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## SAVED

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### Hershella Smith

The night Stevens Creek overflowed its banks, the Reverend Mack Roy Campbell sought refuge on the graves of his grandparents. Or rather, on the roof of the house that sheltered their graves. It was a house of stone and mortar with a wide-planked poplar door you could have entered, if the lock hadn't rusted tight. Mack's grandfather had built the house when he lost his young wife to polio the year before the vaccine was introduced. He'd built it beside the church he had founded and where Mack himself now preached. If you didn't know, you would think it was just another one of the spring houses that still burrowed into the hills behind every old farmhouse in the county. Except for its location in the graveyard, of course, and the lock, and the names imprinted in a frosting of mortar above the door. Whoever had pressed the letters of the top inscription into the fresh mortar had taken time and care: *Isobel Correll Campbell, Beloved wife and mother.* The birth and death dates written below were much smaller but carved with just as much precision. The patch of mortar into which the bottom inscription had been pushed was newer, smoother, and the words were written in jagged letters that slanted toward the ground: *Robert Mack Campbell*, and beneath the name, a simple 73.

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The evening of the flood, expecting nothing out of the ordinary, Mack went to the church to sweep up after prayer meeting. When he swung back the double doors, a host of abandoned programs, folded and fanned and otherwise mangled, skittered across the floor. His grandfather wouldn't have put up with this from his congregation. Mack leaned against the door frame, watching the papers turn from live to dead things as they settled into stillness. He smiled. His grandfather would probably have preached a sermon about it. The grandson would probably just pick up the programs and say nothing.

Mack shut the doors. Inside, it was musty with the moisture of the falling rain. It had been raining for two days already, water streaming down in layers driven sideways by the wind. In the graveyard beside the church, water puddled in the valleys that marked the oldest graves and ran in muddy trickles down the orange clay mound of the grave they had dug and covered just last week for Pearl Gunter.

Mack cracked each window about an inch to get the air moving. The pages of the Bible lying open on a wooden stand in front of the pulpit ruffled in the cross-wind, and he saw that the pages had parted at a spot marked by a visitor card taken from one of the wooden boxes hanging on the backs of the pews. A marker to someone's favorite passage, he guessed. Probably one of the Psalms. That was the book most people liked the best. The card had been white but its edges were now stained a purplish gray. Grape juice, he realized—their substitute for communion wine. He saw that there was writing on the card, not in the blanks for name and address, but on the back. *Beware of snakes*, it said, and was signed *Frank*.

He didn't know a Frank, didn't think there was a family around here that used that name. A true visitor then. Could have been anybody. He left the church unlocked, like it had always been. Some preachers he knew locked up after every service, but Grandpa had always said, what was the use in having a church if it wasn't open when you needed it? And besides, it meant just one more thing Mack would have to think about before heading for home after the service.

Mack looked to see what the scripture was that the man had marked. What had made him write about snakes? The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden, maybe. No, the card had been stuck in the Bible just past the middle, in the gospel of Luke. Mack saw that someone had underlined verse 13:5. *Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish*.

He began to weave in and out of the pews, picking up the discarded programs. So the stranger had not come into the church for solace but in anger, to point a finger and place blame. The scripture, with its implied threat of hell fire and damnation, wasn't one of his favorites. And then there was the message on the card. *Beware of snakes*. Another warning, Mack assumed the man hadn't literally

meant snakes. Maybe snakes in the grass. The old serpent which deceiveth the whole world, cast out into the earth. Revelations.

Mack stood up fast and looked back toward the open doors. He felt a little shock, even though there was no one there. For the first time since becoming minister of Point Pleasant, he felt a trace of hostility in the air, as if a thief had come into the church and left a scent. He walked quickly up the steps of the platform at the front of the church, past the pulpit, and over to the closet where he stored the cleaning supplies and the extra Bibles and hymnals. He would get his work done and get out of here. He pulled a broom from the back, and a mop and bucket rattled out, knocking over a stack of New Testaments. Damn.

*Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.* O.K., so he wasn't a saint. A curse word slipped out now and then. He restacked the books but left the mop and bucket leaning against the closet door. He should mop the floor too before he left. Maybe he would.

The broom was the new kind, a wedge of plastic bristles, one edge cut at an angle so that the broom would lie perfectly flat as it was being swept across the floor. Grandpa would have approved of this serviceable design. He had been a practical man as well as a spiritual one, a farmer all week, a preacher only on Sundays. Mack started under the window in the front of the church like he always did and worked his way back toward the doors, pushing a growing tide of dried mud and dead flies in front of the broom. As he worked, Mack continued to think about the note and the scripture, thought about the sins he'd committed over the span of his life. Lies, of course, some small, mostly to avoid causing somebody trouble. And some bigger ones. The time he'd told Nancy that a conference he was attending was scheduled to last another day and had then arranged to meet a woman for dinner in the hotel restaurant. Nothing had come of the dinner. They'd flirted, but in the end, he'd nervously paid the check and hurried back to his room alone. He stood looking down at the dirt at his feet. The memory of that night left his stomach hollow and his skin hot with shame. He forced himself to continue to think back again to that time in his marriage ten years ago when he'd found himself restless and not knowing why. Once again, he analyzed what had stopped him that night, guilt or love. Both, he knew, but today

he had a new thought. Maybe he'd just been too scared to try it with another woman. He squatted down to rescue a penny from the pile of dirt. Well, he was just glad he hadn't slipped. Later, when Nancy had finally left him, at least she'd had no grounds for adultery.

At the back of the church, Mack worked the dirt into a pool in front of the doors. He glanced down at the creek that ran beside the church. Man, it was high! It must have risen a foot while he was working. His grandfather had built the church close to the creek even though everybody said it was foolish. And it was true that a hard spring rain had been known to wash down out of the mountains quick as a gunshot. The water pushed trees and trash along its path and loosened the banks so that houses that had been solid as rocks slid lopsided down the hills. But Mack's grandfather had insisted that the narrow bottom that lay in the crook of the creek was the place the Lord had chosen. And Mack was not inclined to doubt his grandfather's guidance from God.

Mack walked out to the edge of the porch and looked into the gray curtain of rain. He scratched the itch beneath his thick beard and smoothed his hand back across his hair. The reincarnation of Elvis, Nancy had said, teasing him when they were dating, around the time he had half-seriously considered starting a band with a couple of old boys he knew from high school.

He held his palm out and let it fill with water. Maybe he should preach on Noah and the great flood on Sunday. He tried to imagine what would have gone through Noah's head somewhere during the tenth or eleventh day of rain. Would he have felt a rising joy as he watched the rain fall, anticipating that he would finally be vindicated in his neighbors' eyes? It must be hard to be thought crazy, to be ridiculed, especially by people you love, when you listen to an inner call. He thought about his Grandpa and all the odd things he'd done throughout his life. He thought about his own decision to become a preacher. He'd been lucky, he guessed. It had just been assumed he'd do what he did.

Mack dragged the dirt over the threshold and gathered it again into a navigable pile, which he steered to the edge of the porch and swept over the side. But the dried mud picked up moisture on its way across the wet wood, and his broom left a reddish brush stroke on the

white paint. He scrubbed the broom through the stain a couple of times, lodging the mud even more solidly in the joints between the boards. Damn, he would have to mop now. And shit, he had cursed again.

He left the broom and walked up the center aisle to the front of the church where the mop stood against the closet door. He picked the bucket up by its bail and looked glumly out the window. The spigot was outside. It was raining so hard, he was tempted to set the bucket out beside the porch and let the rain fill it. *Lazy bones, how long you gonna stand there gawking?* Mack's skin went cold. He turned fast to look behind him. That Frank guy had sure gotten to him good. Grandpa had been dead almost ten years.

When Mack became aware of the sound of water, like a bath tub running over, he spun around to see shallow waves lapping across the threshold of the church. How long had he stood there daydreaming? He ran to the door. It was no longer raining, but muddy creek water was washing across the porch and splashing against the walls. He ran back in. He looked at the water licking the feet of the pews. He looked at the hymnals and the Bibles stored in racks along their backs. How high would the water rise? He looked at the pump organ sitting squat and square on the floor near the pulpit. Would the front platform stay dry? Should he wait to find out? What would Grandpa do?

He listened to the hiss of the water past the porch. If he could get the organ up off the floor, put a pew under each end, maybe it would stay dry. But he couldn't lift it by himself. He looked down. He was now standing in an inch of water. If he waited much longer, he'd have to stay. He could manage a dead-man's float, but that was about as far as he'd gotten with swimming lessons. And if he did stay, for how long? Till the water receded? That might be days. What about food?

There was nothing else to do but leave. He grabbed the Bible from its stand, the mysterious dark message still caught in its pages, and ran out onto the porch. He stuck the Bible under his arm and waded down into water past his knees. There was a strong current, pushing his legs to walk faster. He hadn't expected that. He gripped the porch posts until he got to the corner of the church. He could

see the graveyard now, the gravestones circling his grandparents' grave house like ships in a sea. He thought of words from one of the old hymns. *I was sinking deep in sin, far from a peaceful shore, very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more.*

He moved away from the church building into the space where the driveway had been. For a second he felt gravel under his feet, but the current was much quicker here, and the water propelled him off the driveway into the deep ditch that ran beside it. His head went under and he spluttered and sprawled, unable to regain his footing. The current prodded him into the graveyard, which lay several feet below the little rise where the church sat. Finally, he bounced against a gravestone and stalled. Using the stone as leverage, he propped himself up, drenched and panting but still holding the Bible. Only the very tops of the tallest stones were visible.

The grave house was fifty feet away, the water two feet below its roof. With the current running this fast, it was his best chance now. He mapped out a path, a crooked line moving with the current from one gravestone to the next. That was when he saw the snakes. It seemed as if there were dozens of them. So many that they formed a paisley pattern on the surface of the water, whorls of black against the rusty color of the water. He wasn't inordinately afraid of snakes, had played with them as a kid, even raised one for a while as a pet, but these were water moccasins, more poisonous than rattlers or copperheads, and aggressive. The tail of a passing snake grazed his hip. He hung across the gravestone, trying to stop himself from trembling.

A plea slipped like light into his thoughts. *Grandpa, I need help.* Mack closed his eyes against the snakes and spoke the word again inside his head. *Grandpa.* Then he felt himself fill up with emotion, as if his body were a glass into which someone were pouring a warm heavy liquor. Where had he felt this before? Not as strong, but not different. If forced to name it, he would have said that he felt—a strange word but—treasured. Grandpa? No, he didn't think so.

He raised up, steadying himself with the gravestone, but standing on ground, watching the water curl against the gravestones. He saw no more snakes and wondered how there could have been that many of them all at once. Could they have been from the same nest, washed out in a clump by the flood? He pushed into the water and,

stone by stone, bounced and bobbed his way to the grave house. He stuck the Bible in the back of his pants and tightened his belt. Then, as if mounting a horse, he hopped a few times to gain momentum and landed on his stomach, his body draped over the ridge cap. The rough grain of the shingles on his face and hands felt good and even though his long legs still dangled off the edge of the roof, he was too exhausted to move and lay there for a long time, listening to the water sluice past him. He thought about the flask he used to keep in his back pocket, back before he'd started preaching. A couple of swigs of Wild Turkey would sure taste good about now. At some point he slept, lulled by the constancy of the water.

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He was six years old, lying in bed in the back room of his grandpa's old farmhouse, the week his father died. His bladder was bursting, but he was too scared to walk through the black night to the outhouse, too embarrassed to use the chamber pot. When the urine streamed into the pot, it rang out in the dark like a bell. So he lay still, hoping despite experience that he could hold it until morning, wishing for his mom and the buffer she provided against his grandpa's dark looks, shot from underneath bushy black eyebrows. And then he was lying in a pool of pee, failing once again to discipline himself.

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Water pulling at his hair and pooling in the crotch of his pants woke Mack up. He jerked his legs up and out of the water and scrambled up to perch on the peak of the roof. The water was now lapping against the lower edge of the roof, yet he was unable to think what he should do now, what would happen if he did nothing. He leaned one way and then another, seeking as much comfort as possible, but except for his expanded gut, he was a bony man, and nothing he did seemed to soften the bite of the roof ridge into his hips. He could use the Bible as a cushion, he thought, but hesitated, thinking it not quite right to sit like that on the word of God. He should at least cover it with something. So he pulled off his drenched shirt, wrapped it around the Bible and lowered himself carefully onto the book. And then, for the first time since he'd begun his ordeal, he looked up and around at the wider landscape.



The clouds had pulled back and he could see a chip of moon in the western sky. But below that, nothing but churning creek water. The gravestones were now completely submerged. The creek had become a river that had become the world. Nothing existed beyond it. Mack felt as if he would never know anything else ever again, that this would be the world in which he would grow old, the world in which he would have to learn to survive. The waves that slapped against the shingles seemed alive, not malevolent, but uncompromising. Mack heard nothing but the hissing sound of water seeking level ground, saw nothing but a sheet of water curdled by the hidden shapes of what was now past. Every few minutes a box or a branch would appear, only to be thrust swiftly downstream and out of sight by the force of the feral water.

Inside him, it was the same. Thoughts floated in and out, bumped into one another, formed ideas then broke away, some to get caught in the current and circle round again, others to disappear into the dark.

He wondered what his congregation would think if they saw him, half-naked in the middle of a flooded graveyard. They would think him no more strange than they probably already did, a husband whose wife had left him, a father whose son had been caught speeding and then in possession of marijuana and meth. He was nothing like Grandpa, whose wife had left him only in death, whose son had been the local hero. Grandpa had been a serious man, a principled man, a man who believed in rules and restraint, yet a man of action. He wasn't an emotional man.

But then Mack remembered how Grandpa had talked about his wife, his sweet Issy. He had called her his earthly angel, said she had "hung the moon." Mack wondered what their marriage had been like, really been like. He wondered again why Grandpa had built the grave house. Had he simply wanted to protect in death the body of the woman he was helpless to protect in life? Nancy was still in the house he had built for *her*. Well, he hadn't exactly built it. It was one of those modular homes, the kind you can buy on installments. He wasn't much of a hand with a hammer.

The truth of it was that he wasn't much of a hand with anything. He'd been pretty good on the guitar when he was younger—a lot younger—and used to sing too. Not half-bad, some said; a kind of

latter-day Jimmie Rodgers. But that was a hard life; you couldn't make a living that way.

He rotated carefully around on the Bible to face the moon and looked down at the water. Its level seemed to have stabilized and for the first time he felt something approximating relief. He wrapped his arms around his legs and rested his head on his knees, taking notice of his unique view. The moon was a swirling reflection in the water, and each piece of passing debris became a surprise.

A flotilla of what seemed like a million milk jugs floated by, tethered together with string, bumping and scraping against each other as they rode the current past him. Somebody's recyclables, he thought, unmoored by the rushing water. So many though; no doubt the husband was lazy, putting off taking them to the recycling center, procrastinating. Nancy had joked, what was he waiting for, the second coming? It would take a while, but then she would grow irritated. And he could always tell when she was irritated. Her silence was worse than words, the weight of her disappointment hard to bear.

A soccer ball, scuffed and dirty, rocked past the grave house. He wondered why Danny had never played sports. He never seemed to be interested in anything. Then Mack remembered Nancy showing him a photo album, a four-leaf clover pressed in each sleeve. Danny had collected more than a hundred over one summer—was he eight or nine that year? Such a quiet kid—half the time, Mack never even knew he was in the house, never knew he was in trouble until sometime after he started high school. A phone call from a teacher, then the principal, even other parents. Finally, the arrest.

When Mack had arrived at the jail, Danny had been slumped on the bare springs of the cell's bunk, one long thin leg pulled up against his chest, hair swinging heavy and thick past his face, hiding the bright blue eyes that were always a little shocking amid the mass of dark hair. Mack had wanted to hit his son, pound him back into shape, back into the little boy who had been such a shining light. Instead, Mack hadn't touched his son at all. He had simply said, "Let's go," and waited for Danny to comply. Going home in the car, neither had said a word. Mack could have talked about the power of a life that was an example to others and the importance of restraint and discipline. He

could have used the words he'd heard so often from his grandfather. But what would have been the use of that?

Mack's life had begun to disintegrate around him like a sugar cube doused with hot water, and all he seemed to be able to do was watch. Not long after Danny's arrest, Nancy had asked for the divorce.

A metal lawn chair floated by, its back rising above the water like a sail. It was made in the old-style, itchy strips of plastic fabric woven in a grid, the kind his dad bought to take to the beach. Mack remembered riding into the surf on his father's shoulders, spindly legs clenched around the thick neck. He felt the splash of the waves on his dangling feet. He heard the sound of his own thin screech filling the air. His father had laughed, but tightened his hold on Mack's ankles.

Mack watched the chair until it disappeared and thought of another summer and a road trip out West, sitting in the front seat between his parents, gazing up into stars and trying his best to count the telephone poles as they flew past his head. His dad humming low. Some old Gene Autry song? His mom's eyes were closed, her head against the window. A monstrous shadow loomed beside the dark highway, and he buried his face in his mother's lap. His father's hand covered his whole back as he explained: only the cutout of a cowboy on a steak house sign, lit from below, projected against the clouds.

Mack rearranged himself on his uncomfortable seat. The moon was nearing the horizon and under its faint slanted light, the water was a solid piece of granite, thick enough to walk on. Mack's stomach twisted tight—there was somebody out there! A man, the water up to his chest, leaning against the current and wobbling like a road sign in a windstorm. The man just stood there, looking straight at Mack. And then his arms rose from his sides and stretched out toward Mack, straight and firm above the roaring water, a gesture that suggested beckoning rather than appeal. Mack crouched forward, waving the man toward him, yelling, "Over here! Over here!" If the man could make it to the grave house, he could pull him up. But the man just stood there looking at him, arms raised in invitation, his body shoved about by the strength of the water. Mack rose to his knees, arms stretched out in reply, straining toward the man, not knowing whether he was desperate to help or to be helped. It was a strange reversal of

roles, the man in danger of drowning seeming more capable of saving the one on solid ground.

And then the man disappeared. One moment the man was looking at Mack, and Mack was looking at him, and the next, the man wasn't there. The second Mack no longer saw the man, he knew it hadn't been a real person. The figure he'd seen in the river was one he'd seen a hundred times as a child, a shadow against the hills, hands cupped to his mouth, calling in the cows. It was his grandfather—tall, lanky body bent in a slight stoop, loose old suit jacket flapping around his bony frame in a way that made him look both angular and shapeless. Mack knew the look on the face, too. As impassive as a blank page, but eyes eloquent with the pronouncement that he'd been weighed and found wanting.

Mack dropped back down to his seat on the Bible, his mind numbed, confused. He looked up at the moon, no longer crisp against the black sky but blurred by mist. There was that other moon, years ago, the night his mother dropped him off at Grandpa's, a few nights after his dad had drowned in the boating accident. Mack had slipped out of bed onto the porch steps and started to cry. His grandfather must have heard him because he came out and stood on the edge of the porch. The moon was just coming up, bright and full above the hills, and they both stood watching it get higher and higher in the sky. The night was full of sound, but an owl's cry from the maple beside the porch was so loud Mack jumped. His grandfather stood silent, then said, "No need in being scared, son." He jabbed his head toward the sky. "That man up there's gonna take care of you." Then he took out his tobacco pouch and put a pinch in his jaw and told Mack to go on back to bed. At first, Mack thought Grandpa was talking about his daddy but the next day, he was sure he had only meant the man in the moon.

No need in being scared, Grandpa had said. Was there ever a time when he hadn't been scared? Scared he wouldn't measure up to Grandpa's expectations. Scared his mother wouldn't come back. After his mom left him with Grandpa, she had disappeared, just like his dad. They'd called it a nervous breakdown, and she'd gone to stay somewhere near her sister, and, for the next two years, he had visited only once a month for a few hours. Most of that time they spent not

talking about the husband and father who was no longer there. After that, they'd returned to the house in the suburbs long enough to sell it and move to another city, where he'd learned the ways of his mother's family, four aunts and a crowd of cousins. But he had continued to spend every summer with Grandpa, trying to be good enough, hoping his mother would return in the fall.

Mack looked across the dark water. The moon was completely obscured by trees. He'd even been too scared to learn to swim. Now here he was, marooned on this temporary island.

Then he felt water seeping through the already wet cloth of his pants. The creek was rising again. It had risen so far that only a thin crest of roof no wider than his two hands was still above the water line. It must not have stopped raining yet upstream. He had the irrational thought that it was his fault: he shouldn't have taken his eyes off the water. If it rose another foot, he could probably hang onto the edge of the roof for a while, but he would grow tired, and the water would sweep him into its flow, away from the only solid thing he could see or feel.

There was panic on the other side of his fear. He forced himself to think. How could he stop himself from floating away? A rope—he could tie himself to the grave house with a rope. But he had no rope, of course. He would use his belt! He fumbled with the buckle and tugged again and again at the wet leather. By the time the belt loosened itself in its loops, he was frantic. He stripped the belt out and stretched it to its full length. It was short, too short to be of any use. He snapped it taut, and then again, and again, pulling hard and then harder, his palms growing red, then raw. He hurled the belt into the water where it slithered and then sunk, submerged by the weight of the buckle.

He sat, eyes closed, head bent to his knees. A deep swell of loneliness threatened to overwhelm him. He pivoted on his hips and swung his legs around and back, lowering himself with a groan onto his stomach. He made a cup of his hand and plowed it into the water, diagonally across the current. It moved in a flimsy, jagged line. He tried again, stiffening his hand, pushing harder, faster. He closed his eyes. Up went one arm, then the other. Up, bending, stretching. Down, splashing, pulling. His body rocked back and forth across the

spine of the roof as his arms went up and out and down and back. He turned his face first downstream, then upstream. The rocking of his body became beats in the rhythm of his heart and he began to believe in the possible. He leaned far into the next stroke, a little farther into the next one. Soon the momentum of his body would send him sliding down the roof and under the water but he would keep churning against it until his head broke through again to air. He would breathe in oxygen, breathe out water, drag forward with his arms, kick back with his legs. He would keep on doing that and keep on doing that and this is what he thought he would keep on doing—until he opened his eyes. The water was now at sight level stretching out toward oblivion and the rhythm of his heart faltered. He curled on his stomach along the spine of the roof, shrunk with fear, and he felt lost to everyone he'd ever known. He closed his eyes to the isolation of the water, and against the whirling dark in his head, he saw Nancy's face. Just the flash of an image suspended in black, but solid like flesh, magnified, so close and clear that if the image had stayed he could have examined each freckle, each wrinkle, each pore. Her expression was one he'd seen a thousand times before. Expectant, hopeful, careful.

Would he ever see her again? Even if he survived this night, he might never see her again. A wave of yearning passed through him. He could think of nothing he wanted more than the simple knowledge that each day, every day, no matter what, he would see her face. That would be enough. No—more than enough. It would be an overabundance. To ask for more, to ask for a chance to redeem himself, that would be asking too much.

The moon had disappeared. The water was battering against his thigh and he had to lean upstream to keep his balance. Soon the water would take him, a piece of trash—no, worse, a fraud. He had eaten of the fruit. Been beguiled. Brought forth children. But sorrow, nothing but sorrow. Enmity and sorrow. A flaming sword to the east. You're no preacher. You're nobody, nothing. Writhing upon thy belly shalt thou go.

He dropped his head against the shingles and cried until he was dried to powder and capable of nothing except being dissolved into the water that now covered the world.

Water, against his thigh, no, a weight, nudging, insisting, a limp wet mass, some kind of animal, a possum, dead, pale fur plastered to pale flesh, the son that would have been, what should she do, she asked, he said nothing, did nothing, thought, but too scared, then too late, only what she had to do she said, then cried, he had cried too, his father, leaving, his mother, leaving, his wife, leaving, you were never even here she said, one dead baby, no more she said, that feeling, his father, nobody, nothing.

It was at that moment that a tree, uprooted and already washed bare, was hurled out of the darkness, carried like a weapon by the powerful current. The force of the blow knocked Mack from the grave house and plunged him into the water where a cage of branches captured him and held him under. Trapped in the wet black bones of the tree, he sped down the dark creek away from the grave house. The water turned and tossed them, and Mack fought the tree like his own dark skeleton. He thrashed and scrambled and scraped for air, grabbing a mouthful, going under, fighting like a fiend, coming up, going under. And all this time, an eternity of time, it seemed, his mind had room for only one train of thought. When all was over, who would he be and who would decide.