

**THE WORLD MADE STRAIGHT: A Novel by Ron Rash**  
**Excerpt: Pages 156 - 160**

Leonard raised the cup to his mouth and sipped. A fuss came from the woods, not a gray squirrel's saucy bark but the more insistent chirruping of a smaller red squirrel, what his mother called a boomer. Enough leaves had fallen to see the Smokies, their dark peaks jagging into the blue sky. Crisp weather always made the mountains appear more defined, as if created with scissors and construction paper. *Landscape as destiny.* Leonard had carried that phrase in his head for years, though he could not remember the context or where it came from. But he knew what it meant here, the sense of being closed in, of human limitation. So different from the Midwest, where the possible sprawled bright and endless in every direction. He wondered if people in the Himalayas and Andes were affected similarly. Did they live in the passive voice, as if their lives were not really happening but instead were memories, fixed and immutable? Even die that way, as his Grandfather Shuler had, refusing to go to the doctor when his arm burned with pain and his face grayed to the color of cold ashes. The old man kept working in his tobacco field until the afternoon Leonard's grandmother found him face down between two rows, hoe resolutely clutched in his hand.

A certain comfort in living like that, Leonard believed, the universe's machinery set up to run oblivious to any human tinkering. You could lose your career, your marriage, and your child and accept that it couldn't have been otherwise. You could sell beer to underage kids at an Illinois convenience store to pay child support checks and a farmhouse's yearlong lease. You could return to Madison County and sell pills and pot as well as alcohol. Keep doing it even when the child support checks you sent weren't being cashed. If a kid you'd sold to slammed into a tree or telephone pole, it wasn't your fault. The kid would have gotten the beer or drugs from someone else.

Inside the trailer, Travis stirred. In a few moments Leonard heard the boy's feet pad toward the bathroom, then the sound of the shower. It was Saturday, and Travis didn't have to work until afternoon. Leonard calculated the time in Australia. Emily would probably be in bed by now, maybe listening to the radio or reading, maybe already asleep. His last three letters had come back with NO FORWARDING ADDRESS stamped across them. Sent into a void, same as the phone calls he couldn't stop making on nights he drank too much.

The sun continued its slow haul over the eastern mountains. For a few minutes Leonard watched light slide across the pasture, a wide bright wave that sparked the frosted grass. He'd always liked this time of year, the world seeming to shed its old skin the way a snake did, everything original and vivid, stronger pulsed. Not only what your eyes saw but also the clang of a cowbell, the smell of wood smoke, the cold-iron feel of a cattle gate. *Landscape as destiny, but beauty in that landscape as well.*

When Leonard's father died, his mother had sold the farm and gone to live with Leonard's sister in south Florida. She'd never gotten used to the heat and congestion in a place where nothing but concrete and brick rose around her, the only foliage palmettos his mother claimed were more like stunted telephone poles than real trees. She'd quit eating, become listless, and died after six months. Died of homesickness, Leonard believed, though he knew that could be mere sentimentality on his part. Even in the mountains, his mother had endured what she called "dark spells." She'd stayed in bed for

days at a time, left the bedroom only to whip Leonard and his sister for playing too loudly. She'd given him more than a sense of wonder. Those dark spells had been her legacy as well.

He went inside and lifted Handel's *Messiah* from his record crate and pulled the first disk from its cardboard sleeve. He set it on the turntable and poured himself a second cup of coffee.

"Damn, Leonard," Travis said when he came into the front room. "You need to get some albums by someone who's still alive."

Travis poured his cereal and sat down with Leonard at the kitchen table.

"How'd you start listening to that stuff anyway?" Travis asked. "You sure didn't hear it on a radio or jukebox."

"My Music Appreciation professor in college," Leonard said, pausing to sip his coffee. "He'd lost a leg and half a hand during D-Day. I figured if a man who'd been through World War Two found classical music important I should at least give it a chance."

"Did he talk in class about what happened during the war?"

"No," Leonard said, "at least not directly."

Travis ate his cereal as Leonard listened to "For Unto Us a Child Is Born," the choral voices tentative as though afraid to speak this truth—God come to the world as child. These uncertain voices were the direct opposite of the bombast at the symphony's conclusion. That was the wonder of it, Leonard knew, the balance of the thing, everything countered, not just balanced but *reconciled* as the tenor voices resonated below the ethereal sopranos. Even the words proclaimed an order, *the crookedness of the world made straight*. It was, Leonard recognized, such a magnificent order as to demand devotion, the same kind of devotion his mother had shown as she embraced the world from her porch steps.

In the last class meeting they had listened to the overture of the *Messiah*. Professor Heddon sat in the corner and raised his mangled right hand as the music began. Three fingers and half a palm slowly waved back and forth, a calm stroking motion, as if the music were something to be coaxed from the vinyl. When the record ended Professor Heddon stood before the class and said his final words, holding his right hand up, what remained of his palm open as though to absolve them. There is beauty in this world, he told them, more beauty than any of us can fathom, and we must not ever forget this.