

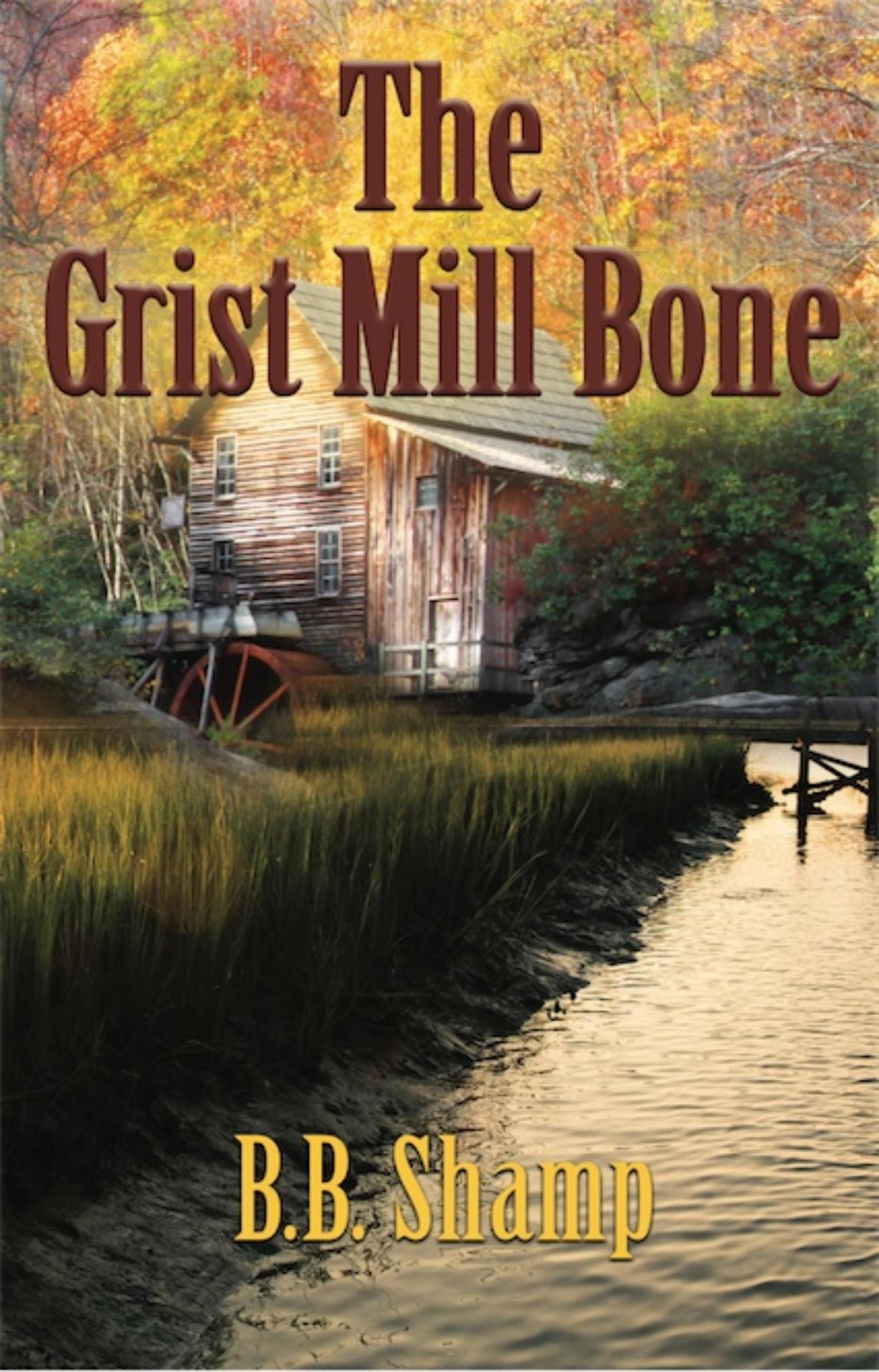
*In what appears to be a safe coastal community, evil surfaces, nebulous, unnamed, and swift. Claire and Booker discover what links these evil events to an old woman preparing for death. Join them in the sequel to Third Haven as they risk everything in their pursuit of truth.*

## **The Grist Mill Bone**

by B.B. Shamp

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A rustic wooden grist mill with a large water wheel, situated on a riverbank surrounded by autumn foliage. The mill is built of weathered wood and has several windows. The water wheel is partially submerged in the river. The background is filled with trees in vibrant autumn colors of yellow, orange, and red. The foreground shows a sandy bank with tall grasses and the calm water of the river.

# The Grist Mill Bone

B.B. Shamp

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First Edition

## I CLAIRE

I wondered who would die first. The will and testament of a retired rear admiral signed in his shaky hand had made room for a new client, a woman of no particular renown, ready to join her Milky Way. This requires patience. Nothing about my job quickens my pulse, or leaves me intrigued. I might as well be on some isolated archeological dig of a dark, ancient world, my knees bent and back hunched. I sift sand, brush off a treasure and realize it's petrified camel bone—worthless, except for the weight of what the camel bore. That's where my work begins: the search of someone's past to guarantee a future.

In real time, I'm a catchpenny attorney trying to engrave in stone the wishes of the dying. Or so I thought until I met Velma Owens just before noon on a crystal white summer day. I was prepared. Her priest told me she was a reader, an amateur photographer, and a former racist. That word 'former' gave me pause, but in the end, I took the job.

Nothing about my decision was cavalier. In a previous life, I worked on Capitol Hill for a lobbyist. There, clients eat you for breakfast, regurgitate you at lunch and serve your bones to their dogs for dinner. As a young attorney starting out, I discovered everyone had a price and mine was never the money. That's why I didn't fit in their world order; D.C. is all about money and who can prove their personal integrity. I had to get out before I lost mine.

A leisurely job in an adopted beach town in slower, lower Delaware answered my call on a whim and a promise. Four years into this life, I have no regrets. Don't get me wrong, there's a ditch to dig wherever you land. Here on the shore, we have an opioid epidemic, summer gridlock, and beach drunks, but it's mostly safe. I've found the year round residents are honest and true but you can't dig deeply without hitting water.

I pulled into guest parking at Fairhaven Assisted Living, flipped up the car visors and took a look around. French blue pansies bordered spring grass, freshly mown. A whiff of rankness caught me unawares and I remembered that smells grow sharper when you're pregnant. With the windows open I breathed, wasting time, enjoying the shore breeze as the wind tickled my hair. It blows like that here, great gusts of wind that carry sand and the sound of distant waves. Promises from unknown shores. I've always thought they were the kind of promises that brought peace and belonging.

A shout broke my musings.

"You better hurry. The bugs!"

Searching under the portico, my eyes adjusted to the

shadows and I saw a woman –really, she was a teenager clothed in medical whites—stopping for me on her way into the nursing home. She nodded in encouragement, her face an annoyed question mark, like... doesn't this lady get it? Her ponytail, full of product, spun in the quickening wind like a propeller. Beyond her shoulder, I could see the familiar tight cloud of insects unfurling from a band of trees. Their chatter grew louder the closer they came. A host of green winged behemoths landed on my windshield like little cargo helicopters, their bulbous eyes staring at me.

Impatient, the girl was trying to be helpful. "I can wait a second," she shouted.

I put the windows up, gathered my bag and bolted from the car, my feet crunching across the shells of molted cicada nymphs. The adults engaged in an opera, singing the chorus, "Phar-aoh, oh, phar-aoh,"

"Yep. I'm right after you," I answered. The insects rose in unison from the car's hood and formed a backup battalion.

She stopped a few feet away from the entrance when a dark whirlwind surrounded her like some Egyptian plague. Arms flailing the air, she blew out in tiny shoo-shoos.

Yesterday, at home, my son Sam had the same reaction until I explained we were in a 17-year eruption. Ever the young researcher, he flew to his computer. In an incredulous childlike voice I don't often hear anymore, he exclaimed it was the East Coast Brood II and they would smother the mid Atlantic wherever there were trees. April, and this is only the beginning of the pestilence to come on the Delmarva Peninsula.

Since last October, we've suffered enough named nor'easters to fill a seaman's pocket diary. The only thing that can put us out of our misery is another asteroid strike like the one that created this sinking spit of land on the Atlantic.

Some days I yearn to move back across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge to D.C., to something more familiar, but then I come to my senses. Kind of like what other transplants on the peninsula do when faced with the western tidal wave of summer tourists. 100 days of their pompous demands, then they disappear, and we're in God's country until the fall storms begin.

The aide worker danced and ducked this way and that, afraid of these dive-bombing aliens. I wasn't shocked at the girl's response. Parroting Sam's research in my head, I reminded myself that cicadas are worse at summer sunset, farther inland, and in deciduous forests or treed suburban areas. It wasn't summer or sunset. We were three miles from the coast and a pine forest was behind the nursing home. This was the beach's first recorded inundation and nothing was following the rules.

"You run ahead, I'll catch up," I yelled over the hum of insects, thinking she probably had to clock in for her eight bucks an hour.

Fairhaven was one of those four story monstrosities with an entrance tower, multiple peaked roofs and blank windows. It sat on the entire corner of the intersection like a giant sphinx in a desert sea. Their advertising claimed it was built on "high ground," but we're maybe five feet above sea level. Liars. It's all low ground in Sussex. Sinking really. New

Orleans gets all the publicity because of the hurricanes, but we're going to be treading water too. Booker, my husband and a native, thinks I don't notice, but I do. These are antediluvian days. We're just waiting to become another campground of flood refugees.

Flickers of bugs hit my back and I hunched over as if that would help. Then I realized it was raindrops—fat ones splattering my face and arms with the weight of latex paint. I had thought cicadas and rain didn't mix. I ran under the portico and the girl looked back at me, her key card hovering over the scanner at the front door.

"You can't get in without a fob," she shouted over their din. "They'll make you wait until they check the visitors' log. You have an appointment?"

Her nametag was pinned neatly above her breast pocket. Tyneice Armstrong - Aide. "Yes, with Velma Owens. I'm her attorney. Claire Solomon."

Her eyes widened and I could only imagine why. It's amazing how much money this generation of elderly widows have accrued. Husbands pass on leaving their wives another lifetime ahead. The poorer ones scrimp and save, barely living, afraid that there won't be enough for old age. A diet of cat food is not appealing. But this lady, Velma Owens, had an unusual amount invested. More than she could have saved digging for loose change in the couch. Assisted living—expensive, and it seemed she had no family. Not even a distant relative.

Tyneice held the door and I approached a busy receptionist who was expecting me, "Ms. Solomon? Sign in

here. Mrs. Owens is in room 207B. Take the elevator over there.” She pointed. Clean, carpeted, antiseptic smelling. A railing ran down the wall to balance those who tottered. Bright lighting, tones of beige and blue everywhere; beach themed for all the old folks who never wore a bathing suit and never caught a glimpse of the waves.

At the polished metal door, I paused, my hand hovering over the button that read “2.” It’s been five years since the firebombing at my firm in D.C. and for a while I couldn’t ride an elevator without choking up. Fortunately, there aren’t a lot of high rises on the beach. I’m over that now but still have vestiges PTSD. Flashbacks, crippling anxiety, night sweats. Mostly, it comes on when I can’t find Sam.

Once recently, in a weak moment after I discovered him exactly where I knew he’d be, ensconced before his computer, I yelled at him, “Why didn’t you answer me?” I had panicked thinking he was too addicted to whatever role play game had captured his interest; that he was giving away his real identity, our personal life, our vacations, and especially our family.

“Mom, get a grip,” he said, removing his headset. His blue eyes squinted and his cheeks hardened. I apologized of course. I still blame myself for the bombing back in those days. I was too close to the risk. Sleeping with it in fact. Even now, when I see fire I wonder if my hands shake because I want to run away in fear or because I’m searching for clues in the flames. Sam has his idiosyncrasies too. Mostly trust issues, but what teenager doesn’t?

The elevator door opened on a small lobby before an

empty dining room that smelled like old soup. Nearby, a small table held an unfinished puzzle. I recognized it as Monet's "Japanese Footbridge" and immediately picked up three small pieces from the carpet. Nothing more annoying than not being able to complete the picture. Mrs. Owen's room was to the left, her door slightly open and the TV was blaring. Pulling my laptop from my briefcase, I knocked gently, then louder.

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## The Sotweed Legacy

Spitting snow stung Father Ingle's ample cheeks as he fumbled for his key to the church. He raised his eyes to the stained glass window of St. Aloysius and thought, not for the first time, that its inscription, 'Patron Saint of Youth' taunted him. His hip ached from the cold. "Give me strength to endure this night," he muttered as he laid his thick hand on the doorknob. He leaned his weight against the wood, whitened from so many years of salt spray and sun. The sacristy door gave way to a green and white tiled floor. Yellow light glowed from the church proper.

In a guarded voice, he called, "Hello? Mrs. Owens?" Cautious, even after his seven years on the peninsula, the priest remained suspicious of these riverside residents. Five years since the riots of '68, he remained reserved around them. He brushed the snow from his overcoat and raised his head to the sound of a radio playing. Doris Day's sweet voice caught him, "*Whatever Will Be, Will Be.*" He nodded and

smiled. A slight hint of bleach wafted over him and he knew Mrs. Owens was busy at work. With the exception of the gleaming floors, there was no other sign of the woman who single handedly ran the Ladies Altar Society.

The white plaster walls reflected the light from his desk lamp. He scanned the sacristy, evaluating its tidiness with the eye of a man who had fussed over details all his life. The vestment drawers were polished, the wardrobe doors locked and his chair tucked in place. She had come despite gale force winds that rose midday off the Chesapeake, whirling east up the Choptank River. He entered, his galoshes scuffing across the floor leaving snowy slobber behind him. He balanced the church mail, his worn leather loafers, and a new snow shovel in his arms. Dumping it all on his desk, the shovel clattered to the floor and he muttered a mild curse as he tossed his fedora on the pile.

Grunting, the priest bent down to grab the shovel but his overcoat bunched up around his neck. His girth, the coat, and his generous lunch constricted his breathing. Straightening, he propped the shovel against the wall. The clip, clip of a woman's sturdy heels reached him and he wiped the sweat from his bald head.

"Father, you early. The dustin' not done," warned Mrs. Owens. He grinned at her thinking after all this time, he had not grown accustomed to her unique speech. She stood in the doorway to the main church, a squat woman wrapped in a bibbed, white apron and a shapeless blue dress. Beckoning him with one eyebrow raised in a high, boney forehead, she held up an enormous piece of cake wrapped in waxed paper.

He frowned thinking he needed to get out of his galoshes. “Planning for obligations prevents inevitable disasters, Mrs. Owens,” he said. “The snow is deepening. You should take off.”

She snorted and said, “I done brought you something. Smith Island cake!”

His mouth watered. He grunted and sat down suddenly in his leather chair. “I hate to ask you,” he said, his voice filled with resignation as he raised one wet boot, “but would you mind helping me get out of these before I track up your floor any further?”

“Well, that’s a whole ’nother story, right there.”

She placed the dessert on the pile of mail, bent down on one knee before him and tugged. The boot came off in a swish, baring a worn black sock. “Did you bring yer shoes? Weren’t that smart of you to not wear ’em under the galoshes? But yer feet pert near ice.” She slipped on his loafers that splayed like flat tires and proffered her hands as if he were her child. “Let’s get you out of that there wet coat.”

Father Ingle gripped her fingers, placed his feet squarely and rocked as she heaved him out of the chair. She giggled lightly and he wondered if this was what it was like to be an old married couple.

Mrs. Owens clipped-clipped toward the space heater.

He shrugged out of his overcoat and hung it on the rack. Reading her thoughts, he said, “No, no. I’ll pull my chair over to it. A mouse ate through the heater cord and Calvert wrapped it in electrical tape.”

“Calvert?” The thick line of her eyebrows met, her heavy

forehead layering in wrinkles.

And so it begins, he thought, wincing. Mrs. Owens despised Calvert more for his color than anything else.

“You had that derelict in here a-working? Father! If I tol’ you once, I tol’ you a thousand times to keep him outta here. He’s a penny waiting for change and crazy to boot.”

“Now, now, Mrs. Owens,” said the priest as he rolled his chair to the heater. “He needed some money for breakfast and I gave him a couple bucks for honest work. I know nothing about electrical. Besides, he was an entomologist of sorts at one time. A scientist.”

“Ento- what? You mean he’s sly like a fox. He steals.”

“Entomology, my dear. The study of bugs. And if I were homeless, I might be driven to steal as well. The Lord says, ‘Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ ”

“ ‘The poor *in spirit,*’ Father,” replied Mrs. Owens, her hands on her hips. “Nothing spiritual about him ’less it’s the spirit he throw down his gullet. He think he deserve everything we give him.”

“Well, that might be so,” said the priest as he held his toes to the warmth. “He is a little too dependent on us. I told him about a job at the fishing wharf. Cleaning up, mostly. Do you know that old coot wouldn’t take it?”

“Not surprised. You cut that mangy hair, put clean clothes on him and it still weren’t make no difference. No amount o’ spit and polish help crazy.”

“Blessed are the merciful, Mrs. Owens. Blessed are the merciful.”

“Worthless human beings, Father,” she said as she glared

at him. “Don’t matter what generation it be, the cannery, the fishing’ boats, or sotweed. We can’t find no decent workers cheap ’round here.

“Sotweed?” He had heard locals complain about paying black watermen or cannery workers but he had never heard of sotweed.

Mrs. Owens clucked a few times as she stacked the mail. “Terbaccer. Cambridge were settled on terbaccer and ersters 300 year ago,” she said.

“Tobacco and oysters. Yes, but that was when Maryland was a slave colony.”

She removed the wax paper from the cake and miraculously pulled a fork from her apron, setting it on the desk as if to change the subject. “Never you mind. You eat yer cake while I go clean that altar and confessional booth.”

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## The Cellar

The 16-penny nails scattered across the concrete floor spilling from a 10 gallon, wooden barrel. Like roaches scurrying from the light, they rolled under wooden shelving, behind the toolbox, under to the contractor’s box and the workbench, and into the corner under the massive tank of home heating oil. The boy stood straight as a toy soldier in their midst, his head turned upward, his whole body on alert. Silence, and then he heard his father’s low voice and footsteps clump across the wooden floor above his head. There was commiserating and the Saturday afternoon

laughter of hardy men pushing to finish their chores so they could enjoy the rest of their day.

“You got the lighter fluid, Vickers? It’ll take two cans.” A gruff voice, it was unfamiliar to the boy.

“Just get the rest and be there ’bout mournful. Soon as the sun go down beside the Rexall,” answered the boy’s father.

“Did ya tell Velma we got it covered the way she want?”

“I’m running this wrecking crew. Our loties need to stay out of this.”

“A shame we cain’t lynch no more. Them days it were easier,” came a raspy, older voice.

The boy sighed, expelling held breath, and grabbed the broom and dustpan. The hardware store’s grit seeped down from the rough planking that served as a flooring above and ceiling below, caking his reddened eyes. Wiping the crust from his wet lashes, he rolled the ball between his thumb and forefinger and flicked it into the air. He had grown so accustomed to his lot, his failing vision, and living in the cellar, but still, he longed for sunlight. At 13, he had the gift of superlative hearing—the first raindrops to hit leaves in the garden, the drone of bees outside, his father’s whispered thoughts were all within his range. Often, he wished this gift on others so he could have peace, but at times he had to admit, it was a gift that saved.

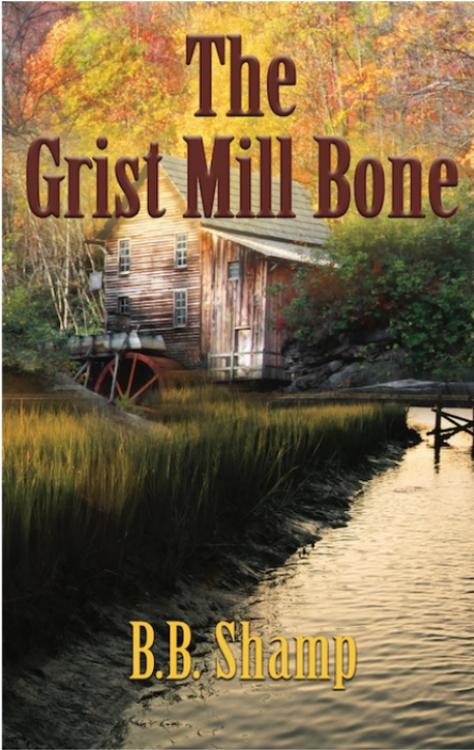
Desperation clawed his stomach as his growing body pleaded for food...and his father, seeing his need, had begun to limit the bites he took in demand of perfection. Rubbing his eyes, the boy could make out the shiny nails that glittered in the florescent light like fireflies in the night air. Fireflies—

they were a distant memory from childhood. He swept furiously, blindly eagle eyeing every square inch, determined to find each blessed nail.

In an hour, he had swept them up and into the barrel. Being cautious this time, he continued his original task, scooping the different sized nails from their crates—6, 8, and 12-penny, along with the framing and gutter nails, into the display case drawers. When finished stocking, he would tote the case up the wooden stairs after the store closed for the day. He would be allowed to eat then, but it seemed so far away.

He cocked his head to listen again and hearing voices at the cash register near the front of the store, he pulled a can of Spam from a hidey-hole in the stone foundation. He fingered the key from the bottom, wedged the pull-tab into its slot and unwound the lid from the can. Inside was the pinky-gray gelatin of congealed hog parts that made his mouth water in anticipation. He lit the propane torch, dumped the cube on the workbench and adjusted the flame. Spearheading his only meal of the day with a galvanized gutter nail, he held it up to the flame, roasting it on all sides to a golden brown. Satisfied, he cut the flame and bit the meat, the grease burning his tongue. He panted as his mouth filled with saliva but determined, he wouldn't spit it out. Instead, he gripped the edge of the workbench and rolled his head on his shoulders, his eyes watering as he chewed when he caught a side eye of a figure on the stairs. His father.

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