

# RIPPLES



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RIPPLES

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All characters in this work are entirely fictional, and are the original products of the author's imagination, with the exception of passing mention of notable individuals, contemporary to the era. While most of the geographical settings and institutions are true to Western North Carolina, the community of Abundance, and the city of Groverton are fictional locations. Any resemblance of those two fictional locales, their named businesses, events, or any of the characters within the book, to real-life people or places, is a matter of coincidence.

The Thomas Paine quote from the introductory page is taken from *Age of Reason*, by Thomas Paine, Part First, Section 11. Scriptural references are taken from the 1611, King James Version of *The Holy Bible*.

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*That question inseminated this novel.*

*“And I moreover believe, that any system of religion that has anything in it that shocks the mind of a child, cannot be a true system.”*

*—Thomas Paine*

# CHAPTER ONE

*“And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household.”*  
—Matthew 10:36

OCTOBER 2002

Aloneness clung to Ben Bramley. Any hope for a normal life had been kicked out of him before his first shave.

College diploma in hand, he retreated to the wild lands, distancing himself from society before it could disappoint him further. The only exception to his voluntary exile came in the form of psychiatric therapy from Dr. Joyce Mendel, a Manhattan native, new to the mountains of Western North Carolina, and beyond foreign to the culture.

“THIS IS DR. MENDEL SPEAKING. How may I help you?”

During their first session he had told her that his life could be summed up by a book title, *Chop Wood Carry Water*—a reference to the daily regimen at the remote cabin atop Cut Laurel Knob.

In contrast to the physical demands on his farm-muscled six-foot frame, solar panels, a hydro-electric generator, and satellite internet service softened the self-imposed quarantine, along with the company of Smoky, a marbled-gray Maine Coon.

“Listen, Doc. I’m in a real bind. My dad’s had an accident. May not make it. I’m headed to Abundance.”

“Oh, my! When?”

“Right now. I needed to speak to you before I cross over the ridgeline and lose signal.”

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“Ben, I’m so sorry. At least swing by my office. We can talk.”

“No time, Doc. And if I stop, I might not start again. Also, I wanted to let you know I probably won’t make my session this week. And if I can’t reach you by phone, in case I have a meltdown, let’s say, will you keep an eye on your e-mail?”

“Of course, Ben. Did you remember to take your running shoes and clothes?”

“First thing I packed. Tell me again what you call that *run-until-I-can’t* disorder of mine.”

“You’re too smart to have forgotten.”

“Maybe. Could be I just like hearing you say it.”

“Alright, I’ll indulge you. In clinical terms, you present as ‘an obsessive, frenetic runner, using the exhaustive aspect of physical activity as a primary coping skill.’”

“That’s what I love about you, Doc. You can make crazy sound sophisticated. Thanks for keeping an ear out. I better get off the phone before my better judgment puts a halt to this insanity.”

“Take care, Ben.”

Pressing the END button, he stared at the phone.

***Stop, and think. This is a classic sixth-commandment situation—Honor thy father and mother. This is your big chance to atone. Maybe your last chance.***

The instructive voice inside his head belonged to Charlton Heston, from his role as Moses in the epic movie *The Ten Commandments*. Ben’s waking hours included frequent King James Bible interjections from Moses. But unlike the plagues on Egypt, which came and went, Ben remained hardwired to see the world framed in the religious training of his childhood.

THE ODOMETER ELICITED AUDIBLE SIGHS as miles registered. To break the cycle he resorted to one of his many mind-shifting tricks—lists. They came in handy during sleepless nights in bed. Lists of his twenty favorite books, favorite movies, movie stars, favorite everything.

“Favorite song,” he began, “‘Losing My Religion,’ by R.E.M.”

Having cheered himself with that blasphemous admission, he decided to enumerate a general list of his favorite things: “reflections, falling snow, shadows, shelves full of books . . . moonlit snow, arched bridges, waterwheels.”

Pausing after each entry, he savored the recollections before moving ahead. By voicing his list aloud, Ben prevented Moses or any negative self-talk from occupying his thoughts.

“Twilight, anything without time limits, people watching, serial-killer psychology, distinctive voices,” as he edged into a more inter-personal realm, he opened that door wider to include, “the tattoo of approaching high heels, an almond-shaped face with prominent cheekbones, tan lines, sunlight through a white-linen dress, long hair (especially wavy or curly), sizeable nipples sprouting from bumpy areolae, sex without debate.”

The sporadic sex he had enjoyed since hermit-hood involved booking hotel rooms in Boone, then trolling bars where App State students hung out. Pretending to be a tourist, come to enjoy the scenery or take in some snow skiing, he invited women to join him for dinner and champagne at the finest hotels. False names and backgrounds guaranteed him anonymity, *to preserve my reputation*, he told himself—a holdover from his small-town upbringing—though he often questioned what reputation, if any, needed preserving.

Whether the forays into Boone pacified or agitated his mental state, he had not managed to resolve. Poor substitutes for meaningful relationships, the casual sex bypassed all possibility of extended coupling. Coupling would have been in direct violation of his vow of solitude.

In truthful moments he could admit that the sexual encounters were more to him than the normal biological impulse or the compulsion for conquest in the name of masculine confirmation.

*Got to talk to Mendel about that one day, after we get past the bigger shit. If we get past the bigger shit.*

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One-night-stands also eliminated the possibility of a self-proclaimed eventuality.

*No sane woman would hang around for the uncensored version of Ben Bramley. Hell, I'm too much for my own self most of the time.*

THREE AGONIZING HOURS IN THE driver's seat left him two-hundred yards short of a right turn onto River Road—their road—prompting a field of red flags to flash across his mind's eye, fabric snapping in the sharp wind.

In response, Ben's left hand dug in his jeans pocket, pulling out a plastic cowboy. Monochromatic, tan colored, though he preferred to think of it as *burnt sienna*—a more dignified designation. Cowboy's curved legs were designed to sit astride a horse, now twenty-four years gone. Though the plastic figure had originally belonged to James, his younger brother, Ben had laid claim. This was back in the day when James had to play the role of Davy Crockett. Ben got first choice, Daniel Boone—who was also the namesake for Ben's adopted home town.

"Stop!" he warned himself, pulling the black Acura SUV into the Abundance Post Office parking lot—four meager spaces, all vacant at the late hour.

*What are you doing?* Moses asked.

Ben paid no attention, engrossed in Bret Michaels's vocals, pouring from the radio. The music escaped the vehicle's open windows, to reverberate off the brick face of the post office. Unable to resist, he accompanied Brett for the final refrain of the rock ballad, "Every Rose Has Its Thorn." The hit single had debuted in 1988, fall semester of Ben's freshman year at Duke University.

A faint remnant of freckles bunched closer when he grinned at the thought of hearing his beloved song on an Oldies Rock station, two years into the new millennium, and two years into his own third decade.

“Not getting any younger, just like this town,” he said to the empty intersection.

He was being generous with the title *town*. Abundance fell more under the category of a *community*, and, more to the point, a community of lives lived too safely. Imagination, innovation, and brilliance were not in great demand, with each cog in place and working to the general satisfaction. Where worshippers sang, “Give Me That Old Time Religion,” and meant it, by God.

Born of a family who considered cinnamon toast to be gourmet fare, Ben longed early on for more than simple circumstances could provide. Wrong time. Wrong place. Wrong relatives. Though he had worked hard to fit in, followed the rules of home and church, he remained a multi-hued boy, cast in the black-and-white world of Abundance.

While the byway lacked dreamers, it excelled in natural beauty. Surrounded by ascending ridge lines in graduated hues of blue, its boundaries lay at the bottom of a bowl of gently rolling land, a crazy quilt of working farms and woodland borders. Topographically fortified against the outside world, the area found that change came slowly, or bypassed it altogether.

As he exited the SUV, Ben’s soles skidded on fine gravel atop the asphalt lot. Staring at his past, he killed the radio to wrestle with the family crisis, minutes down the road.

The October sun’s last light stretched long shadows across the terrain.

“No progress in fourteen years,” he observed, the landscape idling in neutral.

Abundance School—decrepit when he attended—didn’t have the capacity to look any older. Potato-chip-sized paint flakes peeled from the prominent Federal-style trim encircling the two stories that housed grades one through twelve. The innovation of kindergarten had been blocked. “Budgetary reasons,” they said.

Generations of Bramleys, and Eppers—his mom’s side—claimed alumni status from that cyclical institution, where

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graduating classes bore identical surnames from one year to the next in perpetuity.

Between the school and post office stood Uncle Stan's gas station with its two-bay garage. Three vintage pumps stood sentinel in front. None accepted credit cards—an inconvenience store.

Beyond the school, the Abundance Growers' Packing House spilled soft, yellow light onto the highway. A silhouette of flatbed trucks laden with apples awaited their turns to unload. Forklifts buzzed around the perimeter to disappear inside the building, where dozens of worker bees graded and packed fruit. In a few weeks the packing house would lapse into a coma, until resurrected by the influx of next summer's produce.

And in the center of the crossroads cluster loomed Redeemer Baptist Church, absolute authority oozing out of the mortar joints, which forever locked the clotted-blood-colored bricks in their place of prominence.

A church sign identified Redeemer—a low-rent, changeable-letters kind of sign, the kind often found occupying any roadside strip of crabgrass. Underneath the church's name, a solemn message: "Visitors Welcome. Members Expected."

Noticeably lacking were any of the standard warnings—"Turn or Burn," "If You Died Tonight, Where Would You Go?" Rather, it quoted scripture: "Behold you have sinned against the LORD: and be sure your sin will find you out. Numbers 32:23."

Ben shuddered at the divine guarantee of exposure, though he daily assured himself that his faith had eroded to nothingness.

Craning his neck, he looked up at the righteous-white steeple, illuminated by a column of light reaching to the heavens. Monday night. No church service. Safe enough to avoid being spotted by the locals. He reminisced, stalling.

"You cannot escape the steeple! The Great Eye sees all!" he bellowed, double-checking for listeners before adding, "Agnostics rule! Baptists drool!"

Though Ben was delighted with his job, the hollow noise fooled neither himself nor the God from his youth.

Unsettled by his human's strange behavior, Smoky jumped from his curled position on the front seat to the safety of the farthest corner of the cargo area.

"That's not true," Ben recanted. "The Great Eye can't penetrate closed doors or dark nights where husbands beat wives, or wives screw somebody else's husbands. It doesn't stop the teenager breaking into a widow's home, or the teen's little brother getting his ass kicked at school." He hesitated. "No witnesses. Didn't happen. A lie agreed upon."

With each word, his fury grew.

"You steeple people, you couldn't leave Mama alone!"

Feet wide apart, as if preparing for a slugfest, he went silent when his better senses caught up, acknowledging he had been screaming while a frustrated fist beat the innocent air.

"Damn! Less than two minutes here and I'm losing it."

He pulled the cell phone from his pocket, speed dialing number one, for Dr. Mendel. *Out of Service Area* appeared on the screen. "No bars," he conceded. "That figures for this hick town."

*You understand your mistake.*

"What do you mean?"

*You didn't run far enough. Stayed in the same state. Kept in contact, too.*

True, he had not lived outside of his home state after graduating from Duke University. "The Harvard of the South," insecure Southerners called the noble institution, stuck in their post-Civil War, self-esteem issues. The same second-hand title had also been applied to Vanderbilt, Emory, and Davidson, maybe more—all evidence of the pandemic insecurity.

"I couldn't abandon them." Ben responded to Moses, in the same tired excuse millions of other Southern boys had mouthed, frightened to venture north of the Mason-Dixon, or west of the Mississippi.

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“They’re my grandparents, and he’s my dad, if only in name. He might die.”

***He might die, but you being here isn’t going to change fate. The greater threat is maintaining your stability. That’s what’s at stake, and you know it.***

Ben had no response.

In the real world, he had drawn sympathetic listeners, humored by his assertion of growing up not only in the Bible belt, but in the actual buckle. His sardonic tirade would continue: “It’s as if God took a handful of Protestant Brand super-phosphate fertilizer, and spread it across the mountains and valleys, causing churches to spring up in profusion. Southern Baptists and rural Appalachia go together like hookers and street corners. And you can pretty well find a church ready to service you on every block.”

Turning from the church, he glanced across the highway to a row of connected buildings the locals called “the business district.” A combination grocery and general store dominated the sad grouping. Attached to the south end of it was the Abundance Café, the only eatery for miles, in a community where the structures, other than the church, all had “Abundance” within their name.

The café’s neon sign glowed a red *OPEN*.

“Well I’ll be damned. They used to serve the greasiest, thickest cheeseburgers around.”

*Learn more about Ben’s tormented relationship to the Baptist faith by subscribing to Southern Fried Karma’s YouTube channel, Fugitive Views.*

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Nature or nurture? The childhood of Ben Bramley makes a strong case for both.

A long-time observer of human nature, I find the behavior of earth's supposed "highest life form" to be arguably insane. Any number of us will advocate for extreme means to save the life of an unborn fetus, only to have that fetus reach the unripe age of eighteen, and be shoved into a uniform and shipped overseas, to die while warring for peace.

Bombs to end war? In *guns* we trust? Go figure!

Yet, aren't we all at some point acting upon that inner voice from childhood? The one we inherited from parents and relatives, made up of a tiresome list of *do's* and *don't's*, all meant to guide our actions? Do we heed the voice, or fight to resist it, thus proclaiming our adult individuality?

Far from ideal, the mixed bag of nurture handed to Ben was consistent only in the aspect of confounding him. I would have to conclude he ultimately succeeded as an adult, in spite of his nurture, rather than as a credit to it.

As for nature, mine, like Ben's, is the South—or the New South as some wishful thinkers have suggested. Any insistence that the powerful culture hasn't molded me, that I have somehow risen above my raising, is a ridiculous denial of the indelible stamp of heritage.

The lack of a Confederate flag flying in my yard, does not grant me any less cumulative exposure to the prevailing mindset.

I'm infected. We're all infected, with 7.5 billion unique viruses, sourced from the parts of our pasts that stuck, and took

parasitic root. Nonetheless, we're expected to show up for work each day, and perform our best at getting along with the other diversely infected. We call it *life*, and its successful navigation can be a mystery some of us never solve.

My fictional town of Abundance is true to the existing microcosms throughout mountainous Appalachia. Readers from the region likely have no stretch identifying with the prevailing culture, maybe seeing accurate reflections of their own communities. It does not require extensive demographic research to reveal key consistencies throughout the region: cultural, religious, political, racial, and ethnic ties by which residents define themselves.

Some thrive in perpetuation of their heritage. Others wither. Some rebel against it and refashion themselves. And many simply move away, convinced that the entrenched mindset is permanent.

My response to the ever-present unacceptable, to cognitive dissonance in all its regional or cultural forms, is a vigorous shaking of my head, a physical refusal of the *crazy*, the *illogical* attempting to penetrate my cranium and lodge there. That, and to tell my stories, chronicling the vicissitudes of human nature, and peering into the abyss of pain, perhaps to unlock someone else's prison.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evan Williams entered his first writing competition in sixth grade, a county-wide agricultural conservation essay contest, and won second place along with a nifty plaque. For Evan, writing is his repayment of gratitude to every author who has inspired him to dream beyond what his eyes can see. His memoir, *One Apple at a Time*, received the Willie Parker Peace Award for state history from the North Carolina Historical Society. Prior to America's Revolutionary War, Evan's ancestors settled in the Blue Ridge range of the Appalachians, where he remains today. *RIPPLES* draws heavily on his family's multi-generational apple-growing business. Surrounded by orchard, Evan writes from within a former apple-storage shed—the same shed where he would steal away as a boy to enjoy quality reading time.



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