

## HOME BURIAL

By Dale Bailey

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FEBRUARY GRIPPED THE farm like a fist, and the baby would not let her rest. Rachel lay wakeful by her sleeping husband and listened. The baby's cry came to her as a faint protest from the burying ground, patient and mournful as the keen of wind about the clapboard house.

"Breece," she whispered, shaking him gently. "Breece, listen."

Breece mumbled, rolled over, and dragged her into his embrace, but he did not wake. Outside, the wind gusted, rattling the knotted fingers of the skeletal oak that stood by the house and chasing watery moon-cast shadows through the bedroom. The barn door banged. Gray specks of snow spat beyond the pale square of the window.

The wind grew louder, drowning out the baby's racket, and Rachel felt a quick surge of relief that Breece had not awakened. She pulled the rough woolen blanket close against her breasts, still heavy and sore with milk, and admonished herself for imagining things. Breece Casey is a practical man, her mama had told her the week preceding the wedding. He won't tolerate your day-dreaming and nonsense!

That had been almost a year ago. Sighing, Rachel knotted herself about the lingering tenderness between her legs. In the chill of the midnight bedroom, there came to her a series of stark inviolable memories: sweltering summer nights when Breece had lovingly assembled the tiny crib, hardly a real bed at all, and she had sewn the unborn child a tiny flannel night dress; another night, more recent, rank with the doctor's whiskey-stench, the fever vision of his face distorted by a haze of pain and morphine.

Rachel choked back tears. Squirming from beneath the dead weight of Breece's arm, she settled herself more comfortably in the goose-down mattress. Quills pricked her side and back. Every night for two weeks now, the baby's patient mournful wail had pierced through to her from the burying ground. Imagination, she told herself, but tonight she was glad for the clamorous fury of the storm. Wind shrieked through the barren hollows about the house and drove snow against the window-panes with a gravelly spatter.

Presently, Rachel began to drift. Swept gradually into the tidal rhythms of Breece's respiration, she dreamed of a sun-dappled forest clearing, the warm bundle of a breathing child against her breasts, ribbons woven into its fine hair.

A sound woke her. Her heart pounded against her ribs; frigid air needled her

lungs. Breece slept restlessly beside her, his scored knuckles curved beneath his chin, his breath sour. Big downy-looking snowflakes swirled beyond the window. The storm had abated, the wind died down. Rachel held her breath and listened.

Nothing.

And then, just as she began to breathe, there it was again—the shrill cry of the child cutting through the night from the burying ground. Panic knotted Rachel’s throat. She pushed aside the covers and crossed the icy floor to stand in the chill radiance of the window.

Through her faint homely reflection, twisted by the brittle skin of ice that had grown over the glass, Rachel looked out at a world rounded and dimensionless beneath a dingy lid of snow. The oak tree loomed against the moonlit sky like a shaggy grandfather, bearded gray by the storm. Farther away, on a hill that would turn gentle and green come spring, lay the burying ground. Three roughly carved wooden markers and a single wooden cross, knotted about with rawhide strips, leaned like jagged teeth from the frozen earth. The markers indicated the graves of Breece’s folks, dead two decades, and his first wife, Shelley, dead near upon three years now. The cross wasn’t even two weeks old; it marked the spot where Rachel’s child had been buried.

“Rachel?” Breece said, and she turned to see him sitting upright in a tangle of blankets. He watched her alertly.

“Listen,” she said. “Can you hear it?”

She looked back out the window and the sound of the baby came to her with the icy clarity of undiluted pain. Rachel felt as if a knitting needle had been plunged into her heart.

“Hear what?”

Rachel wrapped herself in an embrace and saw that tiny goose bumps had erupted along her forearms. “The baby.”

Breece sighed. She heard the covers shift, his bare feet against the floorboards. “Come to bed now,” he said, appearing in the window as a ghostly reflection. “Ain’t nothing out there.”

“Don’t you hear it?”

“I don’t hear a thing except you talking foolishness.” His hands closed about her arms. “Ain’t nothing to hear.”

“Our baby’s crying, Breece.”

“Baby’s dead, Rachel,” he said gently. “You know that.”

Anger boiled out of some poisoned well within her. “I don’t know that,” she said. “I never saw the baby. You buried him without me ever seeing him. I don’t know that.”

Breece’s rough hand came up to smooth hair from her forehead. “Nothing out there, Rachel. Nothing at all.” He guided her back to the bed.

For a long time Rachel lay awake, staring at the ceiling and listening to the baby cry through the darkness. Very clearly, in her mind’s eye, she could see the tiny flannel night dress, hand-sewn against the cold. “You buried him naked, didn’t you, Breece?” she asked. “You buried him naked and now he’s about to freeze.”

But Breece was already sleeping, and he didn’t answer.

“I’m going to see about hiring a man in Copperhead tomorrow,” Breece said at breakfast. “I’m going to need a fellow come spring.”

The small kitchen was chilly, despite the fire blazing in the stove. Rachel sipped at her coffee before she answered. “You never had to hire anyone before.”

Breece probed at his eggs with his fork. Thick dry yolk clogged the tines. Rachel still hadn’t mastered the technique of getting the whites solid and keeping the yolks runny, the way Breece liked them.

“There’s too much work around the place,” he said. “It ain’t getting any easier, old as I am.”

“You ain’t all that old.”

Breece grunted as if to say, sixteen years older than you, Rachel. But all he said aloud was, “Maybe I’ll just hire a boy. I could use an extra hand.”

Unbidden, an image flashed through Rachel’s mind: the cross Breece had driven into the cold earth over the child’s grave. She shook her head, gathered up her dishes, and moved to the wash basin. The water was pleasantly warm from the stove, and she liked the clean biting smell of the soap. She imagined a fresh-bathed baby gift might smell that way.

A few minutes passed, and Rachel had begun to hope that Breece wouldn’t say anything more when he spoke again. “How you feeling?” he asked.

A plate slipped out of her hand, bobbed to the surface without breaking, and Rachel felt tears start up behind her eyes. “Just fine, Breece.”

“Turn around here and look at me.”

Rachel dipped the plate into the rinse water, and turned to face him.

Breece gestured vaguely with his fork. “You know what I mean. How do you feel down there?”

Rachel stared at the floor. “Well, I don’t know, Breece.”

“Are you hurting any?”

“A little, I guess.”

Breece shook his head. “You’ll be all right soon,” he said gruffly, and a minute later she heard his fork clatter to his plate and the door bang shut behind him.

An immense silence followed. For a moment, Rachel imagined she could hear the faint ghostly sound of a baby crying, and then she shook her head again.

Imagination.

Still, she could not get the matter out of her head. Breece was over forty now, anxious for a child. Last July, when he had taken her down to Sauls Run for the fireworks, he had almost said as much. You can’t take care of that farm when I’m gone, he had said then. Skyrockets exploded into radiant showers behind him, and Rachel felt sweep through her a wave of sympathy for all that beauty. Breece glanced shyly at her belly, which had barely begun to swell, and when he met her eyes, she saw that his face was all a shine with fierce joy. Our boy, he had said, he’ll take care of it.

And that was the problem, Rachel thought, as she slid the last dish into the cupboard. For Breece, a child was just a means to an end; he wouldn’t care that the next child would not be the same as the first. As long as it was a boy, everything would be fine as far as Breece was concerned, and already he was after her to try again.

RACHEL WAS heating a pot of stew for dinner when the stranger arrived. When the knock sounded at the front door, Breece set aside the newspaper he had picked up last week in Copperhead, stood, and went out into the hall. He returned a moment later, followed by a dark-headed man clad in a black linen suit, and a great overcoat that hung to his shiny boots. He clasped a scuffed leather case in one hand, and extended his other to Rachel as he crossed the kitchen. In the instant before her hand was engulfed in his firm grip, Rachel looked up and found herself staring into a

pleasant, clean-shaven face split by a wide mouth.

“Evening, ma’am.”

Rachel tried to speak, but her mouth had gone dry. She cleared her throat and felt a hot flush mount her cheeks. “Evening,” she managed. Flustered, she turned to the stove, and discovered that her spoon had slipped into the stew.

“This here is Rowe Montgomery,” Breece said. He sat down at the table and nodded at Rachel. “My wife.”

Rachel nodded politely, and watched as Montgomery draped his great coat over the back of a chair. “My horse slipped and lamed himself up the valley a ways,” he said. “Your husband said you all could put me up for the evening.”

“Pleased to have you,” Rachel said.

“I thought I’d run him down Copperhead come morning, since I was going anyway.” Breece looked at Montgomery. “You can catch a train there, or buy yourself another horse.”

Rachel placed bowls around the table, setting the chipped one at her own place and turning it to hide the flaw. She served the stew with cool milk from the cellar and fresh-baked bread. Breece devoured his food as though he was afraid someone would take it away from him. Rachel ate with embarrassed delicacy, keeping a covert watch over Montgomery.

“Good stew,” Montgomery remarked at one point, and once again Rachel felt a hot flush mount her cheeks. She nodded, and stared at the table. She could feel Breece eyeing her.

After the meal, Breece lifted his rifle from the pegs above the door and shrugged into his old coat.

“Where are you off to?” Rachel asked.

“We got to see about Mr. Montgomery’s horse.”

“You’re not aiming to kill it, are you?”

“I don’t know,” Breece said. He looked at Montgomery. “He’s all lamed up, ain’t he?”

Montgomery nodded, and Breece turned to meet Rachel’s gaze. His eyes gleamed in the light from the stove, and all at once, as if her mama was standing right there and had spoken into her ear, Rachel again heard the words she had last night

remembered: Breece Casey is a practical man.

“We better see to that horse,” Breece said to Montgomery, and then they were gone.

“What is it that you do for a living, Mr. Montgomery?” Rachel asked when they returned. She looked up from her knitting, and gazed at the two men by the stove. Breece slouched in a kitchen chair and whittled, his thin face shadowed with gray stubble, his eyes hooded. Montgomery sat with his back straight and his white sleeves rolled back over forearms thick with dark corkscrews of hair. He had remarkable posture, Rachel thought.

“I’m a salesman, Mrs. Casey.”

Breece paused in his whittling. “What is it you sell?”

“Books. I sell the Fellowship House Bible by subscription.” Montgomery met Rachel’s eyes and smiled.

Rachel glanced away. She saw that she had dropped a stitch and she set aside the knitting in frustration. “I would imagine most everybody owned a Bible already.”

“Yes, ma’am, that’s a fact.” Montgomery laced his fingers behind his head and stared through the grate at the fire. Flames danced and licked at the hollows of his face.

“What makes your Bibles so special that people would want to buy them?” Rachel asked.

“I sure am glad you asked that, ma’am.” Montgomery stood, retrieved his leather case, and returned to his seat. “All I have here are samples,” he said, extracting a bundle of cardboard sheets from the case, “but it would be a real pleasure to put you folks down for one, seeing as you’ve been so kind and all.”

Breece straightened up in his chair a little and put aside his whittling.

“Now the missus asked what it is that makes our Bible so special,” Rowe Montgomery said, “and that’s a good place to start.” He flipped over the first of the cardboard sheets, and Rachel saw that a printed page had been pasted there.

“The first thing that makes our Bible different, is that the words of our Lord Jesus Christ—blessed be his name—are printed in red ink. That way you can see them real easy.”

Breece leaned forward to study the cardboard sheet. Montgomery indicated the red print, and Rachel saw that his cuticles formed perfect little half-moons

beneath his nails.

Breece said, “I reckon it reads the same no matter what color the ink is,” and a stiff embarrassed silence followed. Rachel sighed and looked away, painfully aware of the little kitchen’s shabbiness. The floorboards had long since faded to a dingy gray and it seemed to her that the whole room stank of soot and bacon grease. They didn’t even have a proper fireplace, just that old iron cook stove. All at once it occurred to her to wonder why she had ever married Breece, and just as suddenly a sharp voice that sounded suspiciously like that of her mama spoke up. You didn’t really have a choice, did you Rachel. said the nasty little voice. Twenty-five years old, and not a single proposal!

Rachel glanced around the rundown kitchen again and felt a wave of sorrow ebb through her. No place for a little girl, anyway, she thought, and grief twisted through her guts. For a little while, in the excitement of having a real live visitor, she had managed to forget it.

“Well, now, Mr. Casey,” Montgomery said, “you’re right about that -the words read just the same. But they stand out, you see, the way the words of our Lord Jesus ought to.”

Breece nodded, and Rachel saw that he had retreated into his customary reticence.

“But that’s not all that makes the Fellowship House Bible unique,” Montgomery continued.

“What else is there?” Rachel asked.

“Pictures,” said Rowe Montgomery. “The Fellowship House Bible has the finest illustrations of any such volume on the market, ma’am. There are seventy illustrations total — one for every book, and two for each of the gospels. Each one is guaranteed to be historically accurate.”

“Can I see them?” Rachel asked.

Montgomery passed the sheaf of cardboard sheets to her, and Rachel began to page through them. From the dark mouth of a tomb, a man wrapped in dirty rags staggered toward the figure of a mystically glowing Christ, who stood with his head thrown back and his arms lifted to the heavens. The caption below the picture read: Lazarus came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes.

Rachel pursed her lips and flipped the next sheet of cardboard. Vertigo tore through her. Mounted soldiers exploded from the painting, and a slaughter-house stench of blood and sweat flooded the room. As the horsemen swept past, Rachel flattened herself against a stone wall and clutched her screaming baby to her breasts.

Thick dust clogged her lungs. The thunder of hooves and the panic-stricken shrieks of women and children choked the dense air. Sobbing, Rachel turned to flee, but she hadn't gone more than a few steps before a horseman materialized out of the dust and snatched the infant from her arms.

“No!” Rachel screamed.

She threw herself against the rearing stallion, but already she was too late. With a look of withering disdain, the horseman drew back the gorestained blade of his knife, plunged it once again into the child's breast, and—

Rachel gasped.

She felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room, as if she could not draw breath. Then Herod was exceeding wrath, the caption read, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem. Her fingers loosened. The cardboard sheets slid to the floor in a heap, and Rachel felt tears start down her cheeks. A gentle touch caressed her jaw, and for a moment she allowed herself to hope that Rowe Montgomery had crossed the room to comfort her, but when she looked up, it was, of course, only Breece.

Upstairs, as Rachel changed into her gown, she could not help but run a finger over the tiny flannel night dress she had placed in the cedar-scented drawer where she kept her underthings. Shadows hovered in the flickering light, and for a moment Rachel could believe that dark horsemen tamed beyond the oil-lamp's dim pool of radiance. Distant as the trickle of water in an underground creek-bed, she heard the muffled thunder of hooves. Somewhere far away, a woman wept, and the screams of dying children filled the air.

Rachel shivered, folded the small night dress, and shut the drawer. She blew out the bedside lamp and eased herself into the corona of Breece's animal heat.

Another storm had closed in. Gray snow, silent as a midnight intruder, spun outside the window. The wind was hushed, the quiet so encompassing that it seemed to her that the snow had smothered every noise in the world.

Outside, the baby began to cry.

Rachel stiffened beside her husband. Imagination, she thought, and she closed her eyes, but words leapt into the void of thought: Lazarus came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes.

Rachel remembered the long hours of labor. Agony like a dagger twisted in her guts, sweat stood on her brow as she fought to expel the child

— the girl, the baby girl



— from her body.

And then, suddenly, the pain was gone. It was as if she had fallen into a well. A dim circle of awareness receded above her until at last it disappeared and she plunged, not sleeping but not awake, into the subterranean depths of unconsciousness. When next she became aware, the pain, the sweat-soiled bedclothes, and the desire, the reflexive need, to thrust the child from her body— all these were gone. A faraway circle of radiance, shiny as a new coin, gradually took shape above her; centered in that circle, she saw the doctor's grim visage. She could smell his familiar whiskey stink. Somehow, she had known that he was packing his instruments for the ride to Copperhead, known, too, that in the vast reach of darkness between the two glimpses of light, she had given birth to a child.

She felt a dull pinch in her upper arm, and darkness edged in around her.

When it once again retreated, Breece stood before her. The baby was born dead, he had said.

And perhaps that was true. Except...

Except that she could hear it during the long hours of darkness when sleep would not come. She could hear it, the patient mournful cry of a child in the night. With astonishing clarity, that strange vision loomed up before her: the horseman rearing up and away from her as he drove the gore-stained knife into her baby's stomach.

Why couldn't the baby rest?

A terrible suspicion blossomed within her.

AFTER BREAKFAST, Breece headed out to the barn to hitch up the wagon for the ride into Copperhead. Rachel watched him tramp away through the ice-sheathed lens of the kitchen window. She turned back to her dishes. Exhaustion stitched her eyelids, and sour nausea coiled through her guts. The baby had not let up last night. Rachel had not slept.

Behind her, Rowe Montgomery cleared his throat. Rachel turned, wiping her hands on a dish towel. Montgomery stood by the kitchen table, muffled in his boots and great coat.

"I'm sorry about last night, Mrs. Casey," he said. "I didn't know those pictures would upset you."

Rachel set the towel aside. "There ain't no way you could have known. You

oughtn't feel responsible.”

“I'm mighty sorry about your loss.” He paused as if he expected Rachel to speak. When she did not, he went on. “I went ahead and put you down for one of the Bibles —”

“Breece and I, we can't afford no fancy books.”

“Think of it as a gift,” he said. He glanced at the case by his feet. “It's just my way of saying thanks for all you folks done for me. It's my way of saying I'm sorry.”

Rachel smiled. Warmth radiated from the core of her being. “Thank you, Mr. Montgomery, that's right nice.” She glanced out the window and saw Breece emerge from the barn, leading the horse and wagon. “Breece is coming,” she said. “He'll be anxious to get started.”

Montgomery nodded and picked up his ease.

“Goodbye, Mr. Montgomery,” Rachel said. She turned back to her washing.

A moment passed. “Mrs. Casey?”

“Yes?”

“I thought I heard something last night.”

Rachel's heart quickened. She felt suspended in the moment, trapped, like an insect she had once seen preserved in a square of amber. She tried to speak, but her throat had rusted closed like an old pipe, and the moment stretched, an elastic interval in which it seemed all time and movement had ceased except for the blood pounding through her brain. At last she managed to work up enough spit to say, “What did you think you heard?” — and time lurched forward again.

She dipped a plate into the soapy water and began to scrub dried egg yolk away. The kitchen smelled of coffee and wood smoke. Breece's whip snapped as he urged the horse through the snow toward the house.

“Sounded like a baby,” said Rowe Montgomery.

The plate slipped from her soapy fingers and smashed on the edge of the metal tub. The sound was very loud in the small room. Clay shards skimmed across the floor.

“Probably just a bobcat,” Rachel said. “They sound like a child sometimes.” She turned to look at him.

He had not moved. He held the leather case in one hand. His face formed a pale smear beyond the dark folds of his upturned collar. He smiled suddenly, and when he spoke his voice boomed with forced gaiety. “Of course,” he said. “Probably just a bobcat. I spend so much time on the road, you know. My imagination, it gets carried away with me.”

Still smiling, he started to move toward the door.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Rachel asked.

Montgomery stopped and fixed her with his clear gaze. “Well, ma’am, I don’t rightly know.”

Rachel heard the wagon rattle to a halt outside. The horse whickered and stamped. Breeee yelled Montgomery’s name.

“I reckon you ought to go,” Rachel said.

Rowe Montgomery stepped to the door, paused with his hand on the latch, and looked back at her. “My grandma, now, she used to say that spirits lingered, if you hadn’t done them right.” He stared at Rachel, but she had the feeling that he did not see her. She thought he had the look of a man staring way off into the past, or into himself, and she felt as if she stood at the verge of some vast mystery that with his next words would be revealed.

Outside, Breece hollered again, his voice impatient.

Montgomery shook his head and smiled. “That’s just an old wives tale,” he said. “As for myself, I don’t know what to believe.” He dipped his head, and opened the door.

The frigid breath of February illuminated the small kitchen. Rachel caught a glimpse of the wagon and the snow-covered yard beyond, and then the door closed with a bang and Rowe Montgomery was gone.

Rachel had not been alone for more than an hour when the crying began. She tightened her lips and resolved to ignore it. Idle hands are devil’s tools! her mama had frequently told her, and remembering that, Rachel swept through the house in a virtual frenzy, as if, in the mind-deadening industry of scoured floors and straightened cupboards, she could somehow submerge the patient clamor of the child.

And then, without even an awareness of how she had come to be there, Rachel found herself in the bedroom. She was sitting on the bed with the baby’s tiny night dress cradled in her hands. The complaint of the buried child — conspicuous

as a single dark thread woven through a swatch of shining white — pierced all through the stillness of the abandoned house. Tears carved icy runnels through her flesh. There fell over her the shadow of that awful suspicion which had last night taken root in the soil of her heart.

This was what she most feared, most believed:

Breece Casey had killed her baby daughter.

Even as she allowed this insight to frame itself in her mind, she told herself that it was not true, that it could not be true. And yet she could not help but believe it.

For Breece Casey was a practical man. Her mama had told her that, and if Rachel had learned anything in the last year, it was the truth of that statement. Breece Casey was a practical man.

His was the kind of practicality that hesitated not for one moment to shoot a lamed horse, his the kind of practicality that sought a spinster for a wife — not for love and certainly not for beauty, but for the simple peasant strength of her large-boned body and the inescapable utility of her wide-slung hips, through which might issue ruddy strong-limbed heirs, their tiny fists already clenched in anticipation of the long labors that awaited them. And when those wide hips delivered forth not the first of those ruddy-faced little boys, but a pink and screaming baby gift — what then; His was the kind of practicality that would not hesitate to place a pillow over that child's face and hold it there until her screaming stopped.

Such things were not uncommon, Rachel knew, and it would have been a simple matter to buy the doctor's silence. An occasional bottle of whiskey would have done it — infinitely cheaper than the cost of raising a daughter.

Rachel Casey, married for eleven interminable months, stood and folded the little night-dress against her breasts.

Spirits linger, if you haven't done them right, Rowe Montgomery had said, and all at once Rachel saw what had to be done.

For Breece Casey's was the kind of practicality that would bury a little gift naked to save his wife the labor of sewing a new night dress when the next child —

— a boy, a little boy —

— was born, and Rachel could not allow it.

Rachel drove the spade into the frozen earth with all her weight; the muscles in her shoulders and arms tensed with the effort. Heavy flakes of snow, gray with the

pollution of the coal mines down Copperhead, drifted through her field of vision. With every shovelful of earth, the child's crying ratcheted up a notch or two.

Rachel emptied the spade onto the mound of dirt by the grave, wiped perspiration from her forehead with cold-numbered fingers, and reached once again into the pocket of Breece's woolen work coat. The flannel night-dress was still there. She paused to catch her breath, propping her weight against the smooth haft of the shovel.

A low-slung leaden sky brooded over the mountains. To her left, white smoke curled from the ramshackle chimney of the farmhouse, and for a single bitterly amused instant, she wondered why she had ever found the kitchen chilly. Then, with a glance toward the stark tree-lined ridges that rose in steep ranks to her right, she got back to work.

The blade clanged as it smashed against the wooden coffin. The clamorous bellow of the child grew still louder.

She shook her head to dislodge tears before they froze to her cheeks, and began to dig with renewed vigor. Before twenty minutes passed she had widened the hole sufficiently to scramble down, grasp the tiny coffin by the burlap handles at either end, and wrestle it from the ground. The crying was very loud now. She saw that the box was not a proper coffin at all — merely a big loose-boarded shipping crate from the commissary down Copperhead and a swift arrow of hatred for Breece lodged within her.

Rachel collapsed beside the coffin. The empty grave gaped like an open gate into some undiscovered country. She fought off a bout of hysterical laughter. The baby's noise had evolved into a fortress of sound, walling her away from even the most immediate perceptions— the darkening sky as the dull copper blur of the sun inched below the high western ridges, the knife-edged gust of the wind as it poured out of the high passes into the bleak bowl of Breece Casey's farm, her own fingers, curled into frozen talons.

None of this mattered. None of it.

Rachel flung back the wooden lid. Rusty hinges squealed; the lid shuddered against the mounded soil.

Rachel was shocked to see that the child had been wrapped in a thick woolen blanket. Tiny fingers curled beneath its chin, and its face wrinkled in an expression of boundless noisy energy. For the briefest possible instant, Rachel believed the child alive; then she saw that it had merely been preserved by the icy weather. She lifted the baby with trembling fingers and clasped it to her chest. Cold, so cold. That terrific bawling complaint continued to pour from its frozen lungs. Her heart pounding she fumbled beneath the blanket to check.

A boy, she thought, a boy, it's a boy, it's a

“Rachel?”

Blood hammered through her veins. Clasp ing the baby against her breasts, she stumbled to her feet and wheeled around to face the house. A figure emerged from the swirling snow. Rachel staggered back, believing that a grinning horseman loomed out of the storm before her, his knife arm drawn back to strike the fatal blow. Then, as quickly as it had possessed her, the illusion passed. A man on foot walked toward her, his head bowed against the intensifying storm.

Breece, she thought. Breece.

Rachel clutched the tiny corpse to herself. The baby shrieked.

“You murderer!” she screamed. Cradling the child with one hand, she drew back the other, frozen into a twisted talon, to batter Breece away. “Son of a bitch! Murderer!”

Breece caught her arm even as it swung toward him. Frost timed the whiskers around his lips. His eyes flashed out at her in a way she had not seen since that long-ago July 4th, shiny with strong emotion, grief and fear and maybe

—maybe love.

Breece Casey is a practical man, hissed that insistent voice.

“No! You’ve got it wrong, all wrong!”

“Then how? How?”

“It was an accident,” he whispered hoarsely. “The doctor, that goddamned drunken doctor.”

Rachel stumbled away and went to her knees. She felt as if the earth had abruptly shifted on its axis, and for a single vertiginous instant, she thought she might be sick. Snow soaked the fabric of her skirt. When she lifted her head to look at Breece, hair whipped about her face. His eyes had filled with tears. Rachel saw then how it must have been for him—the guilt and anger, the burden of a grief that surpassed his meager store of words. Most of all, the knowledge he had tried to save her: the baby could have lived. All at once, there passed before her the memory of that distant July—skyrockets raining down glory all about them; Breece’s face, aglow with fierce joy. An incandescent blaze of feeling brighter than anything she had known illuminated her, and her callow fantasies of Rowe Montgomery ignited like a heap of cardboard images.

“Help me,” Rachel said. “Help me dress him.”

She fumbled the tiny night dress from her pocket, and Breece helped her tug it around the baby’s stiffened limbs. The wailing began to die away, to stutter off into his coughs and gasps, and finally silence. Rachel held the child against her for a moment, pressed her lips to its icy flesh, and placed it into the wooden crate. She tucked the blanket in tight around it, and together, they lowered the crate into the earth.

“Go, now,” Breece said, “you go on. I’ll finish here.”

Rachel hesitated, hearing in her mind the baby’s terrible draining cry. But that was over now; it was time to trust. Clutching the woolen coat close, Rachel turned and walked downhill to the house. She heard the rasp of the shovel, the rattle of dirt against the coffin, but after a few more steps even those sounds faded. She walked on through a deep easy silence that seemed to fill up the world.

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Dale Bailey is another F&FS discovery who is doing quite well for himself. In addition to his publications in this magazine, he has sold stories to *Amazing Stories*, and *The Best From F&SF* (which appeared in October from St. Martin’s Press). About the story, Dale writes, “‘Home Burial’ is a story that grew out of my interest in the history of West Virginia, where I grew up. . . The story is loosely based on a similar incident that my father recalls hearing my grandmother relate. The present version has been much altered and elaborated, and also owes a debt to the Robert Frost poem of the same name.”