say. Your momma, she knows that. This was all her idea. To save her boys. To keep our life. That's the price she wants to pay for her family."

"And what's your price, Dad?" he asked cuttingly. "Seems like you get off scot-free."

Matt felt his indignation dig into his father. The man took a deep breath, and his dreary eyes wilted just that much more. In the moonlight, Matt saw lines and wrinkles on the man's face that aged him well beyond his years. He looked like a broken man.

“My price,” his dad whispered, “it’s more than you can ever know.”

With that Matt’s hands relaxed a bit. He peered at his dad through more sympathetic eyes.

The doctor had come by earlier today with a contingent of townspeople. He always seemed pleasant, the doctor did. Always smiling. The people around him looked up to him with an air of respect. He had been meeting with Matt’s dad a lot these past few months. Matt listened in sometimes, when he could hide just right. He heard what the doctor had to say. The doctor claimed that there were rumors about what was going on in Dad’s house. That Dad’s orchard—which is what this land was, mostly apple and pear trees—was doing just fine, not so good or bad as farms go, just fine enough to allow Dad to make a living. But, said the doctor, if those rumors were true, then this orchard would probably be burned to the ground—not by the doctor of course, but by less-scrupulous people in town. Those were some of the doctor’s words. And lots of talk of politics, of how the North was trying to make life down here harder, about how all Virginians had to hold onto their values more now than ever.

Then this morning the doctor comes back with those townspeople, and before the sun crossed the horizon, Matt saw his momma being led off the farm by a few of them he did not even know, her arms in chains, her face serene and silent, and these people just laughing and chatting like it was just any day to them. His dad was nowhere to be seen.

Matt knew this day was destined to come. His momma told him herself, not but a few days ago. She said it was OK; she was going to another farm down South, just for a while, until things settle down here. “Take care of your father,” she said with a smile that glowed of pure goodness. “He will be a lonely man. And watch out for your brothers. Especially Paul! He has fire in him. He needs a steady hand.”

“You told my brothers you is leaving? What’s they saying about this, Paul and Luke?” Matt asked his mother, lying on her shoulder as she stroked his thick brown hair.

“They understand,” she whispered. “And so too should you. We will all meet again in better times. Your father will make sure of that.”

And then they took her away in chains. Matt cried for hours, so helpless, not even able to say a proper goodbye. His momma smiled all along, breathing a peace that he could not understand. But Old Rag wasn’t smiling. Even then, with just a flicker of sun touching the peak, anger spewed from its burning rocks.

“Then what’s going to happen to my brothers?” Matt asked his father after a long silence. Aside from bright stars above and sparkling candles in the house windows, darkness draped the landscape. Matt could barely make out his father’s silhouette.

“They will have to live in the slave quarters now, of course, and be treated like everyone else,” he said. “At least, we have to make it seem that way, to the folk in the town, to our other slaves here. But Matt,” he said, as though through a smile, “me and you, we are two clever men is what we are. And we are sneaky as catfish. We know the rules, but that don’t mean we got to always follow them all the time. We just got to be careful.”

“Then we can have them in the house with us, talk about stuff like always, play games, be like we always were? Is that what you are saying, Dad?” His eyes opened wide.

“They are my boys, Matt, no less than you are. And I love them as deep as any man loves anyone. I lost the love of my life today, and I ache more than you can ever know.” He paused and seemed to choke on his words. Matt knew his dad was crying, because he pushed out the last words splattered with tears. “I won’t let nothing happen to them or you ever, I promise! I lost too much today! I ain’t losing no more, ever, I promise that, Matt. I promise you with all my heart and soul!”

And at that moment, Matt lost every bit of anger and fear that had suffocated him all day, and he engulfed his father in a deep hug. Tears flowed from both of their eyes as they stood as one beneath the obscured shadow of mountains staring down from above.

Two years from that date, Matt’s father would be dead, the victim of a sickness that all the doctor’s leeches and bloodletting could not cure. Matt knew that a heart so broken as his father’s could never heal. Still, Dad kept true to his word, and the three brothers were stealth enough to fool them all, growing into men together upon the hallowed ground of their orchard, separated from the destructive sameness that defined the world outside of its boundaries.

After Matt took control of the land—with the help of one of his father’s friends from New York, who barreled into town and paid a drunk overseer a good wage to never come back again—the orchard thrived. In fact, it grew so prosperous that it was the envy of Rappahannock County, putting out bounteous quantities of some of the best pears and apples that any man from this hilly land had ever tasted before. There was a secret to that success, one so well guarded that it never trickled beyond the sanctuary that was their farm, one that sat in the heads of three young men whose love of land and of each other propelled this place beyond anything otherwise conceivable.

Matt peered up, under the bright sun, his face and hands splattered with mud. There, beyond the pond that they had engineered and built, stood his brothers, talking about something big and important as they always seemed to be doing, something to make the orchard even better and the space within it livelier and more interesting. And high above that was the rocky peak of Old Rag, serene and gray, relaxed as it pushed itself just a bit farther away from the staid Shenandoah line, its cold water flowing down into their pond and feeding everything around them.