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## **HALO AROUND THE MOON EXCERPT:**

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**Washington County, Arkansas 1905**

Incredible as it may seem, earthworms are not native to North America. Their arrival on the continent wasn't marked by ceremony; a few hundred worms dumped with the wastewater from ballasts of the first European ships entering the Chesapeake Bay, sometime shortly after Columbus. Late in the fifteenth century, the worms began their generational migration westward through the thin, rich crust of the North American continent. During this slow and steady westward wave, earthworms irreversibly transformed the continent as they turned, rolled, and squeezed the topsoil through their transparent little bodies. Earthworms eat decaying plant matter, inadvertently swallow dirt, and accelerate the natural processes of decomposition in the soil.

Before their arrival, a thick mulch of rotting leaves blanketed the continent and fed the broadleaved trees of the great forests of the Northeast and Upper Midwest. The worms' movement through the landscape was slow and steady, but at the scale of geological time, they raced across North America consuming everything in their path, turning thick layers of rotting leaves into a thin veneer of nutrient-rich, loamy castings, better suited for pines and other fast-growing trees. In that geological instant after their arrival, the species composition of the vast forests of eastern North America changed forever; maples to pines, basswoods to cedars, and beeches to honey locusts.

Had the worms not committed this unintentional arboreal genocide, perhaps different trees would have dominated the forests on the western edge of the Ozark Mountains near the roadside between Springdale and Fayetteville. Perhaps, in the unusually cold winter of 1905, the vigilante captors of Obediah Bratton, Jack Bratton's great-grandfather, would have successfully carried out his hanging from a limb of a sturdier tree; but as it were, the earthworms had been by that very spot and accomplished their steady work many years prior, leaving only fast-growing, weak-limbed loblolly pines in their wake.

Obediah Bratton was neither a decent nor good man and deserved well to be hanged on that cold, full moon November night. He sat in the snow, watching white puffs of his breath dissipate in the blue moonlight, tears streaming down his cheeks. When no option for escape remained, he began to plead and grovel. He was hunched over, his hands tied behind him, his upper back resting on a tree, listening, but not making out the words of the hushed, angry conversation of his three captors. They quickly came to an agreement, and an old rope, no wider than a man's thumb, was knotted and thrown over a lower limb of a pine tree near the road shoulder.