

Of Beechen Green, and Shadows Numberless by Elaine Corvidae

Cover Art by [Linnea Sinclair](#)

author of [Tyrant Moon](#)

Daniel awoke to the harsh buzz of an alarm clock that had existed long before the word ? digital? became associated with such things. The window by his bed betrayed no hint of dawn, but the moon was clear and bright as it rode low over the towering oak trees that surrounded the old farmhouse. It was May, so the window was open-air conditioning hadn? t been invented when the house was built, and money had never been available since for such frivolities. The cool air brought him the scent of dew, damp earth, and growing things, and awoke him far more surely than the strongest cup of coffee ever brewed.

The floorboards creaked under his feet as he walked to the single bathroom. He bathed quickly in the claw-footed tub, and was still running a comb through his shoulder-length auburn hair as he hurried down to the kitchen. The growl of Jonathan? s alarm sounded faintly from upstairs, and a moment later the pipes in the kitchen walls started clanking as water ran through them.

The pancakes and cereal were ready by the time Jonathan tromped down the stairs, his book bag slung over one shoulder and a surly look on his face. ? You? d better hurry before you miss the bus,? Daniel advised and was rewarded with a silent glare.

Was I that way when I was his age? Daniel wondered, as if there was some great gulf in between. In reality, only four years separated him from Jonathan? s sixteen.

Four years, and a hell of a lot of pain.

Jonathan disappeared out into the predawn gloom-it was an hour-and-half bus ride each way to school, so he had to be at the end of their long driveway no later than six-thirty. Daniel washed the cereal bowl and syrup-crusting plates in the sink; a dishwasher was something else the old farmhouse lacked, although he dreamed of getting one someday. When he was done, he fixed a bowl of hot oatmeal and carried it upstairs to Virginia.

She lay on the bed that had once belonged to their parents, and their grandparents before that, and their great-grandparents before that. Although the room echoed with their absence, it had been the only one big enough to house all the equipment that the doctors had sent home with her once she finally got out of the hospital.

Virginia looked like a doll that had been broken then abandoned in the middle of the big bed. The arms lying on the coverlets were like sticks, the hands twisted into claws cut short where the doctors had amputated fingertips burned down to the bone. Even in the dim light of the bedroom, her scarred skin looked shiny and plastic.

There had been three of them in the car that day: Virginia and their parents. Everyone said she'd been the lucky one.

"Good morning!" Daniel said with what he hoped was a cheerful smile. After first checking her catheter and the IV drip, he sat on the folding chair by the bed and carefully held up the first spoonful of oatmeal to Virginia's lipless mouth.

"I heard the door slam a little while ago," she said once she had eaten the meager amount that was all she wanted anymore. Her voice was breathy and cracked, her throat and lungs scarred from inhaling the super-heated air of the burning car.

Daniel shrugged. "Jonathan wasn't happy this morning. I don't know why. It seems like I don't know anything about him, anymore."

"It isn't you," she said unexpectedly. When he looked up at her in surprise, she managed to move one arm enough to pat his hand with the twisted remains of her own. "It's hard for him, Daniel. With Mama and Daddy gone, and with me like this—it's hard. And when you're sixteen, you don't think that it might be hard on other people, too?"

Daniel's fingers tightened around the bowl. "I'm doing my best."

"I know that."

"Two more years from now and he'll be off to college. I'll send him down to Charlotte, or over to Raleigh, or something. Maybe getting away from here will help."

"He'll come back. We McCoicks always do."

Daniel managed to smile. He'd been at college himself when the accident had taken their parents and left him with a farm and two siblings to take care of. But the whole time he'd been gone, he'd felt the land calling him home.

As he stood up and got ready to go downstairs, Virginia's breathy little voice came from the center of the great bed. "I might be strong enough today."

He paused and looked back at her, but her eyes were closed, as if in sleep. Silently praying that she was right, he took the remains of her breakfast and went out.

The sun was barely in the sky when he headed out to the field. Oaks lined the drive and clustered around the house, their great branches blotting out the sky and pouring pollen into the wind, and he said a good-morning to each of them as he passed on his way to the barn.

His best friend Tyrone, whom he'd hired on to help with the farm, was already waiting for him, tinkering with one of the tractors that hadn't been running well. Tyrone Cauthy was as dark as Daniel was fair, and their daddies had been Freedom Riders together back in the sixties. His family had a farm of their own down the road, but they were able to spare Tyrone to work elsewhere.

"Virginia says she might be strong enough today," Daniel said as they hauled out bags of corn saved from last year's harvest to seed this year's fields.

"You think she is?" Tyrone asked.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Lord, I hope so."

They headed out into the fields. In a few months, the land would be covered with tall, green plants, but for today the good red clay lay exposed and ready. As they worked, Daniel dropped into a trance like his mama had taught him, touching the heart of each little seed and quickening the life within it. "You grow good, now," he told them with a silent breath of magic.

The McCoick farm had always been the envy of their little county in the North Carolina Piedmont, ever since Daniel's great-grandfather had come over from Scotland around the turn of the century. A lot of the earth wizards in those days were immigrating over, then wondering why in hell the maize and tomatoes and potatoes didn't pay attention to them like the crops in the Old World had. Rory McCoick had been no fool though, and had found himself a Lumbee wife to tie his blood to the land right quick.

Ever since then, the corn on their two-hundred acre plot grew tall, no matter what drought or blight beset the rest of the county. When everyone else was in despair over plants that barely got to knee-height because of the lack of rain, the McCoick fields were verdant, the stalks bending over from the weight of the ears on them.

People didn't know what to think. They muttered that Rory, and later his descendants, were witches, or put curses on their neighbors' crops, or the Lord only knew what else. Daniel's grandfather Malcolm in particular had made people talk, mostly because he didn't give a damn what they said about him, and acted like it. "Them crazy McCoicks" became the popular epithet. So far as Daniel knew, it still was.

They stopped for lunch around noon. Daniel was tired-but not so tired as he would be later in the summer, when he had to call up water from deep in the earth to nourish the stout roots of the maturing plants-so they walked back to the house. While Tyrone dug in the fridge for the sandwiches Daniel had put together last night, Daniel went upstairs to check on Virginia.

From her light breathing, he thought she was asleep. But when his shadow fell across her face, she opened up her eyes. They looked like two blue jewels set in the distorted plastic of her melted face.

"You doing okay? Anything you need me to get you?" he asked.

"I had a dream," she said. And then: "I think I'm strong enough today."

An odd feeling of relief and devastation touched him. She was serious. "Can you wait until Jonathan gets home?"

"Sure."

Daniel and Tyrone took their lunch outside to eat under the massive oak trees that sheltered the old house. Daniel tried to sit under a different one every day, so as not to show favor, even though he felt pretty sure they were beyond knowing whether he sat with them or not. But there were ones he preferred, despite his pretense, and today he got to sit under one of those. After a quiet lunch, he settled back amidst the gnarled roots and watched a red-tailed hawk trace a lazy track over the sky. Thinking of the mice and other creatures ready to munch on the seed they'd put out, Daniel wished the hunter good luck.

He drowsed for a while, letting the dreams of the tree soak into him. He saw the time after the war, when the pesticide salesman came around, wanting Grandfather Malcolm to spread that chemical crap on his corn, trying to convince him that it wasn't enough that the plants were doing well already. Malcolm had chased him off the land with a shotgun. When the other farmers around complained, Malcolm had responded by putting up a sign at the end of the drive proclaiming that salesmen of any stripe would be shot on sight. Grandma had been mortified, but no one could change old Malcolm's mind once it was made up.

Daniel roused himself enough to glance at Tyrone, sitting under one of the other oaks with a peaceful air. Maybe the trees were aware, after all, because that provoked the memory of something else they'd seen. Back in the fifties, things started getting real ugly in a lot of places in the south, and North Carolina was no different. Or rather, all the ugly things that had been there all along started making more noise than ever before, because all the rocks they were hiding under started getting overturned.

Malcolm wasn't like Daniel's father. He didn't care one way or another about black folks or civil rights, despite his being half Lumbee. But when the Klan started driving down *his* road late at night, carrying on and making enough damn noise to wake the dead, well, that was something else. No one ever did figure out what happened to those boys-with no trace of them or their car, the police figured they must have all taken off for parts unknown, maybe gone down to Atlanta in search of the kind of good time they couldn't find in rural North Carolina. Maybe some future archaeologist would find them, still sitting in their car, entombed under twenty feet of mud and stone in the middle of the road. Boy, the looks on their faces when the car started sinking had been priceless.

Daniel sat up uncomfortably. He loved Malcolm, but he couldn't imagine himself doing-or approving-of anything so bloodthirsty. Surely there had been some other way; although Malcolm would have pointed out that his way solved a problem once and for all, with no chance of it to come back and bite you on the butt.

Tyrone sat up, stretched, and wiped sweat off his brow. "Time to go back, I guess."

About four-thirty, a plume of red dust marked the passage of the school bus down the road. Daniel and Tyrone stayed in the field for another couple of hours, then went up to the big house. Jonathan was sitting in the living room, watching TV and drinking a Coke.

"Done your homework?" Daniel asked.

Jonathan shrugged, not looking at him. "I guess."

"If your grades slip any more, you won't be able to get a scholarship."

Jonathan shrugged again, to indicate that he didn't care.

Daniel crossed the room and shut off the TV. "No more of that until your grades get better."

"You can't tell me what to do. You're not my father."

It hurt, as it was intended. Daniel sighed and ran a hand through his dusty hair. "No, I'm not," he agreed quietly, painfully aware of the fact. "But I'm all you've got."

Jonathan looked like he wanted to argue, but this wasn't the time for it. "We need to go up and talk to Virginia," Daniel said, cutting him off.

Jonathan's face paled a little. "Why? Is something wrong?"

"Just come on up with me."

"Should I leave?" Tyrone asked, brushing his hands nervously on his overalls.

"No. Just wait here."

They went upstairs. The evening light sent long streamers in between the tree branches outside the room, laying amber bars across the coverlets of the bed. Virginia was awake and waiting for them, and Daniel

saw the truth in the brightness of her eyes.

"I'm strong enough," she said, and for the first time since the accident he heard a note of joy in her ruined voice.

"No!" Jonathan made as if to grab hold of her, then stopped himself, aware of her fragile body. "You can't, Virginia!" Tears started out of his eyes, making tracks in the clay dust on his face.

Daniel put a hand on his brother's shoulder. "She has to."

"No, she doesn't! She just doesn't want to stay with us!"

"I *do* want to stay with you," Virginia said. Her mask-like face remained inexpressive, but tears glittered in her eyes. "But I can't, Jon. I just can't. It hurts too much. If it were you in this bed, I'd want you to go, because I couldn't stand to see you in such pain. Can't you do the same for me?"

Jonathan didn't say anything, only started to cry harder. Fighting back his own tears, telling himself to be strong, Daniel gently lifted Virginia off of her bed. She weighed almost nothing, as if he held a bundle of dried sticks wrapped in a nightgown.

Tyrone was still waiting for them downstairs. "Hey, Virginia," he said when he saw her. Bending over, he gave her a kiss on her forehead. They had dated a little in high school, even though it was still dangerous in these parts for a mixed-race couple to go out in public together.

They all went outside. "Where do you want to go?" Daniel asked.

"By the driveway. By Great-Aunt Wila," she replied, and he heard the eagerness in her voice.

He carried her to her chosen spot, then carefully set her upright, so that her bare feet were on the soil. She breathed deeply, smelling the spring air, the turned earth of the fields, and a smile struggled onto her destroyed face. Withered arms reached up towards the sky, then thickened, growing stronger and browner by the moment. Her nightgown tore asunder, pushed out by bark, and Daniel stepped back as her feet dug deep into the ground, supporting her weight. Higher and higher she reached, her face fading into the swirls and burls of the tree she now was, but her last look was one of peaceful joy.

The oak tree that had been Virginia stood watch over the drive with the other members of their family, shading and protecting the house with her branches. There was a jagged scar down one side, as if she had been struck by lightning, but otherwise she was as beautiful and perfect a tree as Daniel had ever seen. Jonathan broke into great, heaving sobs and flung himself against her trunk, beating at the bark with his fists. But like the others, she was beyond him now, beyond everything except the slow, green dreams of the trees.

Thank you for reading!
Meet the author of this story, [here](#).

Subscribe to Author's Newsletter and/or Comment on the Story

ecorvidae@vnet.	NBI Reader Comm	http://www.nove
email	realname,email	Name

(optional):

Email:

Comment(s) to Author:

Subscribe Me to Author Newsletter

Don't subscribe me, I'm just submitting a comment

newsletterrequest	NBI Newsletter S	http://www.nove
email	email	subscribe to NBI

announcements

email:

[Book Store](#)

[Home](#)

Questions?
publisher@novelbooksinc.com marketing@novelbooksinc.com

Email Webmaster
webmaster@novelbooksinc.com

Copyright (c) 2001-2003, NovelBooks, Inc., All rights reserved.
All images and text are original or have been licensed for use.
Do not copy without permission.

redesign and maintenance by [Lisa Ramaglia](#)