

# The Measure of Everything



A Novel by Ed Davis

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## Dedication

For Al Denman, Julia Cady, Dave and Sharen Neuhardt, and all the other earth-minded angels who worked to save Whitehall Farm in the winter of 1999.



## August, The New Millenium

*The road to Meredith's Pond dips down beneath an old railroad bridge, now bike trail. Billy passes into its shadow and emerges into a new, white world. It even sounds different in the fog, water from yesterday's rain spilling down the dam into Shawnee Springs Creek. Through mist he sees puffs of brighter white on the banks, duckbills buried in feathers.*

*His heart rises, a fish flashing into light. How can you have hope, so rare is the thing you seek?*

*You just do, that's all.*

*The day will be a scorcher, but not yet. Approaching slowly, he swims through cool air beading on his bare arms and face. You never look before it's time. Even thinking can make it fly. You circle toward it, let go of need. Become clean, open, empty.*

*And there it stands in the spillway: unlikely, awesome, almost invisible. Stunning in flight, the great blue god, grounded and fishing, looks small and compact. As always, it takes his breath, leaves his heart beating fast.*

*Motionless, his heron searches the water, fragile and fierce. It knows he's here. So softly and gradually Billy doesn't notice at first, the August air fills with wintry flakes, and memory and presence collide at the edge of all that happened eons ago, only yesterday . . .*



# Chapter One

Putnam County, West Virginia  
Sunday, March 12, 1999

Had Billy known all along where he'd go – or had the road chosen him? Well, Route 35 East (and eventually south) only led one place in his mind. And right now, with Neil Young singing “Heart of Gold” on the Dakota’s stereo and two pieces of paper burning a hole in the pocket of his flannel shirt, he thought West Virginia had never looked so good. Or bad.

He'd had to wait until the Shawnee Springs Credit Union opened this morning to leave. And last night he'd hardly slept in the rest area on Ohio State Route 86, going into the bathroom every hour or so to change the bandage on his hand. (It was hardly bleeding at all now.) So after a two-hour nap behind a K-Mart, he was finally crossing the bridge at Gallipolis, the river blinding white in the afternoon sun. It seared the edges of his memory as well as vision, blanking out all that lay behind him. That was the thing about the road: made you look ahead, not behind.

Welcome to Wild, Wonderful West Virginia.

The land here in Putnam County struck him, as it always did, as awesome in its raw beauty. Farming country. He admired the old leaning barns, the silos, muddy cattle standing in greenish-brown puddles of snow-melt. Billy rolled down the window and inhaled. Mud and manure. A thaw seemed in progress here, although winter still had a chokehold back home in southwestern Ohio, though it was only four hours away.

Home. Had Shawnee Springs ever really been home or just a temporary oasis?

The barn ahead on the left bellowed its slogan about Mail Pouch chewing tobacco. He considered the ads folk art compared to the interstate billboards peddling booze, broads and no-tell motels. The silky Kanawha River serpented beside the two-lane. No traffic whatsoever on Sunday morning, everybody at church. And he'd passed several high-steepled country churches looking straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting, their parking lots overflowing. Billy smiled. God's country.

Which took his thoughts right to Grand-dad. After Ma's death, visits had tapered off and finally Billy's dad hadn't wanted to see his father at all. “He doesn't like my occupation, my women or my lifestyle,” Dad had told him the last time Billy begged him to go see Grand-dad. “He can go to hell.”

So they hadn't even gone to Grand-dad's funeral, and Dad had finally stopped going back even for a once-yearly visit to other relatives. Now Billy had to see his father's homeplace.

The glittering river, high from the snow-melt, gleamed as if lit from fires within. Occasional dead deer littered the roadside, but the pavement had straightened out. He reached over, clicked off the stereo. He knew how the others would see his leaving, with only a week till the auction. *Traitor, thief.* The pocket above his heart tingled. Could he really cash that check?

He was pretty sure it was all over with CitFarm now. The headlines, the photos. Irreparable damage. He wouldn't be surprised if someone had even gotten hurt. Schuyler would see it as the perfect chance to obliterate the violent radicals. Couldn't've designed it for better media exposure himself! Thanks a lot, Mark.

Still, he found himself grinning and gaping like a five-year-old at every picturesque barn and farmhouse, his heart rising as he watched a kestrel leap into the air from a fence post ten feet from the truck. Movin' on. They'd never find him, though he was less than two hundred miles away. Maybe it had taken a farm fight to revive the existence of Grand-dad's farm for him. Now he had to see the place, get some perspective, decide his next move. It was a destination, maybe a launching pad. He didn't know yet, or need to know.

For now, he was doing his best not to think about where he'd come from. About Seth. But he couldn't stop the images . . .



Only three weeks ago, he'd watched her walk through the door of the Bean Tree, its jangling bells announcing a newcomer. Outside it was snowy mid-February, but inside the coffee shop, with soft jazz playing in the background, it felt snug. She stepped toward the burners, lifted the hot water carafe and poured, approached the register, paid for a teabag and headed for a table in the rear.

Beside him, Bonnie snorted. Across from her, Ira grinned.

"Come on, Billy, the farm's zoned agricultural and residential with a three-hundred-foot frontage. It ain't gonna happen."

"Zoning can be changed," he replied. "As a matter of fact, our wise township trustees are discussing it as we speak."

He had smiled past Bonnie, right at the stranger (who, he discovered to his delight, was staring right at him). "So I guess you won't sign my petition?"

Bonnie glared for ten seconds, then suddenly rose.

"Bonnie." Ira placed a hand on her arm. But she knocked it away and huffed out the door, leaving an explosion of bells in her wake.

Ira sighed. "Billy, there's been pressure on Ray ever since November to get something done about affordable housing."

Billy shook his head. "She's got a blind spot for her big brother. I think he'll vote with the pro-developers when the time comes."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm outta here. Got math tests to grade."

"Tonight then, Citizens to Save the Farm: Conference Room Three?"

"I guess. Not that it's gonna do any good."

As soon as Ira was out the door, Billy turned toward the rear. Sure enough, she was looking right at him. He cupped his hands around his mouth:

"So maybe you'll sign my petition, lovely lady?"

Before she could respond, he was on his feet, walking toward her table.

"I'm Billy Acorn."

"Acorn?" she repeated.

"Yeh, when great-granddaddy Achor showed up at Ellis Island . . . well, you know the rest." He shrugged, trying for boyishness. "It's kinda mythic, like Johnny Appleseed."

When she just continued to stare, he spoke again softly. "And you are?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Eliza- . . . Seth Abel," she got out.

He laughed. "Hello, Eliza-seth Abel. You sure have a unique first name."

When she brushed back her blonde hair, he found himself loving the gesture.

"My daddy wanted a boy. And I guess for awhile I wanted to be that boy. Anyhow." She gave a little wave of her fingers. "I decided to quit being Beth and chose Seth. I haven't used Elizabeth or Beth in years."

"How come I don't know you?"

"I just moved back last August."

"No way. I'd've noticed you."

She smiled, not taking the bait. *Damn*. Had she seen him scrutinizing her fingers for a ring.

"I mostly work – the retirement community south of town?"

"Comfort Manor. Great place, I hear."

"And I take care of my son."

"How old is he?"

"Paul's twelve. Sixth grade."

He nodded, storing it for later use. Before she could open her mouth, he spoke again.

"Where'd you move back from?"

"New Mexico . . . Taos."

He nodded. "I crashed there with a friend of mine once, on the way to Frisco. We even saw a rain dance at the Pueblo." He laughed. "And I swear to God, it rained!"

She smiled. After a brief moment, he sobered. "I'll bet you're an artist."

"My husband is . . . was. He's an art dealer now . . . very successful."

"Oh." He affected great sadness. "You're married."

"Separated."

He brightened. "Well, welcome to the Buckeye state, Seth. Shawnee

Springs isn't exactly Ohio, even though it's *in* Ohio. We like to think it's sort of a country all by itself."

She folded her arms. "How about you? Lived in town long?"

"Going on ten years."

"Burke grad?" She had her fingers stuck in her armpits, shivering.

He shook his head. "I came, I crammed, I departed without degree."

"Me, too."

He looked shocked. "When?"

She smiled tightly. "Before you."

"But not much before." Too late he sensed flattery wouldn't work on her.

"So . . . this petition."

"Oh, yeh. May I sit down?" She nodded at the empty chair across from her. After sitting, he laid the document between them on the table.

"Wood Thrush Farm. It's in danger of being sold at auction within a month to developers who will most likely turn it into Crackerbox City – who knows? – maybe even a Wal-Mart. A bunch of us think that Township Trustees should refuse to support re-zoning and purchase Wood Thrush Farm outright, re-selling it to farmers with easements. That's added to the deed, signed and recorded at the courthouse. It means the land can't be used for any other purpose besides the one stipulated. Forever. We want that purpose to be farming."

She was reading the petition, hunkered forward, her lovely hair falling forward around her cheeks. Without looking up, she spoke.

"Is it free?"

Billy smiled broadly. "Not hardly. If a developer would pay \$1500 an acre, and the going rate for farmland in the area is a thou – then the cost of the easement would be the \$500 difference."

"Whoa," she breathed. "Per acre?"

Billy nodded.

"Where is this farm?"

"It surrounds the village on the north, south and east, bordering Route 69 and Springville Road."

"You mean . . ." He watched it dawn slowly. ". . . all those fields I see all the way to Oldham's Dairy . . . ?" He nodded, knowing she was converting words into images of corn, trees, sunsets. "And . . . along Springville road?"

"Yep."

"That's *all* Wood Thrush Farm?"

They listened to the last gasp of steam leave the latest just-brewed pot.

"And it could be sold to developers?" Her voice was growing tinier and tinier. "They could put in . . . shopping centers?"

Billy nodded sadly. The machine made one final shudder before it ceased.

"I'll sign."

"I knew you would."

“What’s this meeting tonight about?” She blushed. “I . . . overheard . . .”

“Strategy. With only a month till the auction, we’ve got to get people off their butts, get organized and . . .”

“You need an event,” she said, “something for the media.” Her voice had firmed up, her gaze direct.

“Aha: you’ve done this before.” He stroked his beard. “You were at Burke in the mid-eighties, right?”

“That’s right.”

He sat forward eagerly. “Did you know Lloyd Kieron?”

“He was my history professor.” Her voice had begun shrinking again.

“And the leader of one of the most successful no-nukes movements in the U.S.” He shook his head. “Dr. Keiron’s gotten weird, some say crazy. Lives in the old Fletcher mansion on the south end of town – his late wife, the chicken heiress, left it to him. Alexandra’s dad owned half the chickens in southeastern Ohio.” He wagged his head. “Since her death, they say he won’t see anybody.”

She shrugged. “Idealists get bitter, too.”

“Not Lloyd Kieron – not the brightest mind against corporate the-way-things-are that Burke has ever seen.”

She’d begun putting on her coat.

“Maybe you’ll come to the flagship meeting of CitFarm – Citizens to Save the Farm – tonight,” Billy said, “village building, Conference Room Three, seven o’clock.”

“Maybe.”

As she turned and headed for the door, Billy called behind her, “Maybe you can tell us what kind of event we need.”

“Something dazzling,” she threw behind her. “Unearthly. With angels, trumpets and a celestial choir.”

“Hey, and there’s a rally tomorrow morning in front of the village building.”

But she was gone.



He came back with a start, yanking the steering wheel hard to avoid a dead skunk. He’d totally spaced out for a few minutes. Now he realized he should be getting to the intersection with Marsden Valley Road. A mile or so back, the two lanes had widened to four, and he’d begun to see blue interstate signs. An interstate out here? Sure enough, as he slowed to forty-five, then thirty-five, he read a sign saying Charleston was just twenty-five miles via I-275. Damn – a fucking beltway over to I-64 at Charleston. And this used to be the boonies.

When he saw he was on a fast-food strip, his heart sputtered. True, it had been fifteen years since he'd come this way, but he was sure this was all farmland before. But he also knew: build an interstate and they will come. And build. And come.

Stores were getting larger: Lowe's, Kroger, K-Mart. He knew it was only a matter of time, and, sure enough, the inevitable loomed into view: A Wal-Mart Super Store. Damned if they hadn't paved paradise while he wasn't looking. Grand-dad's farm was now part of Charleston's 'burbs. Billy slammed his fist against the steering wheel.

Sitting at the light, Billy turned the stereo back on. When Neil began singing "Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere," he cranked it, despite the glare from two suits in the BMW beside him. As soon as the light changed, the yuppie driving gunned it and was halfway to the next light before Billy got the Dakota into gear. The sky, luminous blue before, had turned dark. After three more lights and still no Marsden Valley Road, Billy was seriously considering turning around and heading back to Ohio. At the next gas station he turned in. A perky blond kid wearing the red Speedway vest lounged at the counter.

"Help you, man?"

He didn't look old enough to work. Maybe it was his zitless, baby-soft face. But, no, it was probably the circa-1968 hair: parted in the middle, flower-child style, dangling well past his collar.

"Yeh." He leaned heavily on the counter. "You can direct me the way out of hell."

The kid giggled. "Yeh, West Virginia sucks."

Billy straightened. "My grand-dad has a farm someplace around here. This used to be the prettiest farm country in the world." He looked back over his shoulder. "Till they asphalted it."

The kid blushed. "Sorry, dude. Didn't mean to, like, diss your people. But for me this state is such a drag."

"I'm looking for Marsden Valley Road."

"Beck's Dairy?"

"Yeh, that's Grand-dad's neighbor."

"Beck's rules, man! I been trying to, like, get hired out there for years. Man, they even got insurance benefits. You wanna go back two lights and hang a louie at Wally World."

Billy's face must've registered blank.

"Go left at Wal-Mart."

"Thanks," Billy said, heading for the door.

"Hope you brought your clubs," the kid hollered but Billy hardly registered the nonsense syllables.